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By H. L. MENCKEN

## *The State of the Country*

DEMOCRACY AND LEADERSHIP, by Irving Babbitt. Boston and New York: *The Houghton Mifflin Company*.

If the dour figure of Paul Elmer More did not loom up in the foreground, one would be tempted to call Professor Babbitt the most violent enemy of Rousseau and Rousseauism now extant upon this planet—the most violent ever seen, indeed, since God called Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche to bliss eternal. For nearly twenty years now, the two of them have been flogging the corpse of poor Jean-Jacques—accusing him of every moral and intellectual infamy, blaming him for all the sorrows of the world. Is mankind still made boozy by Romanticism? Are we bored and affronted by the vaporings of poets who mistake their bellyaches for the cosmic urge, of novelists who fill vast tomes with indelicacies dredged out of the Family Medical Book? Then up with the ax, and let it come down, bang, bang, bang, upon the dry skull of the Geneva basilisk! Do the *Chandala* rise from their sewers and rat-holes, and demand places at the table where the pie is? Then into the fire with his tibia, his fibula, his femur, his radius, his ulna, his os ilium, his sternum! Is democracy a murrain upon all of us? Then let the faithful house-dog (*Canis*) gnaw the rest of his bones!

In particular, Dr. Babbitt blames Jean-Jacques for two things, both of them curses upon modern man. The first is the liberation of the instincts, the launching of the doctrine that what is natural is also somehow laudable, that we cannot go far wrong if we follow the voice within. The other is the rise of the idea of democracy, the axiom that one man is as good as another,

that his judgment is as sound because his instincts are as sound. For loosing these notions on the world the learned professor has at his enemy in the highest dudgeon. For page after page and chapter after chapter he piles up his proofs that they are evil. They make, he says, for turmoil, anarchy, running amok. They set civilization to careening down a greased and dizzy chute. They destroy every sound and valuable article of conduct, they upset law and order, they dethrone *Homo sapiens* and let in the beast. And all of them go back to the infamous Rousseau, father alike of the Romantic movement and of the French Revolution, the *Stammvater* at once of all our sea-green aesthetes and all our political doctrinaires, of Ronald Firbank and William Z. Foster, of Joyce's "Ulysses" and the platform of the Conference for Progressive Political Action, of Dadaism and Bolshevism, of the music of Eric Satie and the recall of judicial decisions.

Dr. Babbitt even adds Prohibition—a somewhat startling evidence of his passion to fix and concentrate the blame. It seems to me, I regret to say, that he here goes much too far—that his natural desire, as a pedagogue, to get his materials neatly labeled carries him far beyond the bounds of the probable. I doubt, indeed, that Jean-Jacques was the inventor of most of our current curses, or even that he gathered them together and made a system of them. His actual system, as a matter of fact, was full of contradictions, and large portions of it were old when he adopted them. Moreover, it was in the air of his time, and it would be almost as accurate to say that he belonged to it as to say that it belonged to him. What liberated the instincts of man in the Eighteenth Century was not the speculations of a Swiss seer, but the general

rise of skepticism. It was in that century that Christianity first took to its bed, and as its strength slowly oozed out men had to look elsewhere for light and leading. Having tried philosophy and found it lacking, they turned to science—and science had a curious way of exalting what was natural, of making it seem inevitable. What was inevitable, it was quickly deduced, must be somehow virtuous. Rousseau was not a scientist; he was a poet. It was other men, many of them not mentioned by Dr. Babbitt, who transvalued all the old values, and so changed the world.

But he sticks to his thesis resolutely—and more than once it gets him into difficulties. For example, when he tries to set up an antithesis between the Puritanism of old New England and the prowling, snuffling and rapping of knuckles that now go on under our democracy. This has been attempted before, but always without success. It is true enough, and no one denies it, that the Puritanism of the early days was not wholly nor even primarily a series of police regulations for the other fellow—that there was also in it a rigid concept of *self-discipline*—that the Puritan was chiefly concerned about his own soul. But precisely the same thing may be said of his latter-day heirs and assigns. The bucolic Kansans and Arkansans did not saddle us with Prohibition simply because they hated us; they did it at least partly, I believe, because their pastors had taught them that saving us would be a road to grace. Nor is it true that the primeval Puritans devoted themselves exclusively to soul-searching. On the contrary, they busied themselves with constabulary enterprises against Indians and other infidels, and in the course of that lofty endeavor they invented most of the devices that their descendants still employ against civilized men. In brief, the effort to differentiate between the *Ur*-Puritans and the modern Puritans is bound to lead to all sorts of logical fallacies. Dr. Babbitt is not the first to try it, nor is his argument the most absurd ever heard, but absurd it is none the

less, and his book would have been more plausible if he had avoided it.

When he finishes describing the Rousseau disease and undertakes to outline a remedy he quickly gets into trouble again. What he argues for, in a few words, is a return to Christianity, and especially to Christian humility. The human race has enjoyed a century and a half of bombast and braggadocio; it is now time to return to self-discipline and some notion of duty. *Entbehren sollst! Du sollst entbehren!* The enlightened will must take the bridge once more, and shove the unreliable mind and the debauched feelings into the hold. "As against the expansionists of every kind, I do not hesitate to affirm that what is specifically human in man and ultimately divine is a certain quality of will, a will that is felt in its relation to the ordinary self as a will to refrain." In other words, Be hard! It is astonishing, indeed, that a man with such ideas should be so hostile to Nietzsche, as Dr. Babbitt more than once shows himself to be. I can only guess that his acquaintance with the Naumburg sorcerer must be rather superficial—that what he knows of him he has gathered at second-hand, perhaps from Dr. More. Let him read "The Antichrist" and "Thus Spake Zarathustra": he will find in them a clear statement of the ideas he seems to be groping for—a particular and eloquent description of the standards he talks of so vaguely. Above all, he will find there a substitute for all the puerile notions of morality, of truth, of duty, that now rage on this ball; he will find there the concept of honor. And he will find there, too, in casual but blistering sentences, such appalling words against Jean-Jacques that his own, by contrast, will seem like cajolery.

I attempt here no formal review of this long and interesting book, but only throw out a few observations upon it in passing. It seems to me to be based upon questionable premises and it comes to no forthright conclusion, but for all that there is a great deal of valuable matter in it, and

that matter is presented with no little art. Let it be added to the growing shelf of volumes upon our disillusion. It delivers a well-aimed and effective blow at the central fallacy of democracy, at all the stale sentimentalism which now passes for profundity in Christendom, at the whole degraded buffoonery of Americanism. It has, for all its indignation, a certain coldness. But it is sharp.

### *The Art of Keeping Well*

THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERIES, edited by the National Health Council. The Quest for Health, by James A. Tobey, M. S.; The Expectant Mother, by R. L. DeNormandie, M. D.; Taking Care of Your Heart, by T. Stuart Hart, M. D.; Personal Hygiene, by Allan J. McLaughlin, M. D.; Venereal Diseases, by W. F. Snow, M. D.; Cancer, by Francis C. Wood, M. D.; Community Health, by D. B. Armstrong, M. D.; Man and the Microbe, by C. E. A. Winslow, Dr. P. H.; Food for Health's Sake, by Lucy H. Gillett, A. M.; The Young Child's Health, by Henry L. K. Shaw, M. D.; The Human Machine, by W. H. Howell, M. D.; Tuberculosis, by L. R. Williams, M. D. New York: *The Funk & Wagnall's Company*.

HOW IS YOUR HEART, by S. Calvin Smith, M. D. New York: *Boni & Liveright*.

THE National Health Series, as listed above, is not yet complete. There are to be further volumes, it appears, on "The Baby's Health," "Love and Marriage," "Your Mind and You," "Home Care of the Sick," "Adolescence," "Exercises for Health," "The Child in School," "The Health of the Worker," and perhaps even other subjects. The longest of the volumes so far issued runs to 75 pages. They are all printed clearly on good paper, and all are bound hideously in brown imitation leather, with blind stamping that is almost illegible. Naturally enough, there is some duplication of materials. What Mr. Tobey says in "The Quest for Health" is also said, in part, by Dr. Winslow in "Man and the Microbe," and by Dr. Armstrong in "Community Health." But such overlapping, of course, is inevitable, and it does no damage. In general, the series is very competently planned, and some of the individual books have high merit. This is true especially of the volume on cancer by Dr.

Wood and of that on the heart by Dr. Hart. The latter, though it is much smaller, is a far more useful book than Dr. Smith's "How Is Your Heart?" Dr. Smith falls into the error of trying to be bright and chatty about a subject which, to all persons who are interested in it at all, is bound to be extremely serious, not to say grave. Worse, he tries to lift them with Kiwanis Club optimism, by Edgar A. Guest out of the Twenty-third Psalm. Dr. Hart avoids that unpleasantness. He says what needs to be said clearly and convincingly, and then he shuts up.

Not all of the volumes, of course, are on the same level of merit. Writing of cancer or the heart, a medical man is wholly within his own field, and so he is able to tell the simple truth without taking thought of his duties as a patriot and a Christian. But when he tackles, say, the venereal diseases he is instantly on shakier ground, for the venereal diseases have a moral aspect as well as a medical aspect, and the two have a certain antithesis, and even hostility. This difficulty shows itself in Dr. Snow's volume. He is at pains to argue that vice-crusading and other such devices to put down sin belong to the police, not to the medical faculty; nevertheless, he can't escape pronouncing some judgment upon them, and at once it appears that, rather curiously for a medical man, he is in favor of them. Indeed, he goes the whole hog. That is to say, he specifically advocates continence, and holds it to be the duty of all good citizens to promote it. "The community as a whole," he says, "must participate." When every young man in America has been lifted up to the Y. M. C. A. standard the dawn of the millenium will be at hand.

Perhaps. But it will be a millenium, I fear, of a peculiarly pale and sickly type, for its chief product will be sick young men. When Dr. Snow argues that continence is a "sound . . . habit of sex conduct," he argues what is morally thrilling but physiologically very dubious. The natural law that the human male (to say