

MUTATIONS AMONG AMERICANS

BY CARL VAN VECHTEN

RECENTLY, desiring to purchase a lamp, I emerged from the elevator on the indicated floor of one of New York's largest department stores only to gape with amazement. On every hand there was a heterogeneous collection of objects with electrical attachments—but not one real lamp did I see. Here was a samovar, wired and mounted, with a velum shade on which was painted the effigy of an English fox hunt, the men in pink coats, and the hounds in brown. Nearby stood what had apparently once been an andiron, now electrocuted and shadowed by pale-blue ruffles. Coffee- and tea-pots diffused soft light. I did not discover a *pot de chambre*, but there were water-pitchers, pickle-bottles, sewing-machines, cuspidors, medicine-jars, tea-caddies, champagne jero-boams, kerosene cans, inkwells, butter-tubs, flower urns, porcelain parrots, umbrella stands, cake-baskets, water-buckets and ice-cream freezers, all shedding a warm glow of illumination and all so emasculated that they could no longer perform their proper functions.

I asked the pretty, bob-haired girl who was officiating: "Have you no proper lamps?" Staring at me as if I were slightly demented, a foreigner, or a native of some middle-western village, she replied: "We don't burn oil in New York." Disregarding her obtuseness, I persisted: "I mean electric lamps." She waved her hand about in an inclusive gesture. "These are *all* electric lamps," she informed me, in the tone with which one gently instructs a child. Restraining myself from making the retort: "So's your old man," I retired from this emporium and engaged a taxi to carry me

to a celebrated Chinese shop. Here, at any rate, I assured myself, I should be able to secure what I wanted. But I was again disappointed. An obsequious Chinaman exhibited to me a goldfish bowl, surmounted by twin globes, shaded by an *abat-jour* of amethyst Chinese damask, cloissoné vases, bronze Buddhas, raped from joss-house altars, porcelain elephants, teak-wood bird-cages in which bright finches with electric eyes swung on perches, and divers other ornaments carved from rock-crystal, green and rose jade, and malachite.

I sought no further. Returning to my apartment, I took down from a shelf in the store-room the following objects which had fallen into disuse and which were accumulating thick layers of dust: a brass music-rack, a cinnabar jewel chest of a curious design, an early American slop-jar from an inland hotel which, filled with poppies, a ribald friend had sent me on a certain *jour de fête*, a Chinese actor's head-dress composed of esoteric metals studded with jewels and waving with feathers, and a Victorian silver soup-tureen, bequeathed to me by my paternal grandmother. These I dispatched to the nearest electrician with instructions that they be converted forthwith into lamps.

II

Contemplation has satisfied me that this perverse desire to use objects for purposes for which they were never intended is an abiding American trait to which Europeans engaged in manufacturing goods for disposal to tourists from the United States are not above catering. It is for these that are fashioned the toilet-paper rolls which play

tunes, and for these that calf-skin incunabula are metamorphosed into repositories for cigarettes.

This American characteristic may be studied advantageously from a different angle in the more naïve, native drama, the tradition of which has been perpetuated delightfully in the current movies. Railway trains, snowstorms, real turkeys, real waterfalls, real horses, were assuredly no novelty to the playgoers before whom they were exposed and yet it is evident that play after play succeeded because of their inclusion. "David Harum" was the success of a rainstorm with real water, "Shore Acres," of an actual dinner, served steaming to the actors six nights and two matinées a week, with the ultimate result that not a single member of the original cast has been able to look at a turkey since. Real horses racing on a treadmill made "The County Fair" and "Ben Hur."

As I have remarked, these phenomena were not novel to the spectators who crowded the playhouses to see them; they were commonplaces to them. They gave pleasure simply because they were observed where they did not belong—in the theatre. A farmer, who every day in the week pumped his drinking water into a tin dipper from a well sunk under a spreading elm in his backyard, was so fascinated by the simulation of a similar contrivance in a Down East melodrama, which happened to be on view in New York during his single brief visit to the metropolis, that he attended the show four times, thereby depriving himself of a view of the shapely, though well-covered, legs of the marching toys and the curls of Mabel Barrison in "Babes in Toyland." Natives of Vermont, accustomed to spend long Winter hours clearing paths through the drifts from house to barn, sat infatuated before the plight of Kate Claxton in "The Two Orphans," exposed as she was to a devastating fall of paper flakes. Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians, who never missed a service on Sunday or Wednesday, members, indeed, of committees for the

clothing of heathen Africans, or for the converting of Persian pagans, even deacons, prebendaries and bishops, flocked to see "The Old Homestead" and "The Fatal Wedding," primarily because of the church scenes in them. "The Garden of Allah" was a *succès de chameaux*.

It is to gratify a similar instinct that an audience who could not be induced to pay a visit to Carnegie Hall, an audience, indeed, whom the mere mention of a concert by the Boston Symphony Orchestra would cause to yawn, listens with rapt attention to the Strand or the Rivoli or another cinema-palace band while it plays "Ein Heldenleben" or a movement from the "Symphonie Pathétique," rewarding the truly criminal performance with plaudits that would not be displeasing to a Kreisler or a Myra Hess.

III

In many parts of America there is a steady and growing demand for furniture that appears to be something it is not. In the matter of folding-beds the inventors of these *meubles* have been doubly ingenious. Folding-beds that by day take the shape of dining-tables, bookcases, chairs and probably even kitchen stoves are no rarity. Radio and victrola cabinets are now constructed to resemble sideboards or consoles. Telephones are concealed in sedan chairs, while cocktails are shaken in shells, relics of the late war.

The same is true in the matter of food. Pink lemonade, chopped lettuce and asparagus, hash, succotash, peanut butter, crisco and olcomargarine are all the result, some of them a delightful result, of this baleful influence. Architecture has felt its sway, too. Swiss *châlets* are especially favored in prairie towns; Spanish bungalows decorate the environs of Iowa villages; plaster English farmhouses, with thatched roofs, seem to be considered peculiarly appropriate to face Indiana pastures; French *châteaux*, emulating the Renaissance style of their relatives on the Loire, spring up on Fifth avenue. Garages

become houses and houses, garages. If a novel is disguised as a biography, or a biography as a novel, it is sure to sell. In certain of these United States the use of knives for forks and saucers for tea-cups is almost *de rigueur*.

In politics this trait achieves the air of fantastic burlesque. He who is ignorant of international affairs and innocent of foreign languages seems to be the legitimate choice to head an American embassy in any European capital. It appears to be entirely unnecessary for an applicant to acquaint himself with army and navy affairs before his appointment to take charge of one of these bureaux. Our senators and representatives are apparently selected (and elected) at haphazard from an assortment of the most signally unfit material.

What all this is leading to, one cannot be certain; assuredly, however, there is no sign of a waning of the tendency. As soon as it disappears from one strata of American life, it reappears in another. Perhaps it may be studied in its most ironic form when Uncle Peter and the family descend on Europe, for most of the Americans who visit France and Italy and Spain have no business to be there. They complain bitterly about the garlic and the olive oil in the cooking, and the fleas in their beds; they whine about the habitual gouging of the Parisian *cochers*; they grumble about

the lack of heat in Venetian churches; they growl about the London fogs. French beer is too thin and German beer is too thick; English food is too simple, French food is too complicated.

Foreigners, these Americans grunt, are strange, unmoral people who eat snails and cockscombs and exist without bathtubs. They even refuse to learn the American language, although some of them speak English. In certain provinces they dress eccentrically, preserving the costumes of their ancestors. They nourish unreasonable grudges against each other and more particularly against the inhabitants of the United States. Their politics and their manners are heathenish; their banking and political systems are imperfect. In certain horrible countries—England, for example—they retain the tradition of monarchy and actually support a king in a royal palace. They do not understand the art of baking bread, and when one asks for chicken à la Maryland or Virginia ham one is given a blank stare. They waste government money on theatres and opera houses, and, in some places, a poet has more social importance than a rich brewer. Nevertheless, in spite of these inconveniences of thought and action, Uncle Peter and his family are, on the whole, fairly content. Are they not in the very places where they do not belong?

CLINICAL NOTES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Mountebankery.—When we denounce a man for mountebankery, we often overlook the fact that a touch of charlatanism is necessary to an honest, sincere and first-rate man in the Republic if he is to get his message, whatever it may be, across to the millions of boobs and blockheads who hem him in on all sides. The completely honest, sincere and first-rate man, save he practise a measure of mountebankery, stands no more chance of attracting attention in the United States at the present time than a completely above-board politician or a new Haydn. A few men of his own sort will recognize him and his abilities, but the great mass of the people will remain wholly oblivious to him. To get the ears of this great mass, the first-rate man must speak to them (and conduct himself toward them) as a second-rate, third-rate or even tenth-rate man. By this hocus-pocus, due to the circumstance of like liking like, he may contrive to obtain their attention and, having obtained it, to unload gradually into their temporarily hornswoggled cocos what forthright ideas he desires to.

It matters not what kind of first-rate man the first-rate man in question happens to be. He may be an artist, a writer, a musician, a financier, an editor, a business man or perhaps only a street-hawker of toy balloons, rubber tacks, smell-bombs, imitation cockroaches and busts of Theodore Roosevelt. But, whatever he is, a degree of quackery is vital to him if he would sell himself and his goods or ideas. There are men who are born frauds; there are others who have fraudulence thrust upon them. The former are not worth tobacco juice; the latter are often deserving of the highest and most intelligently

critical respect. The first class I shall not bother to identify by name. Throw a brick out of the window and you will hit one of them or maybe two, if the brick bounces. The second group numbers such highly estimable, if diversified, fellows as J. P. Morgan, William Randolph Hearst, Leopold Stokowski, Colonel William Mitchell, Clarence Darrow, Sinclair Lewis, Alf Ringling, Nicholas Murray Butler and the Messrs. Cluett and Peabody.

Definition 3,260.—Criticism is a technical mastery of the difficult art of keeping un-aesthetic personal prejudices out of æsthetic appraisal.

The Emperor.—Much of the fault that is found by Americans with the Hon. Calvin Coolidge as president of their country undoubtedly rests, at bottom, upon the unromantic aspect of the fellow. 'Way down below the groans and grunts uttered over him, 'way down below the ostensible reasons for the dissatisfaction with him, runs the inevitable current of popular distaste for a leader who lacks picturesqueness. In the way of romance and picturesque quality, Coolidge cuts a sorry figure. He lacks even Harding's impressive front or Taft's sizeable bulk, warm geniality and English actor-manager *Schnurrbart*. When his likeness is flashed on a movie sheet, it is, indeed, always necessary carefully to identify him on the screen by name that the audience may not mistake him for a casual delegate to some School Teachers' Convention, Bible Congress or other such newsreel excitement and may be induced to bestow upon him the usual perfunctory hand-claps.

That the Hon. Calvin is himself privy