

ADVENTURES WHILE PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF BEAUTY

NICHOLAS VACHEL LINDSAY

I

I Start on my Walk

AS some of the readers of this account are aware, I took a walk last summer from my home town, Springfield, Illinois, across Illinois, Missouri, and Kansas, up and down Colorado and into New Mexico. One of the most vivid little episodes of the trip, that came after two months of walking, I would like to tell at this point. It was in Southern Colorado. It was early morning. Around the cliff, with a boom, a rattle and a bang appeared a gypsy wagon. On the front seat was a Roman, himself dressed inconspicuously, but with his woman more bedecked than Carmen. She wore the bangles and spangles of her Hindu progenitors. The woman began to shout at me, I could not distinguish just what. The two seemed to think this was the gayest morning the sun ever shone upon. They came faster and faster, then, suddenly, at the woman's suggestion, pulled up short. And she asked me with a fraternal, confidential air, "What you sellin', what you sellin', boy?"

If we had met on the first of June, when I had just started, she would have pretended to know all about me, she would have asked to tell my fortune. On the first of June I wore about the same costume I wear on the streets of Springfield. I was white as paper from two years of writing poetry indoors. Now, on the first of August I was sunburned a quarter of an inch deep. My costume, once so respectable, I had gradually transformed till it looked like that of a showman. I wore very yellow corduroys, a fancy sombrero and an oriflamme tie. So Mrs. Gypsy hailed me as a brother. She eyed my little worn-out oil-cloth pack. It was a delightful professional mystery to her.

I handed up a sample of what it contained—my *Gospel of*

Beauty (a little one-page formula for making America lovelier), and my little booklet, *Rhymes to be Traded for Bread*.

The impatient horses went charging on. In an instant came more noises. Four more happy gypsy wagons passed. Each time the interview was repeated in identical language, and with the same stage business. The men were so silent and masterful-looking, the girls such brilliant, inquisitive cats! I never before saw anything so like high-class comic opera off the stage, and in fancy I still see it all:—those brown, braceleted arms still waving, and those provocative siren cries:—“What you sellin’, boy? What you sellin’?”

I hope my Gospel did them good. Its essential principle is that one should not be a gypsy forever. He should return home. Having returned, he should plant the seeds of Art and of Beauty. He should tend them till they grow. There is something essentially humorous about a man walking rapidly away from his home town to tell all men they should go back to their birthplaces. It is still more humorous that when I finally did return home, it was sooner than I intended, all through a temporary loss of nerve. But once home I have taken my own advice to heart. I have addressed four mothers’ clubs, one literary club, two missionary societies and one High School Debating Society upon the Gospel of Beauty. And the end is not yet. No, not by any means. As John Paul Jones once said, “I have not yet begun to fight.”

I had set certain rules of travel, evolved and proved practicable in previous expeditions in the East and South. These rules had been published in various periodicals before my start. The home town newspapers, my puzzled but faithful friends in good times and in bad, went the magazines one better and added a rule or so. To promote the gala character of the occasion, a certain paper announced that I was to walk in a Roman toga with bare feet encased in sandals. Another added that I had travelled through most of the countries of Europe in this manner. It made delightful reading. Scores of mere acquaintances crossed the street to shake hands with me on the strength of it.

The actual rules were to have nothing to do with cities, railroads, money, baggage or fellow tramps. I was to begin to ask

for dinner about a quarter of eleven and for supper, lodging and breakfast about a quarter of five. I was to be neat, truthful, civil and on the square. I was to preach the Gospel of Beauty. How did these rules work out?

The cities were easy to let alone. I passed quickly through Hannibal and Jefferson City. Then, straight West, it was nothing but villages and farms till the three main cities of Colorado. Then nothing but desert to Central New Mexico. I did not take the train till I reached Central New Mexico, nor did I write to Springfield for money till I quit the whole game at that point.

Such wages as I made I sent home, starting out broke again, first spending just enough for one day's recuperation out of each pile, and in the first case, rehabilitating my costume considerably. I always walked penniless. My baggage was practically nil. It was mainly printed matter, renewed by mail. Sometimes I carried reproductions of drawings of mine, *The Village Improvement Parade*, a series of picture-cartoons with many morals.

I pinned this on the farmers' walls, explaining the mottoes on the banners, and exhorting them to study it at their leisure. My little pack had a supply of the aforesaid *Rhymes to be Traded for Bread*. And it contained the following Gospel of Beauty:

THE GOSPEL OF BEAUTY

Being the new "creed of a beggar" by that vain and foolish mendicant Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, printed for his personal friends in his home village—Springfield, Illinois. It is his intention to carry this gospel across the country beginning June, 1912, returning in due time.

PROLOGUE

I come to you penniless and afoot, to bring a message. I am starting a new religious idea. The idea does not say "no" to any creed that you have heard. . . . After this, let the denomination to which you now belong be called in your heart "the church of beauty" or "the church of the open sky." . . . The church of beauty has two sides: the love of beauty and the love of God.

II

THE NEW LOCALISM

The things most worth while are one's own hearth and neighborhood. We should make our own home and neighborhood the most democratic, the most beautiful and the holiest in the world. The children now growing up should become devout gardeners or architects or park architects or teachers of dancing in the Greek spirit or musicians or novelists or poets or story-writers or craftsmen or wood-carvers or dramatists or actors or singers. They should find their talent and nurse it industriously. They should believe in every possible application to art-theory of the thoughts of the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. They should, if led by the spirit, wander over the whole nation in search of the secret of democratic beauty with their hearts at the same time filled to overflowing with the righteousness of God. Then they should come back to their own hearth and neighborhood and gather a little circle of their own sort of workers about them and strive to make the neighborhood and home more beautiful and democratic and holy with their special art. . . . They should labor in their little circle expecting neither reward nor honors. . . . In their darkest hours they should be made strong by the vision of a completely beautiful neighborhood and the passion for a completely democratic art. Their reason for living should be that joy in beauty which no wounds can take away, and that joy in the love of God which no crucifixion can end.

The kindly reader at this point clutches his brow and asks, "But why carry this paper around? Why, in Heaven's name, do it as a beggar? Why do it at all?"

Let me make haste to say that there has been as yet no accredited, accepted way for establishing Beauty in the heart of the average American. *Until such a way has been determined upon by a competent committee*, I must be pardoned for taking my own course and trying any experiment I please.

But I hope to justify the space occupied by this narrative, not by the essential seriousness of my intentions, nor the essential solemnity of my motley cloak, nor by the final failure or suc-

cess of the trip, but by the things I unexpectedly ran into, as curious to me as to the gentle and sheltered reader. Of all that I saw the State of Kansas impressed me most, and the letters home I have chosen cover, for the most part, adventures there.

Kansas, the Ideal American Community! Kansas, nearer than any other to the kind of a land our fathers took for granted! Kansas, practically free from cities and industrialism, the real last refuge of the constitution, since it maintains the type of agricultural civilization the constitution had in mind! Kansas, State of tremendous crops and hardy, devout, natural men! Kansas of the historic Santa Fé Trail and the classic village of Emporia and the immortal editor of Emporia! Kansas, laid out in roads a mile apart, criss-crossing to make a great checker-board, roads that go on and on past endless rich farms and big farm-houses, though there is not a village or railroad for miles! Kansas, the land of the real country gentlemen, Americans who work the soil and own the soil they work; State where the shabby tenant-dwelling scarce appears as yet! Kansas of the Chautauqua and the college student and the devout school-teacher! The dry State, the automobile State, the insurgent State! Kansas, that is ruled by the cross-roads church, and the church type of civilization! The Newest New England! State of more promise of permanent spiritual glory than Massachusetts in her brilliant youth!

Travellers who go through in cars with roofs know little of this State. Kansas is not Kansas till we march day after day, away from the sunrise, under the blistering noon sky, on, on over a straight west-going road toward the sunset. Then we begin to have our spirits stirred by the sight of the tremendous clouds looming over the most interminable plain that ever expanded and made glorious the heart of Man.

I have walked in eastern Kansas where the hedged fields and the orchards and gardens reminded one of the picturesque sections of Indiana, of antique and settled Ohio. Later I have mounted a little hill on what was otherwise a level and seemingly uninhabited universe, and traced, away to the left, the creeping Arkansas, its course marked by the cottonwoods, that became like tufts of grass on its far borders. All the rest of the

world was treeless and riverless, yet green from the rain of yesterday, and patterned like a carpet with the shadows of the clouds. I have walked on and on across this unbroken prairie-sod where half-wild cattle grazed. Later I have marched between alfalfa fields where hovered the lavender haze of the fragrant blossom, and have heard the busy music of the gorging bumble bees. Later I have marched for days and days with wheat waving round me, yellow as the sun. Many's the night I have slept in the barn-lofts of Kansas with the wide loft-door rolled open and the inconsequential golden moon for my friend.

These selections from letters home tell how I came into Kansas and how I adventured there. The letters were written avowedly as a sort of diary of the trip, but their contents turned out to be something less than that, something more than that, and something rather different.

THURSDAY, MAY 30, 1912. In the blue grass by the side of the road. Somewhere west of Jacksonville, Illinois. Hot sun. Cool wind. Rabbits in the distance. Bumblebees near.

At five last evening I sighted my lodging for the night. It was the other side of a high worm fence. It was down in the hollow of a grove. It was the box of an old box-car, brought there somehow, without its wheels. It was far from a railroad. I said in my heart "Here is the appointed shelter." I was not mistaken.

As was subsequently revealed, it belonged to the old gentleman I spied through the window stemming gooseberries and singing: "John Brown's body." He puts the car top on wagon wheels and hauls it from grove to grove between Jacksonville and the east bank of the Mississippi. He carries a saw mill equipment along. He is clearing this wood for the owner, of all but its walnut trees. He lives in the box with his son and two assistants. He is cook, washerwoman and saw-mill boss. His wife died many years ago.

The old gentleman let me in with alacrity. He allowed me to stem gooseberries while he made a great supper for the boys. They soon came in. I was meanwhile assured that my name was going into the pot. My host looked like his old General Mc-

Lellan. He was eloquent on the sins of preachers, dry voters and pension reformers. He was full of reminiscences of the string band at Sherman's headquarters, in which he learned to perfect himself on his wonderful fiddle. He said, "I can't play slow music. I've got to play dance tunes or die." He did not die. His son took a banjo from an old trunk and the two of them gave us every worth while tune on earth: *Money Musk*, *Hell's Broke Loose in Georgia*, *The Year of Jubilee*, *Sailor's Hornpipe*, *Baby on the Block*, *Lady on the Lake*, and *The Irish Washerwoman*, while I stemmed gooseberries, which they protested I did not need to do. Then I read my own unworthy verses to the romantic and violin-stirred company. And there was room for all of us to sleep in that one repentant and converted box-car.

FRIDAY, MAY 31, 1912. Half an hour after a dinner of crackers, cheese and raisins, provided at my solicitation by the grocer in the general store and post-office, Valley City, Illinois.

I have thought of a new way of stating my economic position. I belong to one of the leisure classes, that of the rhymers. In order to belong to any leisure class, one must be a thief or a beggar. On the whole I prefer to be a beggar, and, before each meal, receive from toiling man new permission to extend my holiday. The great business of that world that looms above the workshop and the furrow is to take things from people by some sort of taxation or tariff or special privilege. But I want to exercise my covetousness only in a retail way, open and above board, and when I take bread from a man's table I want to ask him for that particular piece of bread, as politely as I can.

But this does not absolutely fit my life. For yesterday I ate several things without permission, for instance, in mid-morning I devoured all the cherries a man can hold. They were hanging from heavy, breaking branches that came way over the stone wall into the road.

Another adventure. Early in the afternoon I found a brick farmhouse. It had a noble porch. There were marks of old-fashioned distinction in the trimmed hedges and flower-beds, and in the summer-houses. The side-yard and barn-lot were the

cluckingest, buzzingest kind of places. There was not a human being in sight. I knocked and knocked on the doors. I wandered through all the sheds. I could look in through the unlocked screens and see every sign of present occupation. If I had chosen to enter I could have stolen the wash bowl or the baby-buggy or the baby's doll. The creamery was more tempting, with milk and butter and eggs, and freshly pulled taffy cut in squares. I took a little taffy. That is all I took, though the chickens were very social and I could have eloped with several of them. The roses and peonies and geraniums were entrancing, and there was not a watch dog anywhere. Everything seemed to say "*Enter in and possess!*"

I saw inside the last door where I knocked a crisp, sweet, simple dress on a chair. Ah ha, a sleeping beauty somewhere about!

I went away from that place.

SUNDAY, JUNE 1, 1912. By the side of the road, somewhere in Illinois.

Last night I was dead tired. I hailed a man by the shed of a stationary engine. I asked him if I could sleep in the engine-shed all night, beginning right now. He said "Yes." But from five to six, he put me out of doors, on a pile of gunny sacks on the grass. There I slept while the ducks quacked in my ears, and the autos whizzed over the bridge three feet away. My host was a one-legged man. In about an hour he came poking me with that crutch and that peg of his. He said "Come, and let me tell your fortune! I have been studying your physiognifry while you were asleep!" So we sat on a log by the edge of the pond. He said: "I am the Seventh Son of a Seventh Son. They call me the duck-pond diviner. I forecast the weather for these parts. Every Sunday I have my corner for the week's weather in the paper here." Then he indulged in a good deal of the kind of talk one finds in the front of the almanac.

He was a little round man with a pair of round, dull eyes, and a dull, round face, with a two weeks' beard upon it. He squinted up his eyes now. He was deliberate. Switch engines were going by. He paused to hail the engineers. Here is a part

of what he finally said: "You are a Child of Destiny." He hesitated, for he wanted to be sure of the next point. "You were born in the month of S-e-p-t-e-m-b-e-r. Your preference is for a business like clerking in a store. You are of a slow, *pigmatic* temperament, but I can see you are fastidious about your eating. You do not use tobacco. You are fond of sweets. You have been married twice. Your first wife died, and your second was divorced. You look like you would make a good spiritualist medium. If you don't let any black cats cross your track you will have good luck for the next three years."

He hit it right twice. I *am* a Child of Destiny and I *am* fond of sweets. When a prophet hits it right on essentials like that, who would be critical?

An old woman with a pipe in her mouth came down the railroad embankment looking for greens. He bawled at her "Git out of that." But on she came. When she was closer he said: "Them weeds is full of poison oak." She grunted, and kept working her way toward us, and with a belligerent swagger marched past us on into the engine-room, carrying a great mess of greens in her muddy hands.

There was scarcely space in that little shed for the engine, and it was sticking out in several places. Yet it dawned on me that this was the wife of my host, that they kept house with that engine for the principal article of furniture. Without a word of introduction or explanation she stood behind me and mumbled, "You need your supper, son. Come in."

There was actually a side-room in that little box, a side room with a cot and a cupboard as well. On the floor was what was once a rug. But it had had a long kitchen history. She dipped a little unwashed bowl into a larger unwashed bowl, with an unwashed thumb doing its whole duty. She handed me a fuzzy, unwashed spoon and said with a note of real kindness, "Eat your supper, young man." She patted me on the shoulder with a sticky hand. Then she stood, looking at me fixedly. The woman only had half her wits.

I suppose they kept that stew till it was used up, and then made another. I was a Child of Destiny, all right, and Destiny decreed I should eat. I sat there trying to think of things to

say to make agreeable conversation, and postpone the inevitable. Finally I told her I wanted to be a little boy once more, and take my bowl and eat on the log by the pond in the presence of Nature.

She maintained that genial silence which indicates a motherly sympathy. I left her smoking and smiling there. And like a little child that knows not the folly of waste, I slyly fed my supper to the ducks.

At bedtime the old gentleman slept in his clothes on the cot in the kitchenette. He had the dog for a foot-warmer. There was a jar of yeast under the table. Every so often the old gentleman would call for the old lady to come and drive the ducks out, or they would get the board off the jar. Ever and anon the ducks had a taste before the avenger arrived.

On one side of the engine the old lady had piled gunny-sacks for my bed. That softened the cement-floor foundation. Then she insisted on adding that elegant rug from the kitchen, to protect me from the fuzz on the sacks. She herself slept on a pile of excelsior with a bit of canvas atop. She kept a cat just by her cheek to keep her warm, and I have no doubt the pretty brute whispered things in her ear. Tabby was the one aristocratic, magical touch:—one of these golden coon-cats.

The old lady's bed was on the floor, just around the corner from me, on the other side of the engine. That engine stretched its vast bulk between us. It was as the sword between the duke and the queen in the fairy story. But every so often, in response to the old gentleman's alarm, the queen would come climbing over my feet in order to get to the kitchen and drive out the ducks. From where I lay I could see through two doors to the night outside. I could watch the stealthy approach of the white and waddling marauders. Do not tell me a duck has no sense of humor. It was a great game of tag to them. It occurred as regularly as the half hours were reached. I could time the whole process by the ticking in my soul, while presumably asleep. And while waiting for them to come up I could see the pond and a star reflected in the pond, the star of my Destiny, no doubt. At last it began to rain. Despite considerations of fresh air, the door was shut, and soon everybody was asleep.

The bed was not verminiferous. I dislike all jokes on such a theme, but in this case the issue must be met. It is the one thing the tramp wants to know about his bunk. That peril avoided, there is nothing to quarrel about. Despite all the grotesquerie of that night, I am grateful for a roof, and two gentle friends.

Poor things! Just like all the citizens of the twentieth century, petting and grooming machinery three times as smart as they are themselves. Such people should have engines to take care of them, instead of taking care of engines. There stood the sleek brute in its stall, absorbing all, giving nothing, pumping supplies only for its own caste;—water to be fed to other engines.

But seldom are keepers of engine-stables as unfortunate as these. The best they can get from the world is cruel laughter. Yet this woman, crippled in brain, her soul only half alive, this dull man, crippled in body, had God's gift of the liberal heart. If they are supremely absurd, so are all of us. We must include ourselves in the farce. These two, tottering through the dimness and vexation of our queer world, were willing the stranger should lean upon them. I say they had the good gift of the liberal heart. One thing was theirs to divide. That was a roof. They gave me my third and they helped me to hide from the rain. In the name of St. Francis I laid me down. May that saint of all saints be with them, and with all the gentle and innocent and weary and broken!

UPON RETURNING TO THE COUNTRY ROAD

*Even the shrewd and bitter,
Gnarled by the old world's greed,
Cherished the stranger softly
Seeing his utter need.
Shelter and patient hearing,
These were their gifts to him,
To the minstrel grimly begging
As the sunset-fire grew dim.
The rich said "You are welcome."*

*Yea, even the rich were good.
How strange that in their feasting
His songs were understood!
The doors of the poor were open,
The poor who had wandered too,
Who had slept with ne'er a roof-tree
Under the wind and dew.
The minds of the poor were open,
There dark mistrust was dead.
They loved his wizard stories,
They bought his rhymes with bread.*

*Those were his days of glory,
Of faith in his fellow-men.
Therefore, to-day the singer
Turns beggar once again.*

[To be continued]

BED CLOTHES

GEORGE A. BIRMINGHAM

EGERTON walked into my private room on Saturday morning and flung a bundle of MS. on my table.
“Read that,” he said.

I was irritated. Egerton is my junior partner—between us we constitute the publishing firm of Burdett Egerton—but I object to his breaking in on me when I am busy.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s a story,” he said; “a story which has been submitted to me for the magazine.”

The Tower Magazine is one of our ventures and it is understood between us that Egerton is responsible for it. I resented his trying to make me do his work.

“Whom is it by?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It’s sent to me without name or address attached to it.”

“Then for goodness’ sake put it in the waste-paper basket and don’t bother me.”

“It’s good,” said Egerton. “It’s so good that——”

“Then publish it; but for heaven’s sake let me alone. I’m going down to the country for the week-end, and if I’m to catch my train I must——”

“Very well then, I’ll publish it; but if there’s a hideous row afterward, don’t blame me.”

Egerton is one of those men who pride themselves on freedom from conventional prejudice. If he thinks a thing is good from a literary point of view he does not care how bad it is in every other way. He rather likes shocking people. I have had to remonstrate with him more than once. His hint about the nature of the story that lay on my table frightened me. I publish *The Tower Magazine* with the object of making money and I am painfully aware that it does not do to shock the public.

“Very well,” I said; “leave it there. I’ll read it in the train and let you know on Monday what I think of it. But if it’s the kind of story——”