

AN OUTLINE OF AMERICAN HISTORY

By Donald Ogden Stewart

With Sketches by Herb Roth

CHAPTER II

MAIN STREET—PLYMOUTH, MASS.

In the Manner of Sinclair Lewis

1620.

Late autumn.

The sour liver-colored shores of America.

Breaking waves dashing too high on a stern and rockbound coast.

Woods tossing giant branches planlessly against a stormy sky.

Cape Cod Bay. Wet and full of codfish. The codfish, wet and full of bones.

Standing on the deck of the anchored "Mayflower", gazing reflectively at the shores of the new world, is Priscilla Kennicott.

A youthful bride on a ship full of pilgrims; a lily floating in a dish of prunes; a cloissoné vase in a cargo of oil cans.

Her husband joins her. Together they go forward to where their fellow pilgrims are preparing to embark in small boats.

Priscilla jumps into the bow of the first of these to shove off.

As the small craft bumps the shore, Priscilla rises joyously. She stretches her hands in ecstasy toward the new world. She leans forward against the breeze, her whole figure alive with the joy of expectant youth.

She leaps with an irrepressible "Yippee" from the boat to the shore.

She remains for an instant, a vibrant pagan, drunk with the joy of life; Pan poised for an unforgettable moment on Plymouth Rock.

The next minute her foot slips on the hard wet unyielding stone. She clutches desperately. She slides slowly back into the cold chill saltiness of Cape Cod Bay.

She is pulled, dripping and ashamed, into the boat. She crouches there, shivering and hopeless. She hears someone whisper, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

A coarse mirthless chuckle.

The pilgrims disembark.

II

Plymouth.

A year later.

Night.

She lay sleepless on her bed.

She heard the outside door open; Kennicott returning from prayer meeting.

He sat down on the bed and began pulling off his boots. She knew that the left boot would stick. She knew exactly what he would say and how



Priscilla Is Pulled, Dripping and Ashamed, into the Boat

long it would take him to get it off. She rolled over in bed, a tactical movement which left no blanket for her husband.

"You weren't at prayer meeting," he said.

"I had a headache," she lied. He expressed no sympathy.

"Miles Standish was telling me what you did today at the meeting of the Jolly Seventeen." He had got the boot off at last; he lay down beside her and pulled all the blankets off her onto himself.

"That was kind of Miles." She jerked at the covers but he held them tight. "What charming story did he tell this time?"

"Now look here, Prissie—Miles Standish isn't given to fabrication. He said you told the Jolly Seventeen that next Thanksgiving they ought to give a dance instead of an all-day prayer service."

"Well—anything else?" She gave a tremendous tug at the bedclothes and Kennicott was uncovered again.

"He said you suggested that they arrange a series of lectures on modern religions, and invite Quakers and other radicals to speak right here in Plymouth and tell us all about their

beliefs. And not only that but he said you suggested sending a message to the Roman Catholic exiles from England, inviting them to make their home with us. You must have made quite a little speech."

"Well—this is the land of religious freedom, isn't it? That's what you came here for, didn't you?" She sat up to deliver this remark—a movement which enabled Kennicott to win back seven-eighths of the bed covering.

"Now look here Prissie—I'm not narrow like some of these pilgrims who came over with us. But I won't have my wife intimating that a Roman Catholic or a Quaker should be allowed to spread his heresies broadcast in this country. It's all right for you and me to know something about those things, but we must protect our children and those who have not had our advantages. The only way to meet this evil is to stamp it out, quick, before it can get a start. And it's just such so-called broadminded thinkers as you that encourage these heretics. You'll be criticizing the Bible next, I suppose."

Thus in early times did the pious Right Thinkers save the land from

Hellfire and Damnation; thus the great-grandfathers of middle-western congressmen; thus the ancestors of platitudinous editorial writers, Sitters on Committees, and tin-horn prohibitionists.

Kennicott got up to cool his wrath and indignation with a drink of water. He stumbled over a chair, reached for the jug, took a drink, set the jug down, stumbled over the same chair, and crawled back into bed. His expedition cost him the loss of all bed covering; he gave up the fight.

"Aside from dragging my own private views over the coals of your righteousness, did you and your friends find anything equally pleasant and self-satisfying to discuss this evening?"

"Eh—what's that? Why, yes, we did. We decided to refuse permission for one of these traveling medicine shows to operate in Plymouth."

"Medicine shows?"

"Yes—you know—like a fair in England. This one claims to come from down south somewhere. 'Smart Set Medicine Show' it's called, run by a fellow named Mencken. Sells cheap whisky to the Indians—makes them crazy, they say. He's another one of your radical friends we don't want around."

"Yes, he might cut in on your own trading with the Indians."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Prissie—hire a hall."

Silence. He began to snore.

She lay there, sleepless and open-eyed. The clock struck eleven.

"Why can't I get to sleep?"

("Did Will put the cat out?")

"I wonder what this medicine show is like?"

"What is the matter with these people?"

("Or is it me?")

She reached down, pulled the blan-

kets from under her, spread them carefully over the sleeping Kennicott, patting them down affectionately.

The next day she learned what the medicine show was like. She also learned what was the matter with the pilgrims.

III

Morning.

A fog horn.

A fog horn blowing unceasingly.

At breakfast Kennicott pointed with his fork in the direction of the persistent sound.

"There's your Smart Set medicine show," he said glumly. "He doesn't seem to care much whether we give him a permit or not." Then, a minute later, "We'll have to let him stay. Won't do to have the Indians down on us. But I tell you this, Priscilla, I don't want you to go."

"But Will—"

"Prissie, please! I'm sorry I said what I did last night. I was tired. But don't you see, well, I can't just exactly explain—but this fog horn sort of scares me—I don't like it—"

He suddenly rose and put both hands on her shoulders. He looked into her eyes. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. He picked up his hat and was gone. It was five minutes before Priscilla noticed that his breakfast had been left untouched.

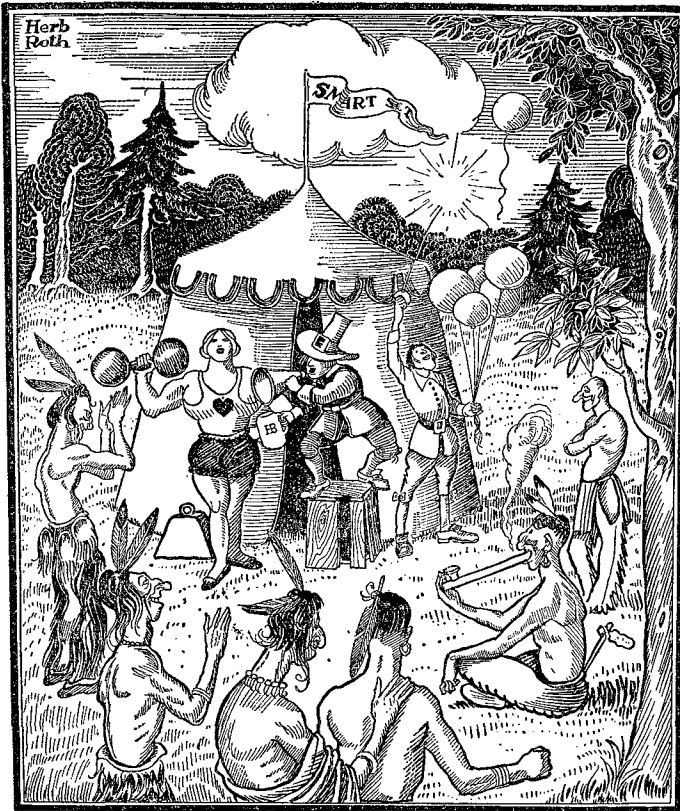
A fog horn, sounding unceasingly.

She listlessly put away the breakfast dishes. She tried to drown out the sound by singing hymns. She fell on her knees and tried to pray. She found her prayers keeping time to the rise and fall of the notes of that horn. She determined to go out in the air—to find her husband—to go to church, anywhere—as far as possible from the Smart Set medicine show.

So she went out the back door and ran as fast as she could toward the

place from which came the sound of the fog horn.

He bellows, "Beauty—Beauty—Beauty!"



The Smart Set Medicine Show

IV

An open space on the edge of the forest.

In the centre of the clearing a small gaudily-painted tent.

Seated on the ground in a semicircle before the tent, some forty or fifty Indians.

Standing on a box before the entrance to the tent, a man of twenty-five or fifty.

In his left hand he holds a fog horn; in his right, a stein of beer.

He puts the horn to his lips and blows a heavy blast.

He takes a drink of beer.

He repeats this performance nine times.

He takes up some mud and deftly models the features of several well-known characters—statesmen, writers, critics. In many cases the resemblance is so slight that Priscilla can hardly recognize the character.

He picks up a heavy club and proceeds to beat each one of his modeled figures into a pulp.

The Indians applaud wildly.

He pays no attention to this applause.

He clears his throat and begins to speak. Priscilla is so deafened by the roar of his voice that she cannot hear what he says. Apparently he is introducing somebody; somebody named George.

George steps out of the tent, but does not bow to the audience. In one hand he carries a fencing foil, well constructed, of European workmanship; in his other hand he holds a number of pretty toy balloons which he has made himself.

He smiles sarcastically, tosses the balloons into the air, and cleverly punctures them one by one with his rapier.

At each "pop" the announcer blows a loud blast on the fog horn.

When the last balloon has been punctured George retires without acknowledging the applause of the Indians.

The next act is announced as Helen of Troy in "Six Minutes of Beauty". Priscilla learns from the announcer that "this little lady is out of Irony by Theodore Dreiser".

"All ready, Helen—"

The "little lady" appears.

She is somewhat over six feet six in height and built like a boilermaker. She is dressed in pink tights.

"Six Minutes of Beauty" begins when Helen picks up three large iron cannon balls and juggles them. She tosses them in the air and catches them cleverly on the back of her neck.

The six minutes are brought to a successful conclusion when Helen, hanging head downward by one foot from a trapeze, balances a lighted lamp on the other foot and plays Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on the slide trombone.

The announcer then begins his lecture. Priscilla has by this time gotten used to the overpowering roar of his voice and she discovers that once this

difficulty is overcome she is tremendously impressed by his words.

She becomes more and more attracted to the man. She listens, fascinated, as his lecture draws to a close and he offers his medicine for sale. She presses forward through the crowd of Indians surrounding the stand. She reaches the tent. She gives her coin and receives in return a bottle. She hides it in her cape and hurries home.

She slips in the back way; she pours some of the medicine into a glass; she drinks it.

V

A terrible overwhelming nausea. Vomiting, which lasts for agonizing minutes, leaving her helpless on the floor.

Then cessation.

Then light—blinding light.

VI

At 3:10 Priscilla drank the Mencken medicine; at 3:12 she was lying in agony on the floor; at 3:20 she opened her eyes; at 3:21 she walked out of her front door; and at 3:22 she discovered what was wrong with Plymouth and the pilgrims.

Main Street. Straight and narrow. A Puritan thoroughfare in a Puritan town.

The church. A centre of Puritan worship. The shrine of a narrow theology which persistently repressed beauty and joy and life.

The Miles Standish house. The house of a Puritan. A squat, unlovely symbol of repression. Beauty crushed by Morality.

Plymouth Rock. Hard, unyielding—like the Puritan moral code. A huge tombstone on the grave of Pan.

She fled home. She flung herself, sobbing, on the bed. She cried,

*The Meeting of the Jolly Seventeen*

"They're all Puritans—that's what they are, Puritans!"

After a while she slept, her cheeks flushed, her heart beating unnaturally.

VII

Late that night.

She opened her eyes; she heard men's voices; she felt her heart still pounding within her at an alarming rate.

"And I told them then that it would come to no good end. Truly, the Lord does not countenance such joking."

She recognized the voices of Miles Standish and Elder Brewster.

"Well—what happened then?" This from Kennicott.

"Well, you see, Henry Haddock got

some of this Mencken's medicine from one of the Indians. And he thought it would be a good joke to put it in the broth at the church supper this evening."

"Yes?"

"Well—he did it, the fool. And when the broth was served, hell on earth broke loose. Everyone started calling his neighbor a Puritan, and cursing him for having banished Beauty from the earth. The Lord knows what they meant by that; I don't. Old friends fought like wild-cats, shrieking 'Puritan' at each other. Luckily it only got to one table—but there are ten raving lunatics in the lockup tonight.

"It's an awful thing. But thanks to

the Lord, some good has come out of this evil: that medicine man, Mencken, was standing outside looking in at the rumpus, smiling to himself I guess. Well, somebody saw him and yelled, "There's another of those damned Puritans!" and before he could get away five of them had jumped on him and beaten him to death. He deserved it, and it's a good joke on him that they killed him for being a Puritan."

Priscilla could stand no more. She rose from her bed, rushed into the room, and faced the three Puritans. In the voice of Priscilla Kennicott but with the words of the medicine man she scoured them.

"A good joke?" she began. "And that is what you Puritan gentlemen of God and volcanoes of Correct Thought snuffle over as a good joke? Well, with the highest respect to Professor Doctor Miles Standish, the Puritan Hearse-hound, and Professor Doctor Elder Brewster, the Plymouth Dr. Frank Crane—*Blaa!*"

She shrieked this last in their faces and fell lifeless at their feet.

She never recovered consciousness; an hour later she died. An overdose of the medicine had been too much for her weak heart.

"Poor William," comforted Elder Brewster, "you must be brave. You will miss her sorely. But console yourself with the thought that it was for the best. Priscilla has gone where she will always be happy. She has at last found that bliss which she searched for in vain on earth."

"Yes William," added Miles Standish. "Priscilla has now found eternal joy."

VIII

Heaven.

Smug saints with ill-fitting halos and imitation wings, singing meaning-

less hymns which Priscilla had heard countless times before.

Sleek prosaic angels flying aimlessly around playing stale songs on sickly yellow harps.

Three of the harps badly out of tune; two strings missing on another.

Moses, a Jew.

Methuselah, another Jew. Old and unshaven.

Priscilla threw herself on a cloud, sobbing.

"Well, sister, what seems to be the matter here?"

She looked up; she saw a sympathetic stranger looking down at her.

"Because you know, sister," he went on, "if you don't like it here you can always go back any time you want to."

"Do you mean to say," gasped Priscilla, "that I can return to earth?"

"You certainly can," said the stranger. "I'm sort of manager here, and whenever you see any particular part of the earth you'd like to live in, you just let me know and I'll arrange it."

He smiled and was gone.

IX

It was two hundred years before Priscilla Kennicott definitely decided that she could stand it no longer in heaven; it was another hundred years before she located a desirable place on earth to return to.

She finally selected a small town in the American northwest, far from the Puritan-tainted Plymouth; a small town in the midst of fields of beautiful waving grain; a small town free from the artificiality of large cities; a small town named Gopher Prairie.

She made known her desire to the manager; she said goodby to a small group of friends who had gathered to see her off; she heard the sound of the eternal harp playing and hymn

singing grow gradually fainter and fainter; she closed her eyes.

When she opened them again she found herself on Main Street in Gopher Prairie.

X

From the "Heavenly Harp and Trumpet":

Mrs. Priscilla Kennicott, one of our most popular angels, left these parts last Tuesday for an extended visit to the Earth. Mrs. K. confided to Ye Editor that she would probably take up her residence in Gopher Prairie, Minn., under the name of Carol Kennicott. The "Harp and Trumpet" felicitates the citizens of Gopher Prairie on their acquisition of a charming and up-to-date young matron whose absence will be keenly regretted by her many friends in the heavenly younger married set. Good luck, Priscilla!

XI

Heaven.

Five years later.

The monthly meeting of the Celestial Browning Club.

Seated in the chair reserved for the guest of honor, the manager.

The meeting opens as usual with a reading by Brother Robert Browning of his poem "Pippa Passes"; as he proclaims that "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world", the members applaud and the manager rises and bows.

The chairman announces that "to-day we take up a subject in which I am sure we are all extremely interested—the popular literature of the United States".

The members listen to selected extracts from the writings of Gene Stratton-Porter, Zane Grey, and Harold Bell Wright; at the conclusion they applaud and the manager again bows.

"I am sure", says the chairman, "that we are all glad to hear that things are going so nicely in the United States." (Applause.) "And now, in conclusion, Brother Voltaire has requested permission to address us for a few minutes, and I am sure that anything Brother Voltaire has to say will be eminently worthwhile."

Brother Voltaire rises and announces that he has listened with interest to the discussion of American literature; that he, too, rejoices that all is well in this best of all possible United States; and that he hopes they will pardon him if he supplements the program by reading a few extracts from another extremely popular American book recently published under the name of "Main Street".

XII

At the next meeting of the Celestial Browning Club it was unanimously voted that the privileges of the club be denied Brother Voltaire for the period of one year, and that the name of Priscilla Kennicott be stricken from the list of non-resident members of heaven.

THE WOMEN'S NATIONAL BOOK ASSOCIATION

By Belle M. Walker

WHY? Because it seemed to the little group of women who organized it at the inspiration of one of their number, that such an association had a place and could be of service in the wider distribution of books. According to Burges Johnson, in a recent issue of "Harper's Magazine", there are sixty millions of persons in the country who never see a book. But the Women's National Book Association was formed before this arresting statement was made. It was organized four years ago, with the aim of bringing within its membership all the women in the country who were in any way connected with books, either in their making or their distributing. As far as the writer knows, it is the only association in the world that has such a function. Its members include authors, publishers, illustrators, printers, advertisers, editors, buyers, saleswomen, etc.

Impossible? Of course, *that* was said, as in the case of every new venture launched. However, the Association's obsequies have not yet been attended—as a matter of fact it is a very healthy infant considering the time busy women have been able to give to it. It has thrived as only a thing does that makes an appeal. Some persons thought it dangerous to try to correlate the different phases of the book business. But why? Is there anything more important than to aim for an intelligent distribution of the dynamic force of literature? Shall that power be limited to those

who have already felt and know its potency, those who have already reaped the benefit of its influence? Is there no urge on the part of the publisher and the bookseller to extend that influence? No desire to bring the reader and the right book together? Books are vital things—things of tremendous energy that need the bookseller's careful attention and about which he cannot have too much knowledge. Next to the publisher his responsibility is a big one. And to serve, to help to broaden, and to assist in any way the book business, is the purpose of the Women's National Book Association. Its monthly meetings are planned to stimulate an interest in books and their influence. The year before last the life of a book was presented from the manufacture of the paper through the various processes of publishing and marketing. This has been followed by a study of the financial side.

Over one thousand publications are offered the bewildered reader this spring; yet we are reminded by Mr. Johnson in the article referred to, that there are fewer bookstores in this country today than there were fifty years ago when the output was smaller and the population less. Is it not time for the women to try to help?

Much has been written about the inefficiency of booksellers, some of which is justified and some is not. The time has passed when you can ask for John Gilpin and be told that "it is not out yet", or when Stephen Leacock's amusing little brochure on "The Methods