

ON PRODIGAL SONS

MONTGOMERY EVANS

IT was obvious to the first Will Rogers who ever discussed democracy over an open barrel of crackers that the survival of democracy depends on a constant crop of prodigal sons. "Shirt sleeves to shirt sleeves in three generations," was the way he expressed it, and what he meant was that a kind Providence prevented the descendants of rich men from keeping their wealth. As long as this continued, the republic could claim the equality of opportunity so thoughtlessly included in its declaration of faith. But is this true to-day, and will it be more or less true to-morrow?

Superficially, the Yankee proverb seems to hold true. Our Sunday supplements can draw on a constant supply of gilded youths who distribute unearned fortunes with a picturesque ingenuity which might well arouse the envy of their penny-hoarding sires. It is easy to spend money, and particularly easy if one has not acquired in earning it any too definite ideas as to what it means. The income and inheritance taxes aid by biting huge chunks from our great fortunes, and they are ably seconded by the attractions of Europe and the more humble efforts of chorus girls, bootleggers, and garage men. Except in Philadelphia and the South, few of the families whose names were household words before the Civil War are to-day more than faint shadows in social registers. The old Dutch families have gone. The early New England magnates are forgotten, and most of the fortunes of the railroad builders are already dissipated or the subject of bitter fights among heirs who will eventually relinquish most of them to lawyers. It seems as if democracy were not likely ever to be endangered by the growth of a monied class.

But the fortunes of to-day will not melt so easily. In the fifties a man bought a carriage and engaged a ducky to drive it, when he had put aside one hundred thousand dollars; for that constituted a fortune. His hundred, or if he were a real magnate several hundred thousand, was distributed at his death between two or three heirs, for rich men do not generally favor Rooseveltian families. If these heirs spent their legacies, they dropped out of

the monied class automatically, but they did so almost as quickly if they tucked them away in safe deposit boxes. For the tremendous increase in the nation's wealth, speculation, and the European War raised the limit which defines wealthy men, so that it is no longer a phenomenon to own a million dollars, and there are perhaps half a dozen who have an income of that amount. These new fortunes will be equally distributed among a few heirs, following American tradition.

But one hundred million, or even five million, or one million, divided by two or three is rather more difficult to squander than a few hundred thousand. A great fortune of the fifties, — three hundred thousand dollars, — divided among three heirs, left each with one hundred thousand, still enough to give them a decided advantage over their fellows. But this hundred divided again left only thirty, a sum which could be matched by many an immigrant grocer. An equivalent fortune of to-day might amount to thirty millions, which on its third division will still be formidable as something over three million dollars.

This means that a monied class is well on the way to establishing itself, and a little thought shows that the fortunes of the twentieth century are likely to remain in existence much longer than the fortunes of Civil War profiteers. But the boggy labeled Plutocracy or Monied Class can inspire in the bourgeoisie a dread equaled only by that labeled Bolshevism. The much quoted "man in the street" saw Mr. Morgan sign a document which saved our Government in the panic of 1907, and lead his colleagues to similar action when France was threatened with bankruptcy; and he begins to wonder which of the two evils is the more dangerous. Contributions to colleges such as those recently made by Eastman, Duke, and Harkness do not frighten him so much, but the gestures are those of princes of that feudal period which we hopefully believed ended by the Treaty of Versailles. The power in the hands of these men and others, which is in most cases to be handed down to their heirs, is surely as great as that of many princes and kings of the past. And if a large group of families of such power becomes established in America, it is not probable that they will leave the management of a country in which they have so great interest and power to the inefficiency of our present form of government. Even where the fortune is given away to colleges

and foundations it must inevitably exert a great influence on the social history of these United States.

To understand what this influence will be, and how the class consolidation is likely to continue, one should examine the causes and history of the feudal system with less emphasis on the points where it failed. The times were much like the forties of the last century, in the West, when physical force and craft were the most desirable of qualities. Those who possessed them were, like all men of power, surrounded by weaker souls who were willing to make bargains for the sake of the protection which the strong could offer.

And these bargains, though they occasionally resulted in romantic scenes of bartering the bodies of fair serfs, were on the whole more just than, and very much similar to, the relations between the units in our political organizations; protection and favor were exchanged for service, and where either party failed to live up to his agreement the other attached himself to one who would. The feudal system continued in this fluid state for some time, until inherited power began to be an important influence. The baron who acquired broad lands fortified the strategic points on them, so that his heirs' position became generally secure. Though when this second period had ended the ruling class still welcomed those from beneath who were strong enough to join it, for many centuries there was little change; the same families contributed leaders to the same district.

But in France Louis xiv destroyed the nobles' position, made them courtiers, and left them no occupation except sport and ideas. The most original idea being that all men were born free and equal, and the most startling injustice being due to the occasional sprees of wastrel noblemen, — a class of parlor Bolsheviks led by Mirabeau and Lafayette, who took up the philosophies of those who saw that the age of force was over, and that French feudalism at least should have ended with it. In some countries the feudal machinery had run so smoothly during the centuries that it adapted itself to the change. England was able to preserve an intelligent class and teach them the game of democracy. Germany was the best governed country in Europe because the descendants of robber barons displayed an uncanny ability for competing in business with descendants of less sturdy stocks.

Generally where the old traditions of feudal times survived uncorrupted, the ruling castes quickly adapted themselves to the new conditions.

America happened to escape these conditions. The feudal concept had almost ceased to exist in England before colonial times, and the budding aristocracy of the South was destroyed by the Civil War. The age is one of organization, of adventure in mass production, specialization, and invention; and the best fitted for success are those who inherit wealth which means education and power. The miracles of self-made men are no longer taken quite seriously, and not many will refuse an education and inherited capital to aid them in their careers. Except for the change in requisites for success, conditions are much as they were when the Roman colonial system, like its successor, was destroyed by violence. Unless the New England maxim is infallible, and we can depend on generations of prodigals to parallel generations of fortune builders, America must witness the gradual growth and solidification of a caste system.

In spite of the sensational squandering of hundreds of fortunes, this growth has already begun. Fifty years ago the first of the great families of the new era, — the Astors, — had so firmly established itself that it could take the rôle of Maecenas and call on Washington Irving to write the history of the house. And that, after shifting its interests from Canada to New York, the family has chosen to carry its energies back to England does not lessen the validity of its use as an example. Many of the statesmen who created the republic established families, not of great wealth, but of considerable political influence, which still exercise at Washington and in their native states a power greater than that of "hard dirt" farmers or earnest and respectable legislators from the newer states. The northern clans of Lodge and Adams have been reinforced within the last generation by the Roosevelts who, but for a collision with prohibition and Mr. Al Smith, might almost have aspired to the formation of a dynasty. In the South political leadership still rests with a few families who escaped when Southern aristocracy was annihilated. One of the most prominent is Senator Bruce of Maryland.

And unnoticed because they shun rather than seek publicity, there are thousands of families scattered throughout the country

constituting roughly the class who can afford to send their sons to college and later equip them with sufficient capital to further aid them in their professions. This class in its lower strata is really more secure of its position than the very rich, for inbred conservatism usually keeps its members from squandering their funds, so that the most important changes in it result from able members using their advantages to win a place among the magnate class. There are no definite boundary lines between the rich and the bourgeoisie, and it is not probable that our classes will ever attain the comparatively rigid stratification of feudal times, but the rough outlines of two privileged classes, differing only in the degree of power or wealth which they inherit, can already be seen.

America at large has not yet become conscious of this tendency of the favored, of this shortage of prodigal sons. The "average man" does not really mind an individual's accumulating a million dollars, or even several hundred million, so long as he believes that he or his son can conceivably equal the feat. Yet he can not but recognize that his chances of getting his million are lessened if other fortunes are preserved intact. He will insist on the continuance of income and inheritance taxes, but he will be afraid to demand confiscation, since the precedent might eventually strike him. And as the absolute equality of Bolshevism and the increased interference with personal liberty of socialism are equally abhorrent to him, it seems unlikely that any more active measures than the present taxes will be taken. And though these certainly act as a check on the growth, or even the preservation of great fortunes, their possessors have found ways of counteracting them by insurance and by trust funds which sometimes produce almost the effect of an entail. The only possible absolute check to this movement must come from violent revolution, and until this country becomes more densely populated and considerably less prosperous, there seems slight danger of an invasion of Wall Street and Fifth Avenue by an army of I. W. W. converts.

The greatest retarding factor and at the same time the greatest guarantee of eventually producing a favored class worthy of its privileges is the action of members of that class in giving their money away. In the last ten years \$1,600,000,000 has been given to various foundations and educational institutions which would never have been founded or equipped by the initiative of those

who benefit from them. Where a fortune, or a substantial part of a fortune, is given to endow an organization like the Rockefeller Foundation or a hospital, the whole community benefits directly, and the action is only one phase of the service the privileged class owes. This first type of gift is practically a gift to the people, but contributions to colleges are ultimately intended to furnish able recruits for the ruling caste; offering chances of a college education to every one is only a means of unconsciously combing the land for those whom education may enable to climb to places of power. In feudal times it was common to encourage tournaments in which commoners might so distinguish themselves as to be noticed by the ruling group of rulers, who like every ruling group recognized the value of new blood in their ranks. The effect of colleges may eventually parallel this method; for even the imperfect mechanism of our educational system furnishes some standard by which to judge the efficient from the inefficient, the desirable new blood from the undesirable. So although the fortunes given to our colleges disappear as personal estates, they will continue to influence class formation by offering a step up to the deserving members of lower strata.

But the most important and encouraging feature of our evolution toward a dominant class is that it seems gradually to learn the use of its inherited power. Power brings opportunities for leisure and the slow development of that indefinable but not entirely undesirable abstraction called culture. The effect on the arts of the existence of a rich class has never been denied, and except in literary utopias or real aristocracies like the republic of Athens, art and literature have always been dependent on a rich patronage. War hysteria or the similar impulse to mummify heroes of the republic have given us a few beautiful buildings in a ramshackle capital, and presumably heroic statues in every county-seat, but these seem only proofs that no body of free men and true has ever been gifted with artistic taste. Encouragement for artists has always come from above, and though it may be disappointing, it is unfortunately true that even those who throng our museums have never considered them sufficiently important to demand aid for them from our legislatures. And the frequent failure of a city to provide a building or the expense of upkeep for a library can not be explained away as due to preoccupation with more impor-

tant public works. Schools do occasionally succeed in obtaining taxes sufficient to operate them efficiently, but it is rare; and public agitation for hospitals is only the tardy result of very startling need for them.

The citizen of moderate means regards the state as an enemy. To obtain a tax reduction which will buy him an extra tire looms more important than contributing toward a library or hospital which he is not sure he will ever need. Only the privileged classes are given the foresight to provide these things, and though our first families may often turn to art and philanthropy as a diverting and fashionable occupation, they probably contribute more real good to the community than ever came from the combined séances of our rotary clubs. The cult of the new or antique may be ridiculous, but the group which flatters our artists or explorers between cocktails incidentally buys their work, and occasionally it produces a Widener or a Field, while amateur philanthropy has given us Carnegie libraries and the Rockefeller Foundation. If our privileged classes produce only a few men in each generation who have the foresight and the desire to give that the class has already produced in its infancy, the sins of the lounge lizards and Palm Beach noblesse may be ignored.

In other countries, where privileged classes are already secure in their position, this same class contributes year after year thousands of young men to serve in the government or diplomatic service. England or Germany may call commoners to lead them, but in every generation they can depend on a goodly number of men who will have taken advantage of their position and education to prepare themselves for service. This feeling of obligation entailed by possession of superior position was, and is, the backbone of the feudal tradition; and though the remote and impersonal relationships between the powerful and the weak in America have not encouraged its growth as did the purely personal equations of feudal times, this conception is beginning to influence America.

Business men first used the phrase "service" without realizing its significance, but they are finding that it constitutes a vital element in their relations with their fellows. Before the War the English tradition still existed among the aristocratic families of the South, but it is no longer sectional. Roosevelt expressed it in

his autobiography by saying that he felt it his duty to enter politics since his inherited wealth enabled him to accept positions which gave slight financial return if honestly administered. More recently another young American of great wealth has seen fit to make a similar decision. And a not inconsiderable number of others less conspicuous have interpreted wealth as an indication that they should enter the less profitable professions.

With surprising frequency one finds these young men possessing both ideas and idealism, and their number does not seem to be diminishing. The ideas are of the twentieth century, and their occupations range from exploring to teaching, but the ideals seem strangely like those of the first thinking rulers. For though all else may change, the traditions of a ruling class are Median; those who inherit power or ability must recognize that they owe a service proportionate to that ability. *Noblesse oblige* did not begin as a social formula or a philosophy, but as an expression of this obligation. "*Ich dien*" meant "I serve" before it became a symbol of the Prince of Wales.

We need not bother about translating the phrase into American for our booster clubs, for the young men who have the ideal are rather shy about catchwords. But if our caste continues to practise it, and if the poor, downtrodden public can be persuaded to let evolution take its course, it does not seem rash to prophesy that in the course of a few geological seconds we shall have a trained and intelligent aristocracy to whom we may trust our government. The public which mistakenly regards democracy as more than a philosophy may look with dismay on the future of our republican institutions, but the new social organization which seems to be growing naturally appears to offer greater advantages than communism, socialism, or republicanism.

Everything depends on the rate at which we produce prodigal sons. The third and fourth generations may dissipate their fortunes, or they may, by ignoring traditions of service, force us to destroy them. But I do not believe in the shirt sleeve maxim, and I think I see a rough class system already in process of formation. I have no fears for any possible change in our government, but infinite hope that if our sons who are not prodigal are let alone, the future holds for them promise of an America of which none need be ashamed.

WHAT IS LOVE?

Forum Definitions — Fifteenth Series

AS was to be expected, "Love" proved a magnet drawing out hundreds of poetic and analytical attempts at definition. Several echoed the opinion of Mrs. Menai Jones (Bedford, Indiana) in saying: "We feel Love and demonstrate Love, but we can not define it;" and yet she knows that "it is Love that makes a woman still think her husband the handsomest man on earth, even after she has seen him with his collar off."

As poets have so often shown, Love lends itself pregnantly to simile and metaphor. "Love is like an olive," says Corrinne M. Grayson (Washington, D. C.), "the first experience is apt to leave a bad taste, but the more you indulge the greater the enjoyment." With E. Wilbur Cook, Jr. (Danville, Kentucky), "Love is like electricity". William Owen (Orchard Park, New York) sees in love "the mother of altruism"; but to Floyd G. Hall (Chicago, Illinois) it seems "a delightful form of cruelty".

"The first infirmity of noble minds," is the Stoical opinion of Joseph d'Evreux (Halifax, Nova Scotia); while Jewel M. Shields (Washington, D. C.) calls Love "a spiritual dew falling on the tired brow of humanity". But lest we soar too high, Cortland W. Sayres (Detroit, Michigan) reminds us that it is often "the tenth word in a telegram".

Many were those who attributed to Love all the excellent qualities with which Saint Paul endowed charity in the thirteenth chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians. Not a few recalled that "God is Love". But at this juncture Elizabeth B. Robb (Ridley Park, Pennsylvania), thinking of her tennis, adds that "Love is nothing". It appears, moreover, that Cupid has borrowed a face from Janus, for, while Genevieve H. Cheney (Mt. Vernon, New York) is saying that Love is "joy in self-sacrifice", Paul E. Hitchcock (Keene, New Hampshire) replies that it is "one hundred per cent selfishness".

And thus, dear readers, we might run on like true Love itself "till death do us part", were it not necessary to submit herewith the prize winning definitions: