

FOOTPATH AND HIGHWAY

BY THE PEDESTRIAN

DUST AND ASHES

IT is with professed regret and secret gladness that we announce our inability to make the "Footpath and Highway" pages into a genuine "Column." Give and take is delightful in a daily and possible in a weekly, but the issue is cold by the time a monthly can print columniations. For this, much thanks! When the issue is hot, you say what you feel, not what you think; and then you spend an amiable aftermath explaining that what you said wasn't what you meant. Ordinarily, therefore, we cannot serve in these pages the funeral baked meats which our friends and enemies send us. But we mean just this once to honor our rule in the breach. We cannot pass lightly over a definite prediction of our demise.

It's a long road that has no turning; and our enemies will rejoice to learn, if the following prediction is correct, that ultimately "Footpath and Highway" must come to an end. In Hatchards's "The Books of To-day and the Books of To-morrow," for October, 1925, the following verses appear:

A — TH CENTURY CONVERSATION

Between a Synthetic Baby and its Father

Goo! what's that ancient print, Daddy —
That funny-looking man?
The species is extinct, laddy,
That's a pedestrian.

Whatever is a 'destrian, Daddy?
(Tut, how the child does talk!)
A twentieth-century nuisance, laddy,
A boob who used to walk.

I've never heard of "walk," Daddy,
Is it in any book?
The word has disappeared, laddy,
So there's no need to look.

And what are those queer things, Daddy,
That from his body grow?
They called them "arms" and "legs," laddy,
Some centuries ago.

Did people *use* their legs, Daddy,
When all the world went wrong?
Only a few poor muts, laddy,
That's how some got along.

And what about the rest, Daddy?
(Goo! hist'ry gets me thrilled!)
They rode in autocars, laddy,
Till all who "walked" were killed. . . .

Goo! what a body! Look, Daddy!
So big and fat and round!
Men used to eat gross meats, laddy,
Their stomachs were renowned.

And what a tiny head, Daddy,
Not HUGE like yours and mine!
Quite large enough for brains, laddy,
In 1929.

I'm glad *I* didn't live, Daddy,
In such a savage age!
Those were the bad old days, laddy,
So says our greatest sage.

And what's the blighter's name, Daddy? —
Hush — speak of him with awe!
He's called the New Methuselah, laddy,
Methuselah Bernard Shaw.

These lines stir in us a strange emotion, such as a man might have on reading his own epitaph. We feel like Partridge, the quack astrologer, whom Swift so successfully condemned to death-in-life. When the date came round on which, according to Swift's prediction, Partridge was to die, the poor fellow protested in vain that he was alive and kicking. For ourselves though, we take comfort in the reflection that it were noble to die if we could thereby win immortality for Bernard Shaw. More than this, we take positive courage when we realize that only the physical pedestrian is doomed. Mental pedestrianism, we venture to predict, may still flourish in those ultimate days. It was that which we championed

at the start, in despite of the flivverous mind, and we still dare to hope that it will persist, even among the synthetes. In fact, we are inclined, while we are quoting poetry, to add the lines from an old doggerel, which supplied us with the first article of our pedestrian creed. The verses appear to be anonymous, though they were for a long time erroneously attributed to Snodgrass:

"The path of honest thinking, —
That way afoot you go;
There isn't any engine
Will cross the rock and snow."

The author of these lines of course never dreamed of the aeroplane. But that engine, we observe, skips the elementary steps and often comes to grief in the end. Our creed is unshaken.

Poetry appears to be the order of the day. A great man has recently noticed the fact, asking somewhat sadly why people cannot leave poetry, as they do other things, to specialists and experts. At first blush, perhaps, it is a matter for sad reflection that poetry and politics are still left to amateurs. But such gloom springs from the popular fallacy that efficiency is the opposite of inefficiency, — true enough, possibly, in the manufacture of things, but an absurd assumption in affairs of passion, like poetry and politics.

Well, to make a clean breast of it, we have been versifying ourselves. God shield man that we should pretend it is poetry, but we hoped great things for it till our Poetry Editor told us it was "not available," or "not suited to his present needs," — we forget which contemptible phrase he used. Not available indeed! There it was on his desk, offered "at your usual rates", — with ten per cent off for cash. Not suited to his present needs, i' sooth! The theme is universal. We expostulated, and he thereupon, mistaking us for a humorist, offered to accept the verses if we would omit the first four stanzas! Then, seeing that we were still unsubdued, he quoted with eloquent eye-brows an almost true *dictum* of our own, — "Poetry is fire, which, if harmless, is ashes." "This," he added with deliberation and with that compassionate look peculiar to editors, — "this — is — harmless."

But we were undefeated. Anger and despair soon yielded to

cunning. Why not print the verses in "Footpath and Highway"? Ha! Revenge! Far sweeter than the "usual rates"! Quoting the Poetry Editor in one of his less happy moments, we cried, — "Od's blood! I'll do't myself!"

THE FOOT-PATH WAY

The old path, the worn path,
With a pack upon your shoulder, —
Oh, there are pleasant places
For walking men to know;
So sing your catch the bolder
Across the meadow spaces,
Along the highway places,
That lead where men should go.

The old path, the dim path,
With fairy feet that patter, —
Oh, there are magic places
Adown the ferny glen;
But turn you with your clatter,
For these are secret spaces,
The children's special places,
And never meant for men.

The old path, the steep path,
To the dizzy ridges clinging, —
Oh, there are toilsome places
For walking men apart;
You've lost your breath for singing,
But the song of open spaces,
Of jagged skyline places,
Is working in your heart.

The new path, the hard path,
With a pack upon your shoulder, —
Oh, there are lonely places
For walking men to go;
Above the scrub and boulder, —
Dawn-transfigured spaces,
Stern and starlit places, —
And it's these that you shall know!



THE VILLAGE DOCTOR

AT the first flake I dropped the foolscap prose
And stole outdoors. No staying in for me
When snow comes on! I love a growing storm,
Love to be one with it and lose myself
In the gray sameness of its company,
Obeying my heart as snow obeys the wind
Until my head is full of formless dreams.
“Never you mind,” I make allowance with,
“These sky-born fancies may pack down to poems
The better to recall this trackless joy.”

A snow-shoe trail, crossed and recrossed by a dog's,
Brought me up short — a shadow without the man.
Strange that our doctor's name should spring to mind
Since Fred's the last one to lay by his work,
Even for hunting. As I was pledged nowhere,
I followed them down the slope, then by a swamp
Whose alders had a spite against my face,
Then through some firs that shook their snow on me
And came to the first-growth pine, a high still room
Where even a fool would not dare raise his voice,
And found them sitting silent by a spring.

The doctor was in trouble, I knew at once.
“You here?” I said, “I didn't think there were
Two men in any one county quite so wise!”

“Wise? And me telling Bruce there's no such fool
As a fool hunter humoring his hound.”

“Don't lay it to the dog,” I rallied him,
But seeing he did not smile, went on, “What d' you call
A wool-gatherer mistaking snow for wool?”