



THE OFFENSE OF BLUE TOMATOES

BY F. M. COLBY

And when he was asked why he painted tomatoes blue, he said: "When tomatoes grow they are *red* or *green*, but when *painted* they are blue." Need more be said? Can either the words or picture of such a man be taken seriously?

I DO not recall where I read the above passage and I know nothing about the particular controversy implied in it. But of two things I am certain, from my experience of contemporary claims. In the first place, the context, whatever else it may be, will surely be very voluminous and in the second place, Bolshevism must be involved in the thing somehow. Then, too, I feel fairly safe in saying that passions on the subject are running high.

Now I myself incline always to the side of the redness of tomatoes, and my first impulse is to run to their aid against any man who asserts their blueness. In common with many other persons over fifty years of age, a considerable part of my life has been devoted to keeping tomatoes red, and I think I may say with success. Yet the triumph has not brought me the gratification that it evidently brings to those who continue in this activity. For a good many of the blue-tomato people I attacked would certainly, if left to themselves, have disappeared anyhow, while others, as I now see in retrospect, were as strong for the redness of tomatoes as I was but simply saw a different shade of it. A true blue-tomato man will, of course, in the long run commit a sort of suicide, for it is in the nature of a really blue-tomato heresiarch to be so heretical that he has no followers at all. He so hates ordinary

acceptance that he ends by operating in a social vacuum. That is why history keeps no record of the most independent of all thinkers. I mean the kind who in contempt of conventional notions about the thinness of the air have walked on it from high places. The natural end of true blue-tomato men being all that malignity could desire, hatred of them is always thrown away.

And as to the eccentrics of day before yesterday, who seem if anything too normal to-day, you seldom hear a word of regret for the time wasted in defense against them, and never from the persons who wasted most of it. I suppose, for example, that every critic who filled a volume with his fear of Ibsen not only became soon afterward an Ibsenite, but later named his eldest daughter Hedda Gabler; for the very man who is most scared by a new thing at the beginning is the hardest to detach from it at the end. But though you would meet only anti-Ibsenites on one day and then meet only Ibsenites a few days afterward, you never met a man just as he was turning from an anti-Ibsenite into an Ibsenite. You never saw a group of dramatic critics in a grove rocking and singing and coming out Ibsenized. The mental life of dramatic critics during these transition periods is apparently passed in a cocoon. I recall no interesting record of the changes as in the case of Bunyan and St. Paul.

I am not speaking of that mere ebb of moral indignation which leaves for the present high and dry such subjects as Wagner, symbolism, décolletage, Henry James, realism, bicycle skirts, art for art's sake, Browning, Beardsley, the waltz, Paul Verlaine, ragtime, *fin du siècle* immorality, Bernard Shaw, co-

education, and young women and cock-tails, and which soon will leave high and dry such subjects as cubism, feminism, futurism, birth control, flappers, H. G. Wells, bare knees, Cézanne, the fox trot, jazz, Proust, and young women and whisky flasks. I blame no enemy of co-education, Wagner, and the waltz, who afterward became a waltzing Wagnerian with a son and daughter at Cornell, and now hates mainly Cézanne, eugenics, and the fox trot; nor do I pretend for one moment that simply because Bernard Shaw, bicycle skirts, and ragtime did not bring us to the brink in 1900, we are justified in thinking that Amy Lowell, the naked knee, and the Bolshevisms may not now be doing so. I am referring to the methods, not the merits, of defense.

I mean the constant use against these new perils of the same language that failed to save us from the old ones. I mean the common illusion of our leading reactionaries that reaction simply signifies the same action over again when it did no good before, and I have in mind such gross and familiar instances as a recourse in this time of grave peril from Bolshevism or a naked knee to the self-same words that in that time of minor peril actually seemed to encourage a Bernard Shaw or a bicycle skirt. And I mean literally words, not moral attitude.

Rages in this country are the product of ennui. If men had been as monotonous in favor of feminine emancipation as they were against it, women would have revolted backward deep into the bosom of the home. Wreaths should be placed by suffragists on the brows of members of the Union League Club and not on the tomb of Susan B. Anthony. As philosophers are always reminding us, the fatigue caused by safe thinkers in America is the occasion of the wildest thoughts we have. A new movement usually is not a stampede to some new object but a stampede away from some old person, and it is a mistake to explain the Bolshevisms by the seduction of new ideas as conservative writers are

constantly doing, because conservative writers are not giving the old ideas a chance. When a young American writer seems mad it is usually because an old one drives him almost crazy. In hostilities such as that between Mr. H. L. Mencken and Mr. Paul Elmer More, ideas are not concerned at all.

Of course the disagreeable association of certain ideas and duties with the language of college presidents, congressmen, professors and ex-professors of English literature, monogamists, classical teachers, family men, property owners, cultivated Boston literary essayists, patriots, Shakespeareans, Golden Rule people, gentlefolk, civic federationists, and chief justices of the Supreme Court, ought not to count with a reasonable person against the duties and ideas themselves; but it certainly lowers the power of resistance, for it leaves the mind empty and aching. Radicalism is the rush of an opposite conclusion into an indignant void.

In this state the victim of contemporary conservatism—often a quite respectable person—will, in imagination at least, destroy his home, tear up the Constitution, pray for Lenin, join the Rough Writers, drop in at the literary shooting galleries, write poetry backward, get himself six concubines in succession, prove George Washington a drunkard, or, like Mr. H. L. Mencken after reading the *Congressional Record* for six months, burn down both houses of Congress. If he is young he will probably try to do some of these things, for the young are fearfully literal-minded. If he is old he can probably imagine enough about them to save his plowing through.

That is the danger when sound-to-mato people like myself go to the rescue of the redness of tomatoes. It is an unwelcome thought, but there may be something about us personally that makes others so angry that they see tomatoes blue. Sober writers in this country have, like Max Nordau in his celebrated volume on *Degeneration*, given sanity a black eye and cre-

ated the strange presumption in many aspiring æsthetic breasts that ends of art have been achieved simply because they seem insane to sober writers. Nordau, it will be recalled, ranged the writers of his time, as he believed, in the order of their madness, but Nordau's notion of madness was of such a nature that the order of writers in insanity corresponded closely to the order of their literary merit. For literature, it so happened, began at a point just beyond the range of Nordau's comprehension, so that the better a man wrote the madder he naturally seemed to Nordau. And so accurate did he become in classifying the best authors of the period among the criminal insane, that a man of taste might purchase almost any volume with perfect confidence without any other knowledge of the writer than that Nordau considered him a dangerous lunatic. Thus benefiting as it did the two great classes in the public, those who hated good authors and those who rather liked them, *Degeneration* was one of the most successful volumes of its day. But nature has bestowed on few men this gift of going wrong so precisely as to serve as a safe guide in the opposite direction.

THE HEAVY-FOOTED

BY FREDERICK L. ALLEN

WHAT I tell you is not to be taken lightly. I write in bitterness.

I am generally a good-natured fellow mild and tolerant. I take a kindly view of things and make excuses for people's shortcomings. Seldom does my temper give way. Now and then, to be sure, I am aroused by the adhesive nature of the kind of bureau drawer found in summer cottages; now and then I depart briefly from the even tenor of my emotional way when I stumble over a suitcase left in the dark hallway of my apartment; and there are a few sorts of people who goad me to occasional fury. The woman (for it is usually a woman) who inserts herself at the head of the long line of people waiting at the

ticket window is one of these. But my pet aversion is the Heavy-footed.

The Heavy-footed is perhaps seen in his most characteristic manifestation at the theater. The curtain has just gone up on the first act, showing the drawing-room at The Larches, Puddington-on-Thames, Berks; the butler has shown in Lady Worcestershire, who has asked for Mrs. Cholmondeley-Neville; and the butler is just beginning to explain why Mrs. Cholmondeley-Neville is not at home and who are present at the house party, when the Heavy-footed, preceded by an usher with a spotlight, goes thundering down the aisle on his heels, pauses at the end of row C, pushes his way past the seven people who struggle to their feet at the command, "Rise, please," finds his place, stands for a good twenty seconds at his full height and takes off his overcoat, pushes down his seat with a bang, rattles his program, breathes heavily, and finally relapses into comparative silence.

For a moment the stage becomes once more visible and the butler once more audible; then the theater shakes again as another of the Heavy-footed thuds down the aisle. Doubtless, these people are physically able to walk on their toes. But apparently the fact that there is a play going on, which other people are attempting to hear, does not percolate into their intelligence until they are seated and ready to listen to it themselves. The first half of the first act and the first five minutes of acts two and three are gathered in only the most fragmentary way by the sufferer in row M; and he has no redress. All he can do is to sit silently and concentrate upon the Heavy-footed an unexpressed and unavailing hatred.

I have spoken of the Heavy-footed as though he were masculine. He usually is. One of the severest indictments of a sex in which I personally take great pride is contained in the fact that it contributes some seventy per cent of the Heavy-footed. But the female of the species can be deadly too.