

# CLINICAL NOTES

BY H. L. MENCKEN AND GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

*Sine Qua Non.*—In every thoroughly charming and effective person, one finds a suggestion and trace, however small, of the gutter. This trace of finished vulgarity is essential to a completely winning manner. The suavest and most highly polished man or woman becomes uninteresting save he or she possesses it. In the soul of every fetching man, there is a streak of ingratiating commonness; in the heart of every alluring silken woman, there is a touch of calico.

*The New Galahad.*—My agents in attendance upon the so-called moving pictures tell me that persons who frequent such shows begin to tire of Western films—that they are no longer roused to clapper-clawing by the spectacle of actors in patent-leather boots murdering Indians and Mexicans. Several of the astute Ashkenazim in charge of the movie industry, noting that slackening of taste, have sought to find a new hero to replace the scout and cowboy, but so far without success. The children of today, young and old, seem to take no interest in pirates, nor are they stirred by train-robbers, safe-blowers and other such illicit adventurers. It can't be that the movie censorship is to blame, for the same thing is visible in the field of *belles lettres*. The dime novel, once so prosperous, is practically dead. The great deeds of the James brothers, known to every literate boy in my youth, are now forgotten. And so are the great deeds of Nick Carter and Old Sleuth: the detective has fallen with his prey.

What is needed, obviously, is a new hero for the infantry of the land, for if one is not quickly supplied there is some

danger that the boys will begin admiring Y. M. C. A. secretaries, crooked members of the Cabinet and lecturers on sex hygiene. In this emergency I nominate the boot-legger—not, of course, the abject scoundrel who peddles bogus Scotch in clubs and office buildings, but the dashing, romantic, defiant fellow who brings the stuff up from Bimini. He is, indeed, almost an ideal hero. He is the true heir, not only of the old-time Indian fighters and train-robbers, but also of the tough and barn-acled deep-water sailors, now no more. He faces the perils of the high seas in a puny shallop, and navigates the worst coast in the world in contempt of wind and storm. Think of him lying out there on wild nights in Winter, with the waves piling mountain-high and the gale standing his crazy little craft on her beam! Think of him creeping in in his motor-boat on Christmas Eve, risking his life that the greatest of Christian festivals may be celebrated in a Christian and respectable manner! Think of him soaked and freezing, facing his exile and its hardships uncomplainingly, saving his money that his old mother may escape the poor-farm, that his wife may have her operation for gall-stones, that his little children may be decently fed and clad, and go to school regularly, and learn the principles of Americanism!

This brave lad is not only the heir of Jesse James and Ned Buntline; he is also the heir of John Hancock and of all the other heroes who throttled the accursed Hun in 1776. All the most gallant among them were smugglers, and in their fragile craft they brought in not only rum but also liberty. The Revolution was not merely

against the person of the Potsdam tyrant, George III; it was also, and especially, against harsh and intolerable laws—the worst of them the abhorrent Stamp Act. But was the Stamp Act worse than Prohibition? I leave it to any fair man. Prohibition, in fact, is a hundred times as foul, false, oppressive and tyrannical. If the Stamp Act was worth a Revolution, then Prohibition is worth a massacre and an earthquake. Well, it has already bred its Hancocks, and soon or late, no doubt, it will breed its Molly Pitchers, Paul Reveres and Mad Anthony Waynes. Liberty, driven from the land by the Methodist White Terror, has been given a refuge by the hardy boys of the Rum Fleet. In their bleak and lonely exile they cherish her and keep her alive. Some day, let us hope, they will storm the coast, slit the gullets of her enemies, and restore her to her dominion. The lubbers of the land have limber necks; their blood runs pale and yellow. But on the roaring deep there are still men who are colossally he, and when the bugle calls they will not fail.

Here are heroes—gallant, lawless, picturesque, adventurous, noble. Let the youth of the land be taught to venerate them. They make the cowboys who linger in the movies look like puny Christian Endeavorers; they are the only Olympians left in a decayed and flabby land, or in the seas that hedge it 'round. Who will be the first poet to sing them?

*Observation in Passing.*—One of my books was recently published in England. I observe that it has been highly praised by those English critics who like America and Americans and vigorously damned by those who do not like America and Americans. The book itself, so far as I am able to make out, has been dealt with by only one man.

*Trio De Luxe.*—The contention that, so far as a man is concerned, the pleasantest of all parties is the twosome, that is, one composed of a fellow and a girl who like

each other, is no longer maintained save by professors of the orthodox and banal. The true masculine connoisseur of pleasure knows from long experience that the most amusing party ever devised by the angels on high is the one that is made up of one man and two girls, and that its amusement qualities are not particularly much interfered with one way or the other whether the attendants like one another or not. In fact, the less they like one another the more likely the party is to be to the taste of the man, assuming him, of course, to be a member of what may be called cultured society.

The twosome generally repeats itself. One such party is as much like another as the soup stains on a Congressman's waistcoat. The man who can still find gratification of the spirit in sitting around with a girl, holding her hand under the table, gazing lovingly at her ear and whispering sweet emptinesses to her is either a recent college graduate, who hence knows nothing, or a vain old idiot of a bachelor making a gallant and futile stab at youth and romance. The man of any intelligence who spends an evening at a table with a fair creature may, true enough, enjoy the first half hour, but he is a liar who would seriously maintain that thereafter the party does not descend to the time-worn stencils and rubber-stamps. Recall, if you will, that it is the amusement-power of such parties of which I am speaking—nothing else. And with this in mind, consider the relative pleasure to be derived from the triangular party, the one composed of one man and two girls. Here is humor in its fullest promise! Where, in the case of one man and one girl, both the man and the girl feel a certain amount of reserve, and conduct themselves accordingly, this reserve, as everyone knows, promptly disappears when an extra girl is on the scene, and to the establishment of the necessary gala note. What one girl will talk about with a man isn't worth listening to, save perhaps by young boys and adult mushheads. But what *two* girls

will talk about with a man is worthy the attention of the savant. No man who has experienced the joys of the mixed threesome will for a moment debate its tremendously superior humorous horsepower. The conversation at such an affair has life, salt, gayety, wit, searching truth, and the charm that lies ever in the heart of frankness. The conversation at the party made up of a fellow and a girl is usually fit only for the ears of imbeciles, already full-blown or potential.

*After 1900 Years.*—At the end of one millennium and nine centuries of Christianity, it remains an unshakable assumption of the law in all Christian countries and of the moral judgment of Christians everywhere that if a man and a woman, entering a room together, close the door behind them, the man will come out sadder and the woman wiser.

*Memorial Service.*—If he were still alive today, the late James Harlan, LL.B., of Iowa, would be 104 years old. In 1865 Abraham Lincoln, whose son had married his daughter, appointed him Secretary of the Interior. One day he was informed by spies that a clerk in the Interior Department, Walter Whitman by name, had written a book of poems, by title "Leaves of Grass." Sending for a copy of this book, he read it with indignation, and at once fired the author. Let us pause a moment to remember this dreadful and almost forgotten ass: James Harlan, of Iowa, Secretary of the Interior in the Cabinet of Abraham Lincoln.

*More Reflections at Forty.*—1. It is only the amateur of feminine loveliness who believes that a woman looks more beautiful in an evening gown than in day dress. As a general thing, a woman is not half so physically attractive in décolleté as in the habiliments of afternoon.

2. With the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln, every one of our really great Americans was by nature and in private

life a light-hearted and even waggish man.

3. Nothing grows tiresome so quickly as an interesting talker.

4. There is one thing, at least, that age is not successful in deceiving itself about. It may lie convincingly to itself about a hundred different things, but it stubs its toe embarrassingly when it is met with an invitation to toboggan. A man and woman become definitely old in their own consciousness the moment the toboggan sled begins to seem risky and uninviting to them.

5. No woman, in the highest moment of her happiness, thinks of marriage. She begins to think of it in her moments of misgiving, self-doubt and misery. Marriage is generally a craft that backs quickly out to sea from a shaky and partly condemned dock.

6. Nothing is so ruinous to the success of a dinner party as good food.

7. Few things in this world are so thoroughly boring as a professional entertainer doing his stunt after midnight.

8. A policeman who feels that he is growing old—there you have the essence of pure tragedy!

*Revolt.*—It is frequently said that revolt is ever the distinguishing characteristic of the Younger Generation. This is only half true. The Younger Generation in any double decade or of any century merely talks of revolt. The actual revolting is generally done by the Older Generation. The Younger Generation may be found atop the soapboxes, but the loaded guns are usually found in the hands of their elders.

*Vanished Hobgoblins.*—In the days before the Nineteenth Amendment one of the chief arguments against the extension of the suffrage to women was this: that the act of voting would bring them unpleasant and contaminating contacts, that going into polling-places peopled by low ruffians would offer them indignity. This argument was heard chiefly from ladies of an

elder school; almost all of us had aunts who voiced it. The instant they got the vote they voiced it no more. What they found in the polling-place was not a horde of assassins from the waterfront, but half a dozen humble and harmless fellows from the neighborhood—the corner delicatessen dealer, an apartment-house janitor, a bookkeeper from a lumber-yard, a retired plumber, and so on. It surprised them, I daresay, but they said nothing; women are far too intelligent ever to admit their errors specifically.

Some worse ones flourished in those ancient days, and now, thanks to the progress of moral endeavor in the Republic, it is impossible to dispose of them by evidential means. Thus they probably continue to hold credit in camera. I offer, as specimens, the general feminine notions of what went on in saloons, in men's clubs, and in what used to be called mellifluously disorderly houses. The saloon, seen from the outside, probably bore an extremely sinister and romantic aspect. It was the place where father acquired his hiccup, where improper anecdotes originated, where politicians, burglars and other criminals met to plan their rogueries. In most American States women were forbidden by law to enter its doors; in all States their entrance was frowned upon by the communal *mores*. Yet they passed those doors every day. They caught whiffs of its ethereal aromas; they heard echoes of its occult ribaldry; they nursed, on occasions, the victims of its sorceries. No wonder they were curious about it, and ready to believe fabulous tales about it!

It is a pity that, at least in its more gaudy and romantic forms, it disappeared, along with the old-time men's club, before the communal *mores* had been abated sufficiently for them to go see it for themselves. Their inspection, of course, would have given them a surprise vastly greater than that they suffered when they began to vote. For the saloon, in actuality, was even more banal than the polling-place. Its charm, to a sober visitor, was scarcely

beyond that of a hardware store or a Pullman wash-room. Like the barber-shop—also mysterious and sinister in its time, but now invaded by flappers of ten and twelve—, it was simply stupid. I frequented bar-rooms, in the days before the Wesleyan Reformation, pretty steadily; my constitution, then as now, required an occasional dram. Yet I can't remember ever having met any man in one who was worth meeting, or having heard anything that was worth hearing, or having seen anything that might not have been set before an audience of grandmothers. I seem to remember a few florid paintings of the nude, but the nude certainly would not shock grandmothers. Once I saw a man black another man's eye, but I have seen precisely the same thing in a cemetery.

The old-time bordello, nine times out of ten, was quite as innocuous. Its reputation for thrills was kept up, not by those who had ever actually examined it, but by sensational clergymen who viewed it from a range of 1000 yards. In reality, it was commonly run almost as decorously as the Lake Mohonk Conference. The instant gayety went beyond a mild *mezzo forte* the bouncer emerged from the cellar, the piano-player jumped out of the window, and the police reserves arrived. Save in the lowest dives, improper dress was forbidden the internes, and profane or Rabelaisian language was severely punished, often by heavy fines or suspension from the faculty. The music, true enough, was vulgar, but it was never so vulgar as the current music of Broadway; always there was some simple sentiment in it to mitigate its cacophony. Nor was drunkenness countenanced, save perhaps by the higher functionaries of the gendarmerie. A police captain, on his day off, was permitted to drink beyond the seemingly and lie snoring on the floor, but that was out of respect for his office. A private citizen who essayed to imitate him was kicked out without ado, and his hat and stick thrown after him.

This institution, as I say, passed out of existence before the recent relaxation of the

old pruderies permitted any woman of any social dignity to inspect it for herself. The result is that the romantic view of it lies embalmed in amber. It still figures in Sunday-school stories as a place of levantine debauchery—the scene of revels that would have staggered even Offenbach or Heliogabalus. Suburban clergymen, in their Sunday-night discourses to bored victims of the laws against Sunday movies, depict it as a sort of moral slaughter-house, and speak of its suppression as one of the greatest triumphs of Ku Klux Christianity. But was it actually suppressed? I often doubt it. I believe, rather, that it died of inanition—that the dance craze, the vast extension of boozing under Prohibition, and, above all, the increasing bawdiness of the theatre, simply drove it to the wall, as the old-time leg shows were driven to the wall by the universal exposure of the female calf.

*Definition.*—Christendom may be defined briefly as that part of the world in which, if any man stands up in public and solemnly swears that he is a Christian, all his auditors will laugh.

*A False Prudery.*—It is less than two hundred years since the art of the surgeon was definitely separated from that of the barber, but already its practitioners have developed a great corpus of professional hocus-pocus and a high sense of their own dignity. If it were not for the remedies for malpractice that equity offers to their patients many of them would be operating in dress suits today, as all of them did down to Lister's day. Not a few of the more pretentious of them, I believe, still refuse to finish an operation that they have begun. The patient is sewed up, not by the virtuoso who gets his money, but by an apprentice who gets nothing. This results, I suppose, in more stitches, but perhaps in fewer stitch abscesses. All the auxiliary work, of course—boiling instruments, counting sponges, shaving the field, and so on—is done by menials, many of them of the female sex and some of them beautiful.

But against all this I do not protest. If a clergyman deserves an altar-boy to open his missal for him and hand him his censor, then certainly a surgeon deserves an assistant to hand him his instruments and prepare his patient for the embalmer. What I object to is the professional sniffishness that has handed over one of the most important departments of surgery—that of cosmetic repair—chiefly to quacks. Nine out of ten surgeons of the first rank, I believe, refuse to engage in it—that is, when it is not a necessary sequel to traumatic or operative mutilation. They will help a soldier who has had his nose shot off in the wars or even a pugilist who has lost an ear in the ring, but they will not help a poor working girl who is lovely in every particular save that her mouth is six inches wide. If she would have it reduced to normalcy by the surgical art, she must resort, usually, to a practitioner who is somewhat below the salt, and not infrequently the net result is that she gets a tremendous bill and two bad scars, and sees her boss' son married to some other girl.

It is difficult to detect any sense in this professional prudery. If the Hippocratic Oath obliges a surgeon to trephine the skull of a Prohibition enforcement officer who has fallen a victim to the just wrath of a *posse comitatus*, then why should it forbid him to relieve the agony of a young woman whose nose, in sagittal section, is like a clam shell, or whose ears stick out like studding sails? The girl is obviously more worthy than the enforcement officer and her malady is more dangerous to her success in life. Moreover, her relief and improvement are of infinitely greater value to society in general. To save a Prohibition agent's useless and degraded life is to carry humanitarianism to the verge of pedantry; to convert a homely and unhappy girl into a pretty and happy one is to increase the general store of joy in the world. She is herself lifted to the heights of bliss, and the rest of us are made easier in mind, for nothing, it must be obvious, is more de-



pressing than the spectacle of a human virgin without physical charm. She is a walking futility; a tragedy in one long, lugubrious act. Surgery, three times out of four, could help her. So long as it fails to do so it is recreant to its trust.

Nearly always her relief presents a trifling problem, surgically speaking. She is not homely all over; she is simply homely in one salient feature, and repairing it is seldom as complex a business as repairing a broken knee-cap. The worst nose imaginable yields very readily to the plastic surgeon's ingenuity. He can shave it down if it is too big; he can shrink it if it bulges; he can correct its lines if it is offensively Socratic. Ears, too, are easy for him, and so are double chins. He can make dimples. He can reconstruct necks. He can enlarge or diminish mouths. He can correct bow legs and knock knees—and often, in fact, does so, though always on some specious "ethical" ground. But, in general, he appears to dislike these humane offices. It is his theory that it is *infra dig* for him to aid the beauty doctors, so-called—that he must confine himself to the repair of injuries and the cure of disease. Well, bad ears are injuries to any young girl, and a mouth like a ferry slip is a disease far worse than Asiatic cholera.

On the medical side I detect something of the same prejudice. So long as it may be reasonably argued that a female patient's bad complexion is due to some definite malady, the skin specialists and professors of internal medicine labor diligently to relieve her. But the moment the fact appears that she is quite well otherwise—that her muddy color is simply an act of God—then they desert her. No scientific investigation of complexions *per se* has ever been made; there is absolutely no literature on a subject at least twice as important as, say, color blindness or writer's cramp, both of which have been studied so laboriously that the records fill whole shelves. Medicine is an art as well as a science, and as an art it should be concerned with beauty. To increase the

general sightliness of the human race, to augment the number of pretty girls in the world and diminish the number of homely ones—this is an enterprise quite as respectable and ten times as important as ridding infants of the *Oxyuris vermicularis*. It is, indeed, an enterprise that should be one of the first concerns of every civilized people. One can only deplore the fact that the pruderies of the only men scientifically capable of it should stand in the way of its undertaking.

*More on Divorce.*—In the many learned and eloquent treatises on divorce that have appeared in the various public prints, including this department of cosmic wisdom, it seems to us that we and our colleagues in philosophy have at times laid too much stress on important things and too little on trivial. The adjectives are used, of course, in their generally accepted sense; hence there is no paradox. What we mean to say, specifically, is this: that the causes of divorce are doubtless infinitely more insignificant, as such things go, than the majority of investigators and examiners believe. The real causes, that is. The reasons that appear in court are generally as far from these real causes as the human eye can reach. Long before a husband has committed adultery, for instance, the divorce germ has entered his consciousness; long before a wife actually runs away from her husband, the seed of divorce has begun to take root in her mind. A hundred little things preface a husband's beating his wife, and so giving her grounds for divorce in certain States, as a hundred little things, which the investigators dismiss as negligible, preface a wife's running off to Paris with the first available bellhop. What are these little things? Let us guess at a few.

Perhaps one of the chief causes of divorce, or, more exactly, leading up to the act or acts legally recognized as grounds for divorce, is a trivial physical blemish in one or the other of the parties to the marriage. This defect, in the husband's

or the wife's person, may be comparatively insignificant, yet no matter. Such a blemish, when lived with for a period of time, has a cruel and devastating habit of burning itself into the eye and consciousness of the other person; it gradually becomes almost a visual phobia; its image will not out. It colors the one person's entire picture of the other; it grows to dominate that picture completely. In time, if the other person is at all sensitive—and four out of five persons are extremely sensitive in this regard—it becomes unbearable. The husband, if it is the husband, begins, almost unconsciously, to look around him at other and theoretically more immaculate women. The look grows steadier . . . Atlantic City . . . the divorce court. Or he deserts his wife, or treats her with cruelty. The wife, on the other hand, if it is the wife, simply gets to the point where she cannot endure the marriage relation any longer, and leaves her husband's bed and board. And the newspapers, in due course, print the grounds of divorce, but fail to print the reason.

Another reason for the act or acts leading to divorce may be found in the inability of the married parties to stand the aesthetic jars that propinquity forces more or less upon them. This is particularly true of men and women who marry after the twenties have passed into the thirties. Such men and such women have grown so accustomed to physical and emotional independence that the habit is not easy to break. It is much more difficult for them to endure the invasions upon privacy that marriage brings with it than it is for younger persons. For every couple that have been put asunder by adultery, or lack of support, or a carpet-beater, there are two that have been split by being compelled to use the same bathroom, or by a bathroom that was too disconcertingly close to their bed-chamber.

There are dozens of other such reasons, each and all overpowering in their superficial triviality. The two that have been set down are sufficient to suggest many of

the rest. A marriage that has weathered stormy seas all too often goes to smash on a pebble.

*Consolation.*—A sense of moral superiority, as everyone knows, is very comforting. Personally, I find myself unable to indulge myself in it very often, chiefly, I suppose, because most of the things I like to do are forbidden by the *mores* of my time and nation. Yet even I have my virtues and it is very agreeable to think of them. I would not invite a guest to dinner and then give him bad gin; I would not, if I had been shoved into the trenches, accept a bonus in satisfaction of the injury; and I would not do what Mr. Fall did. At the moment that is as far as I can go. If I ever think of anything else I'll resume the subject.

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3. “For years the mistaken idea prevailed that writing was a ‘gift’ miraculously placed in the hands of the chosen few. People said you had to be an Emotional Genius with long hair and strange ways. Many vowed it was no use to try unless you’d been touched with the Magic Wand of the Muse. They discouraged and often scoffed at attempts of ambitious people to express themselves. These mistaken ideas have recently been proved to be ‘bunk.’ People know better now. The entire world is now learning the TRUTH about writing. People everywhere are finding out that writers are no different from the rest of the world. They have nothing ‘up their sleeve’; no mysterious magic to make them successful. They are plain, ordinary people. They have simply learned the principles of writing and have intelligently applied them. I have shown hundreds of people how to turn their ideas into cash—men and women in all walks of life—the modest worker, the clerk, the stenographer, bookkeepers, salesmen, reporters, doctors, lawyers, salesgirls, nurses, housewives—people of all trades and temperaments. I believe there are thousands of people like yourself who can write

much better stories than we now read. Just fill out the coupon. All the secrets are yours.”—*The Authors' Press, Auburn, N. Y.*

*The Backward Art.*—In all the numerous fields of human ingenuity and enterprise, none shows so small a measure of progress as that which concerns itself with the artificial thatching of the male mammal's bald dome. Human imagination and skill have triumphed over fire and water, the air and the land, the sea and the jungle; they have chained electricity and water falls; they have defied the flight of birds and the very passing of time. But the wig in this Year of Our Lord 1924 is still the melancholy looking and completely obvious dingus that it was in the Sixteenth Century. It is reasonable to believe that thousands upon thousands of men in the last five or six centuries, and particularly in the last, have labored to perfect a wig that would be at least partly deceptive, that would seem to belong where it was put. And yet with what result? With the result that the wig looks today exactly like—a wig.

There never has been a wig or a toupé that could deceive even an onlooker with a violent case of astigmatism. One can spot the spurious covering on a bald head a block away. It is approximately as successful in concealing the fact that a man hasn't any of his own hair left as a bustle is successful in concealing the fact that a woman is deficient in what need not further be described. The wig or the toupé, in fact, does not so much conceal baldness as loudly announce it. The only person it fools is the man who wears it. Yet why should this be? Why should one of the apparently most simple things in the world thus baffle human ingenuity? No prize will be given for the correct answer.

*Footnote.*—The difference between a moral man and a man of honor is that the latter regrets a discreditable act, even when it has worked and he has not been caught.



# MUSHROOM TOWN

By MUNA LEE

## THE DRUG-STORE

*A DOOR with blurred panes swung aside to show  
The cavernous room, across whose muffled scents  
Came sudden drifts, volatile and intense,  
Of pennyroyal or tansy. A smeary row,  
Cases of soaps and notions stood before  
Long, gleaming shelves of jars in sapphire glass,  
Below were drawers—salts, sulphur, copperas.  
The soda-taps dripped sirops by the door.*

*And pent in every jar, a bewildering djinn:  
Linden—among whose crackling light-brown leaves  
Still clung small blossoms from a foreign tree;  
Sesame—flat seeds known to the Forty Thieves—  
A child for hours could peer and find within  
Spoil of far lands and islands of the sea.*

## II

### ELECTORS

*THE drug-store was a club, in whose talk took part  
Tall men, slouch-batted, neither old nor young—  
Men who had failed elsewhere, and who had wrung  
Stakes from scant capital for another start.  
Not hopeless men: here was a junction which  
Ensured a Harvey Eating House; next year  
Congress would pass the Enabling Act; right here  
Would be a metropolis: they would all be rich.*

*These consummations meanwhile they awaited  
In the drug-store, talking politics till night.  
Texans, farmers, and carpet-baggers they hated;  
Feared the Negro—"This state should be lily-white,"  
And arguments to damn whatever scheme  
Were the epithets "Utopia" and "dream."*