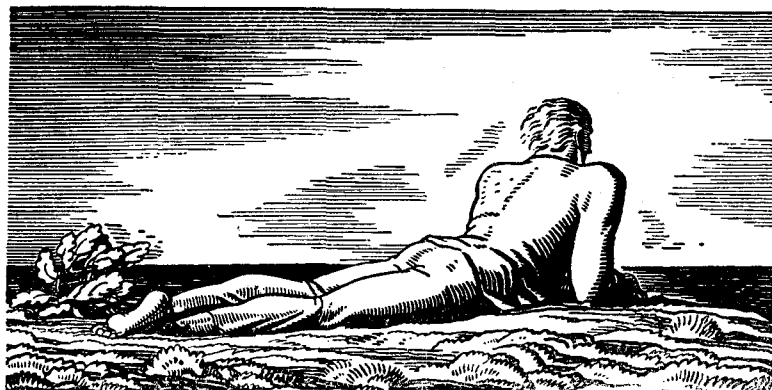


# Artist Adventurer

## *The Saga of Rockwell Kent*



From "Moby Dick" (Random House)

by **LUCIUS BEEBE**

**A** CLASSIC literary concept, the constant use of which from the time of Theocritus down to the most recent generation of collegiate novelists has made it a cliché, treats of life as a wine. A happier, or at least a more adroit, metaphor would describe the life of Rockwell Kent in terms of some less obvious beverage — a strong punch, perhaps, compounded on a generous scale of equal parts of art, adventure, and unclassified uproar and disturbance.

Distinguished for a variety of endeavor, the youngest American ever to have a painting purchased and hung by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, casual youthful collector of innumerable prizes, mentions, and scholarships, adventurer in the far, desolate places of the earth and portrayer of nature in her most magnificent and forbidding moods, sculptor, author, tub-thumping champion of American art, tosspot, Don Juan, quarrelsome participant in a score of controversies, the hero of a whooping and still crescent saga, Rockwell Kent is probably the most truly American artist of our times. He has almost invariably got what he wanted, and whatever compensations he has derived from the business of living have all been acquired strenuously and vitally, for to him nothing that can be had without effort is worth the having. He has made enemies with the same militant enthusiasm that he has made friends. He has had at stuffed shirts in high

places for the sheer love of battle and the exchange of insults, and wherever he has imagined or heard of beauty he has sought it out and recorded it with a fidelity which has raised him to the first rank of contemporary pictorial artists.

He is the figure of heroic legends still current in the tea and batik shoppes of Greenwich Village and in the haunts of seafaring folk at the far ends of the earth, Desolation Bay and Famine Reach; and his paintings hang with those of the great masters of color and design of all time in the collections of Frick and Whitney and in other famous galleries. Commercialization has never caused him to avert his eyes in fastidious grief, much of his best work having been created for prearranged and substantial remuneration. There is no affectation of the æsthete about him, although he enjoys a number of amiable and amusing poses in other directions; his attitude toward creative endeavor, toward life in general, is cool, alive, and nicely balanced between realism and the romantic. Above all, he is unique and inimitably a manifestation and reflection of nothing and nobody but Rockwell Kent.

So far as public record is concerned there has never been very much doubt that predominantly Kent is an artist. But to those who know him and follow his progress, his perilous

adventuring in restless and uncharted oceans, his indefatigable penchant for controversy, his insatiable appetite for causing a commotion, and the gusto with which he relishes oblique and amorous endeavor (as chronicled by Waldo Pierce in his saga of "Unser Kent and his Magic Flute") — to those who are aware of these and a hundred other aspects of a personality at once vivid, emphatic, boisterous, and quarrelsome, Kent must always be something of a synthesis of Casanova and authentic genius with overtones of the crusader and tavern knight.

#### A STORMY PETREL

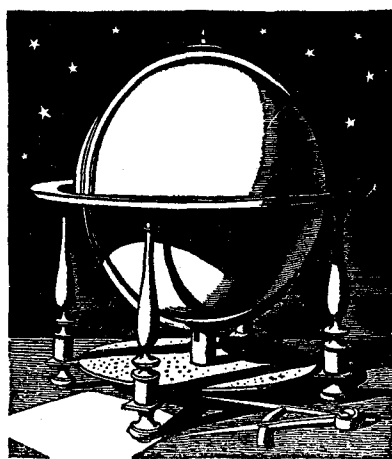
**K**ENT was born at Tarrytown Heights, New York, in 1882, and was educated in New York at the Horace Mann School and Columbia University, where, in the School of Architecture, his facile command of artistic media was at once recognized. His teachers, Robert Henri, Hayes Miller, and William M. Chase at the Chase School of Art, which he attended after leaving Columbia, were unanimous in forecasting for him a distinguished career. His first real success was achieved after a year's apprenticeship to Abbott Thayer, the famous artist, when he submitted two paintings of Mount Monadnock to the National Academy, where they were at once accepted and hung with the other outstanding pictures of the year. From that time forward his name has been established as one of the roll of significant American artists.

The penchant that Kent has so frequently shown for controversy as a variant from adventure and creative work probably dates, he says, from his earliest years when he was, for a short time, a student at Cheshire Military Academy (now Roxbury School) at Cheshire, Connecticut. His uncle, who was an instructor at that institution, refused to award him a scholarship prize to which he was entitled for fear of being accused of favoring a relative. The sight of the cherished trophy going to another boy first aroused in the future artist the propensity for verbal nose-punching and slat-kicking which became so notable a characteristic in maturity.

Kent's first grievance to be aired in the public prints came in 1915 when he had settled down in the little town of Brigus, Newfoundland, in an old homestead he had purchased as a studio overlooking the ocean, and from which he was shortly evicted by British colonial authorities on the accusation of being a German spy. "My first offense," he said later, "was to be caught reading a German translation of Björnson, my second the writing in German of a letter to a friend in Wisconsin, and my third a public remark to the effect that I doubted if the English army would capture Berlin within a fortnight."

In any event, he was deported, bag and baggage, to the United States, where he was quick to charge the administration with failure to protect American nationals abroad. For a time the papers inclined a friendly ear to his complaints, but finally a letter from Secretary Lansing positively refusing to interfere on his behalf put an end to the case, and Kent retired, defeated but unsilenced, to the fastness of West New Brighton, Staten Island, which was then his home.

Three years after this, Kent embarked on his first important voyage of adventure and discovery. He cut himself loose from New York and the Village, journeyed to the Alaskan mainland with only his young son for company, and finally selected as a winter abode a desolate location on a dreary waste called Fox Island. There the artist and his son spent the winter months far from cities and civilization, in search of material for his first book as well as for records in oils and pigments. Of that winter Kent told in his story, *Wilderness, the*



From "N by E" (Brewer & Warren)

*Journal of a Quiet Adventure*, and during it he discovered the compelling attraction which nature in her most rugged and untamed aspects exercised upon him. The success of the book itself and the attention which his illustrations attracted from the world of artists, combined, upon his return, to convert Kent to the life and lure of outland places and the far uninhabited reaches of the earth.

Convinced by his experiences in the frozen



From "Wilderness" (Putnam)

fastnesses of the northland that his best work was inspired by circumstances in no way to be encountered save far from the beaten tracks of life and mankind, Kent a couple of years after his winter at Resurrection Bay set out in search of adventure at the other extreme of the world. Shipping as a freight clerk aboard a tramp steamer as far as Chile, at the Sailor's Graveyard of Punta Arenas he bought a derelict lifeboat from the wreck of the steamer *Beacon Grange* for twenty dollars, and with the aid of a wild and reckless Swede adventurer named Ole Ytterrock set about putting the craft in condition for a voyage over the most perilous of known oceans, around Cape Horn.

For two dim, gelid months of the Magellan winter Kent and Ole lived aboard an abandoned hulk in the harbor of Punta Arenas while they prepared their sloop for an enterprise which, to even the most experienced sailors of those parts, savored of nothing so much as sheer lunacy. In the end they surprised everyone by nearly reaching their goal

and returning alive to tell of their adventures. They got as far as Admiralty Sound in their five-ton sailing vessel before they were forced by terrific Antarctic storms to abandon the project of completing the passage around the Horn by water. They discovered an unknown overland pass through the mountain wastes of Tierra del Fuego and set out for the southern shore, a trip never before undertaken and believed impossible. On their journey they were aided by an assortment of characters which included sailors, soldiers, cannibals, brawlers, poachers, missionaries, two murderers and other fugitives from justice, a minister's son, and a Holy-Jumper, and reached their goal in the last stages of exhaustion.

"Twilight descended just as we reached the broad plain westward of Ushuaia," said Kent later in describing their arrival. "The mate was spent.

"'Let's rest a bit,' he said, as we reached the outskirts of the town, 'because we've got to blow in in style.'

"In a few minutes we could stand it. With





From "Wilderness" (Putnam)

heads thrown back and swinging our arms to the marching tune of 'John Brown's Body,' we tramped in.

"The dogs announced our coming, folk came to their doors to stare.

"Where are you from?' asked a fellow.

"Admiralty Sound.'

"Wow! Where are you going?'

"Cape Horn!'"

And the natives were fairly flabbergasted by the hardiness of the two rovers on their way to the last ultimate tip of the world, still a hundred weary miles away.

#### IN GREENLAND'S ICY MOUNTAINS

**T**HE PAINTINGS brought back from the savage seas and bays, the gauntly desolate mountain ranges of Tierra del Fuego and the Straits of Magellan, were put on sale at the Wildenstein Galleries in New York, where they were snapped up almost at once by private collectors and buyers for museums and other galleries. Kent became an enormous success and the price of his earlier canvases soared,

while the narrative of the Cape Horn adventure in book form, under the title *Voyaging*, aided in conferring upon the artist a cachet of smartness as a litterateur.

It was after the success of his South American pictures and *Voyaging* that Kent purchased his farm at Ausable Forks, near Plattsburg, New York, for his permanent home — or at least as nearly permanent an establishment as can be the headquarters of a man who, at the drop of a hat, dashes off to far quarters of the earth for a year or two. As have been his other abodes, his boats, and most of the material factors in his scheme of living, this is largely the work of his own hands. There are two hundred acres of farmland, a stable filled with cows and horses, and a handsome studio-residence the principal rooms of which face northward across the Adirondacks, verdant and green in summer, bleak, grim, and snow-smear during the winter months.

The main living room of the structure is entirely Kentian in character, an accurate architectural and decorative gauge of his tastes



From "Voyaging" (Putnam)

and predilections as adventurer-artist. The ceiling is low studded, supported by oaken rafters, and the walls have broad window expanses. The great stone fireplace at one end is protected by a fire screen of black with gold stars scattered over its surface. Wedgewood bowls of fruit and flowers decorate the long oaken table at one side, and the walls are completely papered with survey maps of the far places of the earth familiar to the artist himself — South America, Alaska, Greenland, Newfoundland, almost all of *terra cognita* and some that verges on the unexplored.

Tall, built-in bookshelves contain volumes on every imaginable subject. A predominant number are devoted to travel, adventure, and exploration. There are Cook's *Voyages*, *The Saga of Burnt Njal*, Sydney's *Arcadia*, *The Cruise of the Antarctic*, *Till Eulenspiegel*, the Sacco-Vanzetti letters, novels by Carl Van Vechten, poems by Robert Frost and Edwin Arlington Robinson and Masfield. A pair of globes, terrestrial and celestial, a telescope, murder mysteries of the moment, odd proofs of woodcuts and lithographs, periodicals and souvenirs are scattered about the room, evidences of a lively and imaginative existence rather than meticulous neatness.

Here it is that Kent has lived of recent years, prepared the illustrations for the handsome edition of *Moby Dick* which appeared a season or so since, and rewrote *N by E* after his Greenland trip in 1929. This latter excursion began as a transoceanic voyage with two young companions in a small sailing boat, and involved a narrow escape from death when their sloop was broken up on the jagged rocks in a small fjord located about forty miles from Godthaab, the southern capital of Greenland. Kent acted as chief cook and navigator on the trip until a heavy tide dragged the ship, despite two anchors, onto the rocks one midnight in a "smothering calm." Before morning she had sunk. By swimming and wading the voyagers managed to save a few supplies and personal effects, and camp for the two youths was established on a rocky ledge overlooking the sea, while Kent walked forty miles before obtaining assistance. The boys returned by steamship, but Kent remained two months in Greenland, painting in the land of Eskimos and Dutch colonists "where good Scotch whisky sells for eighty cents a bottle and where natives are as hospitable as Americans would be if there were no such thing as prohibition." The resulting book, *N by E*, became a best seller before publication.

It is at Ausable Forks that Kent has conducted a number of his major controversies, controversies which have found him, with outraged and outrageous tumult and shouting, arrayed against traction and steamship companies, artists, advertisers, customs services, and commonwealths. The most recent of his major engagements — the legal encounter in which he found himself defying with triple threats and blasphemy the embattled forces of the Delaware and Hudson Railway, the Public Service Commission, and the regiments of costly legal talent retained by both, and the first round of which he won hands down and handsome — is still fresh in the public mind. The overlords of trains and trackage in the Delaware and Hudson offices decided last year that because of insufficient patronage they would abandon passenger service on the branch of their line running from Plattsburg to Ausable Forks, but they figured without their occasional but very determined commuter, Rockwell Kent. Hiring his own lawyer and appearing personally at hearings, Kent demonstrated that the railway had abandoned the service

without first obtaining the consent of the Public Service Commission. He attacked the railroad magnates for their sins, collectively, individually, categorically, and as a group. He stamped his feet and flashed his eyes and cruelly frightened everyone concerned by the attention he attracted in the public prints.

The case was dismissed by the chief engineer of the Public Service Commission, who said Kent had not proved the need of the service in that territory, and Kent with impenitent howls and loud derision printed and distributed broadsides full of wrath and grievances. He kept up a shouting in the wilderness of Essex County until the hearing was reopened, and after a year of agitating the train service was restored. "To my knowledge," he declared later, "Al Capone, Peggy Joyce, Mahatma Gandhi, and Bernard Shaw all rode on the line in one day, and a very happy party they were, too. On another occasion the conductor told me he had taken the names of Trotsky, Aimeé McPherson, Garibaldi, Lydia Pinkham, Senator Heflin, and Romain Roland. . . . It would be intolerable to deprive these eminent persons of railroad transport and might precipitate an ugly international situation."

Alas, however, only last summer, with Kent safely out of the way in the unexplored wastes of Greenland, the train service was finally and very probably irrevocably terminated, for at present the artist is again lost in the northernmost penetrable reaches of that northern land, where he will remain another year, his only communication with the outer world being through the agency of wireless with which he is in touch with the tiny township of Uminak. There he is preparing a new volume of travel, exploration, and a pictorial record.

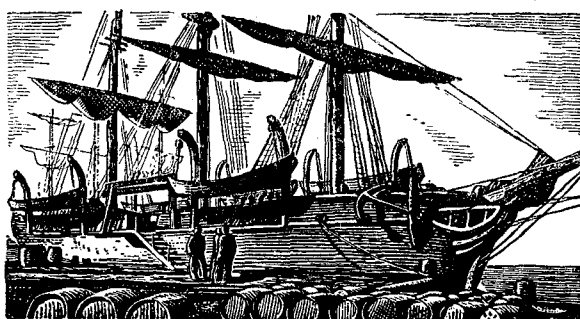
#### ONE AGAINST THE WORLD

**T**HE RAILROAD epic was, of course, but one of a long series of glorified nose-pokings in which Kent has participated, armed only, in the majority of cases, with a native audacity and a prodigious taste for vocal violence. There was the case, mentioned above, when with

howls and roars enough to make the judicious grieve he was tossed out of wartime Newfoundland; the episode of the attachment of an entire ocean liner belonging to the Fabre Steamship Company in a suit originating when his fourteen-year-old son was landed at the wrong port of call, "giving him a fear of travel, a trans-Atlantic steamer complex, and making it impossible for him to voyage alone in the future;" the withdrawal of an exhibit of paintings from the Worcester Art Museum as a penalty imposed on the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti; the set-to and bandying of dubious compliments with Chapin Marcus, the jeweler, over the award of the Harvard-Bok advertising prize a few years since; the assault upon the customs service for enforcing a duty on his own paintings executed at Tierra del Fuego and listed as "articles of foreign manufacture"; the bloody war upon the "stuffed shirts" of the National Academy of Design and the subsequent establishment of a society known as "Against" to combat the stand-patters and old fogies of the world of canvas and palette knives.

Kent was particularly outraged by the condemnation of Sacco and Vanzetti, and while he forewent the exhibitionistic gestures which

brought the gendarmerie down upon Gardiner Jackson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, he could not refrain from letting the people of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and Governor Fuller have a piece of his opinionated mind.



*From "Moby Dick" (Random House)*

"It is with regret," he wrote the Worcester Museum, "that I inform you that because of the killing of Sacco and Vanzetti by the State of Massachusetts I have determined to have no relations of any public nature with that State or any community or organization of it. I am compelled to take this action by my abhorrence of such murder and the conclusion that the citizens of the State must be held responsible for it. And while I feel the stubborn disregard of America's interests and humanity's demands which has marked the State's procedure and made its act so singularly brutal to be derived from its cultured arrogance, while therefore



I believe my retaliation to be at least feebly consistent with the State's offense and of a nature which if generally undertaken and persisted in might chasten it, I can unfortunately attach no public importance to my resolution: it is merely necessary to my own integrity."

It may be noted that despite the apparent modesty of the concluding portion of this pronouncement, and despite also the fact that he complacently denies subscribing to press cutting bureaus, Kent is seldom an edition behind the accounts of his various controversies and voyagings, which he absorbs with gusto if favorable or upon which he jumps up and down with roars of rage if otherwise.

The above constitutes merely a catalogue of the more emphatic slat-kickings and nose-pastings through whose agency Kent has managed to explode himself over the front pages of the papers and the consciousness of the public, and of them all the organization of "Against" was perhaps the most symbolic, for unless he is breathing slaughter and destruction against somebody or something he is not at his happiest. The more epic the engagement, the louder the screams and yells of outraged piety and virtue emanating from his victims, the better he is satisfied.

The personality of Kent at its best should not be viewed among the morning coats and linen spatterdashes of pre-view days or in the midst of admiring throngs of women at literary teas in the drawing rooms of fashion. His most characteristic gestures of dramatization of his own peculiar genius are achieved in the secluded fastness of his Adirondack home, where the gaunt winter mountains furnish the theme and setting for numerous of his paintings, where timber wolves may still be heard of a frozen midnight and where the good Canadian whisky flows over the boundary in unrepressed oceans.

At Ausable, Kent, his family, and whatever house guests may be in residence lead an existence that is not without its suggestions of the Spartan. At five o'clock in the morning everyone is up and breakfast is half an hour later. This is the first rule and no infraction of it is tolerated. Those who would oversleep find that a phonograph with a loud record in action outside their door is a potent spur to activity. This holy rage for early hours is of uncertain origin, but it is generally and

blasphemously ascribed to the artist's desire to show the head farmer on his estate that the muse is no less virile than Agricola. As a result there is sometimes a good deal of daylight sleeping around the premises.

Kent himself, usually attired in tweeds and a sweater or riding costume, his mobile face with its short mustache beaming under his high bald forehead with a matutinal vigor which guests sometimes find positively repellent, is often up and at work in the studio even earlier than this, especially in summer when the light comes sooner. He works the better part of the day by himself, leaving guests to amuse themselves with his books or a gallon jug of the applejack which is invariably on tap in heroic quantities. Later, with a heavy blue stocking cap pulled over his ears if it is cold, Kent goes riding or throws a medicine ball or plays animated wrestling games with his police dog. He is always offensively strong and healthy.

Always a good talker, a raconteur of Rabelaisian anecdotes of enterprises amorous, alcoholic, and Bohemian, an outdoor man, a man's man, a tweeds-and-pipe man, Kent is most at home in an atmosphere where a lapse into the Anglo-Saxon monosyllables will not precipitate a universal raising of eyebrows. Like the eminent pharmacologist in *Arrowsmith*, he believes that "only fools make speeches, wise men sing songs," and late in the evening he sings a number that have to do with nautical men named William and ladies of less than facile virtue. Although an avowed vegetarian, he can frequently be found, after a dinner of herbs and breakfast foods and other fodder which it is doubtful that God ever created for human consumption, sneaking a slice of rare beef from the ice box. Prohibition as a factual manifestation has never yet dawned on his consciousness.

The saga of Kent the prober of hidden mysteries, the pioneer in lands unknown, has been preserved for posterity by Waldo Pierce (who knows not of Jumper Pierce of the black beard who once swam from Ambrose Light to the Battery when he decided he didn't want to go to Europe at all?) in the ballad of "Unser Kent," which commences as follows:

Who strides so far through the winds and snows  
With his mountain face and suburban clothes,  
While the human race doth kneel in salute?  
'Tis Unser Kent and his magic flute.

# Big Business Begs for Socialism

by **WILLIS J. BALLINGER**

**C**AN IT BE that in the turmoil of this depression, capitalism is quietly vanishing under the leadership of its guardian, the bourgeoisie? Is it possible that this is not a depression at all but the end of a journey — a kind of gap between an old order and a new one? Would it not be an instance of poetic irony if our hard-headed business men, who think they are patching up our capitalistic system, were actually pushing it aside and setting up a wholly new system?

And the thing they are proposing to set up — is it Socialism? Certainly no one of them would admit it. Karl Marx believed capitalism would end in a vast catastrophe, in which the bourgeoisie would practically abdicate and the Socialistic legions would march in and take possession. Can it be that it is these same hard-headed business men, damned for decades by the Socialists, who are actually, without so much as suspecting it, laying the first foundations of the Socialist state in America?

At bottom the depression is the work of destructive and unmanageable competition. But competition is not the end and the primary aim of our present system. Its fundamental principle is individualism. Competition is merely a technique, a form of activity in which individualism can function with the best economic results. This at least is the supposition. Now it is our individualism, running wild, which has produced the mad and undisciplined competition which has brought about the economic debacle.

Many explanations are offered. The President insists it all began in Europe with the breakdown of the economic machine there. Some of his department diagnosticians think it is the result of a vast timidity in demand.

According to this simple explanation, unreasoning fear has buyers and spenders by the throat, while business famishes for want of customers. Still others lay the trouble to gold. And recently a noted economist isolated the depression microbe and pronounced it to be a shortage of credit. All of these maladjustments have got mixed up with the depression, to be sure. But for anyone who wishes to look at the picture in panorama, instead of from sharp angles, it is only too obvious that behind all the proximate causes lies the elementary and original cause: the inability of a world or a nation made up of unorganized individuals proceeding upon a philosophy of individualism to manage competition.

Countless individuals, operating utterly without organization or without any effort whatever to relate their activities to the activities of others, have simply flooded the world with goods, while on the distributive side, an unorganized individualistic distributing system has found itself unable to hand these goods around. We have plenty of individualism and no end of competition, but immense disorder.

Now what do our capitalistic diagnosticians and leaders propose to do about this? Do they propose to preserve this competition, to consolidate it and make it more vigorous? Mr. Gerard Swope suggests a powerful trade association in the electrical field which will ostensibly manage employment, but in reality will curb and even very largely end competition by regulating production, and do so many other things that Mr. Swope recognizes the necessity of having the government take a kind of supervisory part in it. The sugar people propose to enter into an international trade agreement, fixing production, trade areas, prices, surpluses,