

EDITORIALS

Quantilla Prudentia Regatur Orbis

If the statesmen of Christendom really had any of the wisdom they pretend to they would prohibit talking news-reels everywhere. For so long as such things are permitted they will have to appear in them, and every time they appear they do irreparable damage to the general respect for their trade. One day last July, dodging into a movie-parlor in New York to escape the heat of Broadway, I saw a reel showing the three current mastodons of British statecraft—MacDonald, Baldwin and Lloyd-George—, all of them making speeches. I had myself enjoyed the honor of witnessing these gentlemen in person, and hence their appearance did not shock me, but the effect upon certain other members of the audience was plainly very painful. It was at a time when the three were once more parading through the newspapers as saviors of the world. But what the people saw and heard was simply a trio of shabby and preposterous politicians—no better and no worse than so many American Congressmen. A glance at them was sufficient to show that they were as little fit to save the world as they were to square the circle. Unluckily, the crowd got far more than a glance: it had to look at them steadily for four or five minutes, and while it looked it had to listen to their speeches. And when they were wafted away it was confronted with a jerking, grimacing image of the Hon. Henry L. Stimson, LL.D., Secretary of State in the Cabinet

of Lord Hoover, also accompanied by chin music. There was a great moan of relief when he faded into three frank mountebanks—Jimmy Walker, Joe Weber and Lew Fields.

The talkie, I believe, bears far more harshly upon such exalted personages than the old silent movie. The latter permitted them to strike effective poses, and to hold them. They could prepare themselves by settling their coat-collars, fixing their cuffs, plastering their forelocks, and choosing their backgrounds. Above all, they could keep their mouths shut. The talkie strips them of all such protections. They are forced to perform according to their nature, to show their actual professional stuff, to be themselves. They have to open their mouths as wide as possible, and to roar their wisdom into the microphone. The public effect is inevitably disastrous to their reputations. The great masses of the plain people go to see and hear a Talleyrand, a Metternich or a Bismarck, mounted on a charger and in a gilt frame, but what confronts them, if MacDonald is dished up, is a forlorn little soap-boxer with long hair, or, if Lloyd-George is the bill, an older, beefier and moldier soap-boxer with longer hair, or, when Stimson has his turn, a Wall Street lawyer with his shirt-tail afire.

Such august and puissant men, I suppose, do not deign to view their own films; no doubt they send their secretaries or their daughters-in-law to report, and are humanely deceived. The late Woodrow Wilson was hornswoggled in somewhat

the same way. When he made his stumping tour for the League of Nations he relied on parasites for news of the public effect, and was thus staggered with surprise when it turned out that the enterprise had been a bust. Wilson, when he got home from Versailles, was higher in the world than any other American had ever got. Multitudes of his lieges regarded him as the wisest man since Solomon, and there were plenty who suspected that he was actually divine. More than once, in fact, in 1919, I heard bold whispers that the Second Coming, after long delays, was at last upon us. If he had incarcerated himself in the White House, and confined himself to issuing vague bulls in that voluptuous camp-meeting rhetoric of which he was a master, he would have died to the accompaniment of well-authenticated natural portents, and miracles would be worked at his tomb today. But he insisted fatuously upon exposing himself to the plain people, and the result was catastrophe. The more they looked at him and listened to him, the more they fell away. When they turned out by the thousand to feast their eyes upon a genius, a superman, an archangel, what they saw was simply a Presbyterian pedagogue in a long-tailed coat, giving his old show for sophomores. It was a bitter disillusion and it cost Wilson a pair of wings.

Thus I counsel the statesmen of the world to put down the talkie while there is yet time; in a few years it may reduce them to the public esteem of dog-stealers or traffic cops. Every time they permit themselves to be recorded in the act of saving the world they lose millions of trusting customers. The public is shocked and horrified by the discovery that the lofty characters it has been taught to venerate are simply a gang of blowsy politicians, full of sound and fury, signifying

nothing. But that this discovery is bad for the human race, as opposed to the statesmen themselves, I do not go so far as to say. On the contrary, I presume to associate myself with the opposite thesis. That is to say, I presume to argue that, whatever the immediate discomfort, it is good medicine for the plain people to get next to their rulers. Since history began they have been admiring quacks, always to their heavy and inescapable cost. Thus they have paid taxes without end, and thus they have marched off idiotically to countless wars. If, now, the progress of invention sicklies them o'er with a pale cast of doubt, then something, I fancy, will be accomplished. It may not be much, practically speaking, but it will be something. The quacks will still hold forth, but they will certainly be less dangerous when their quackery is understood than they were when it was mistaken for wisdom.



Market Report: Poetry

The poets of America, like the farmers, are suffering from hard times, but it is not because of a dull market: their trouble is that they seem to be unable to make a crop. Fifteen or sixteen years ago, as everyone will recall, they did a very brisk business, and scarcely a month went by without a new one horning into it to great applause—Sandburg, Lindsay, Masters, Robinson, Frost, Amy Lowell, and so on. But today the survivors of that flush era write very little, and that little makes no stir, and there is a great dearth of talented newcomers. Since Robinson Jeffers I can recall but one *débutant* who has really got any serious notice: to wit, Hart Crane. But Mr. Crane's dithyrambs are extremely difficult, not to say painful, to most consumers of poetry, and in consequence his

following remains small. I offer a specimen from the *New Republic*:

Ay! Scripture flee'th stone!
Milk-bright, Thy chisel wind
Rescindeth flesh from bone
To quivering whittlings thinned—
Swept, whistling straw!

It is plain here that something is being said, but just what it is is not too clear. In the days when there were college yells, one got much the same effect from them. My belief is that the overwhelming majority of poetry fans prefer something more pellucid, and so I fear that the author has hard sledding ahead of him, despite his earnestness, industry and patriotism. If a new Masters or Frost or Sandburg were to arise tomorrow, Crane would be knocked off the board. He is safe only so long as he doesn't have to compete with poets writing in plain English. Even so, he may be safe for a long while, for, as I have said, not many such poets are now in practice, and there is little sign that any new ones are hatching. Most of the stuff that makes the bottoms of the magazine pages is even more baffling than Mr. Crane's.

Why poetry should thus go on the rocks is a somewhat mysterious matter, for the American people are naturally poetical, as Rotary and Kiwanis so brilliantly demonstrate. There has never been a time in their history when they were not ready to cherish and venerate poets. In the last heyday of the craft—say in 1915 or thereabout—they bought poetry so copiously that a new volume of it often outsold the latest pornographic novel. If sound goods were on the wharves today they would buy again, even at the cost of missing payments on their radios. But nothing is offered that they can get their teeth into. They ask for something to make their hearts leap, and all they get is something that puzzles and scares them.

I half suspect that the science of criticism is responsible, at least in large part, for this sad decay. Up to four or five years ago the current poetry was reviewed by ordinary critics, and they applied to it the same criteria that they applied to novels, essays and plays. If it seemed to them to be swell, they said so plainly, and had done. They could understand most of the poetry that was then being written, and they wrote about it in a simple and straightforward way. Thus the poetry-loving public got comprehensible and reliable news upon the subject, and poets themselves were given useful aid in their business. The reviews that they read dealt exclusively with what was in their poetry, and there was no intrusion of extraneous and irrelevant matters. In particular, there was no parade of metaphysics—obviously, a comfortable thing for the poets, for their craft is really very simple, and they dislike metaphysics as much as any other decent and laborious men. When Sandburg, for example, read the reviews of his "Chicago Poems" there was nothing in them to either mystify or alarm him. He saw only that his plain strophes had been plainly understood, and highly appreciated. Thus he was encouraged to compose more of them, and presently he did so.

But that innocent day is past. Of late the criticism of poetry has come to be a special branch, with rules and postulates all its own. A flavor of the occult has got into it—even a flavor of the diabolical. One no longer hears that a given poem is either swell stuff or dreadful rubbish, as the case may be; instead, one has to settle down to an acroamatic and indelicate essay upon epistemology, commonly by a young critic who heard of it for the first time not later than the Autumn of 1929. It is not enough for a poet to make it known in dulcet and thrilling terms that he is taken

by his gal; he must also offer his reasons for saying that she exists, and define love in the mystical vocabulary of Plotinus. Nor is it sufficient for him to write about what he has actually seen and experienced—a wheat field in the wind, a New England village, a Methodist camp-meeting, the battle of Santiago, or what not. The New Criticism demands that he also state his views about such indecent phantasms as neo-Platonism, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Scholastic eudemonism, the precise difference between percept and concept, and the Red plot to kidnap Paul Elmer More. If he fails, then it goes as hard with him as it goes with an atheist in Mississippi.

All this plays hob with the poets. They are artists, not astrologers, and it is asking too much of them to demand that they cram their heads with such stuff. Even a Sandburg, though he is a graduate of a sound Lutheran college and has worked for the *Chicago Daily News* for fifteen years, cannot be expected to understand the fancy writing of a Harvard sophomore drunk on T. S. Eliot. It is all right, of course, for Mr. Crane and his like, but they are plainly exceptional. The average poet, so belabored, simply gives up. He concludes gloomily that the poetry business has gone to pot. I half suspect that it has.

H. L. M.

AMERICANS IN THE SOUTH SEAS

BY ROBERT DEAN FRISBIE

"I HAVE been told that there is a woman named Dora," Mrs. Henry Watson wrote from a mid-Western town some months ago, "and that she was *very* well acquainted with my late and lamented husband, Henry Watson. This may be malicious gossip, I do not *know*; but I expect and demand, as a muchly wronged and aggrieved wife, that you send me a full and detailed account of this *affair*, if any, by the next post."

And more to the same effect. Chataigner and I, friends and drinking companions of the "late and lamented" Watson, read the letter and smiled wryly. We knew then, at last, why he had come to the South Seas to live hard and die quickly.

Watson had arrived late in December, and he made himself liked by the local alcoholics almost immediately. He was short, prematurely white and as round as a pumpkin, with a sporting temperament acquired from years of patronizing the races. He told us that his wife was dead, that he had no children or other connections of any kind, and that he had come to the South Seas to spend the rest of his days. He fitted in perfectly; we accepted him without a murmur.

He lived with us a little less than a year, drinking deeply and loving as well as his years would permit. He gave us the impression of one born to the life. For months no one dreamed that he was only a hen-pecked husband.

But though at first his real history was unknown, gradually rumors merged into facts, and we learned that he was one of those few men who have the courage to break away from long years of habit. His wife was his cross: a nagging woman; and early in life his two children had found it convenient or diplomatic to side with their mother. So he was the butt of his family for twenty-five years, finding solace only in his sporting companions, and allowed to enjoy them only by stealth.

But on a Thanksgiving Day, twenty-five years after his marriage, Watson did a strange and inexplicable thing. The whole family had gathered about the usual dinner, very straight-laced and smirking, I imagine, allowing themselves the sinful liberty of a bottle of elderberry wine, and blushing as they sipped it. Watson held the head of the table. No one could detect anything unusual in his conduct save that he did not eat his helping of turkey. He stared at it a moment; then he turned his eyes to his wife, and a hard glint came into them. A moment later he rose, excused himself and left the room. This was an unheard of breach of etiquette in the Watson home; everyone was embarrassed. And that was the last the family ever saw of Henry Watson.

Shortly afterward, he stepped from the steamer at Papeete; and a year later he was celebrating Thanksgiving Day at his newly-acquired place in Raiatea. Chataigner and I were there. We helped him