

Footnote on Journalism<sup>1</sup>

By H. L. MENCKEN

## I

THE peculiar prejudices and habits of mind of an uncompromising Liberal are written all over the Hon. Oswald Garrison Villard's eloquent testimonial to the sense, enterprise, and common decency of the two *Sunpapers*, printed in this week's *Nation*. Dr. Villard is certainly no dilettante when it comes to journalism. He has conducted a great daily journal in the heat of the day, he is privy to all the esoteric wisdom and gossip of the trade, and he is of a reflective and analytical turn of mind. Nevertheless, it seems to me that, in his discussion of the two *Sunpapers* and of what they are trying to do, he permits his political prepossessions to blind him to their chief difficulty and their highest achievement. In brief, he overstates the impediments to sound journalism that lie in the class superstitions of newspaper owners and the *Wille zur Macht* of advertisers, and he very greatly understresses the impediments that lie in the dark and gummy minds of the great masses of the plain people—the repository, according to the Liberal astrology, of every virtue and sagacity.

In practically all discussions of journalism, and particularly of daily journalism, there are lugubrious strophes on the baleful tyranny of advertisers, and it is blamed for at least two-thirds of the dishonesty and imbecility that characterize the normal American newspaper. But I am convinced, after an experience but two years short of Dr. Villard's, that it is largely imaginary. The advertiser is a bugaboo behind whom incompetent and cowardly newspaper editors take refuge from their critics. I have never heard of him attempting to influence a journal of any visible integrity upon a matter of any genuine importance. If he comes in with a request, it is usually to the effect that nothing be printed about the fact that a fat woman has fallen down the main stairway of his store or that his brother is being blackmailed by one of his salesgirls. But for one such request that comes from an advertiser there are a thousand that come from persons who are not advertisers—persons who attempt to bring the most formidable pressure to bear upon editors—pressure that is financial, social, political, and ecclesiastical. That sort of bombardment, in truth, is part of every editor's ordinary day's work. He often finds it very hard to resist, and sometimes downright impossible. But I doubt that it is the advertisers who give him most concern. On the contrary, I am convinced that he employs them very often as laboratory animals to demonstrate his courage and independence, and that much idle stuff thus gets into newspapers that might as well stay out.

## II

As for newspaper owners, who are commonly men of some wealth, it is my impression that, in intelligence and integrity, they run about as other men of wealth run, which is to say, considerably above the level of men who are bankrupt. In my journey through this miserable world I have so far failed to find the slightest evidential support for the democratic theory that virtue and incompetence are identical. Practically all normal Americans, and especially all who profess to abhor the Money Power—e. g., labor leaders, uplifters, and politicians—are trying to get all the money that they can. When a man makes such an attempt and fails, he tends to become bitter, and I find it hard to deal with him. But when he succeeds he mellows and expands, and it is relatively easy to talk beautiful nonsense to him. I have often argued against capital to capitalists, and found them polite and tolerant, but I have never encountered a union leader who would listen to an argument against unionism.

The fact is that the things I esteem most in this world, and which Dr. Villard puts upon the fundamental program of the

two *Sunpapers*, to wit, truth, liberty, tolerance, and common decency, are kept alive among us, not by the great masses of men, but by small groups of men, most of them very well fed. When the ordinary rights of the citizens were torn to tatters during the late war by Dr. Wilson and his patriotic *Polizei*, and men were jailed, beaten, and murdered for daring to exercise them, it was not the plain people who protested and called a halt; it was a volunteer committee of lawyers, nearly all of them with money in the bank. It was the money in the bank, in fact, that gave them courage and made them interested in questions of liberty. And when the Pennsylvania State cossacks, two or three years ago, began butchering the poor wops and bohunks in the steel region, it was not the labor unions that exposed the infamy, but a small corps of well-to-do specialists in atrocity. The labor unions, in fact, were against the strikers, and the Gompers crowd did its best to beat them—mainly by acts of treachery so gross that very few men of the dignity and self-respect that goes with money could be imagined as capable of them.

## III

I do not here argue for money, which I esteem very lightly, but simply against the banal notion that a rich man is necessarily without imagination and idealistic aspiration. He may be, of course, a mere hyena of the Baer-Gary type, or he may be a jackass of the Rotary Club variety, but it is also possible for him to be reflective, tolerant, and even a bit altruistic (that is, if we assume that anyone is ever genuinely altruistic), and it is my contention that he is all of these things quite as often as his slaves are. Thus I see no impediment to decent journalism in America in the fact that under modern conditions it takes a very rich man to own a newspaper. That rich man may yield to class prejudices and they may color the news in his paper, but I doubt that they will color it more gaudily than it would be colored by the prejudices of a poor man, supposing him to have the same power. Moreover, I am convinced that the specific prejudices which most critics of journalism complain of—for example, the prejudices in favor of the capitalistic system, of an exaggerated nationalism, and of tightly regimented opinion—would be just as apparent in a newspaper run, say, by an American labor leader, as they are in a newspaper run by an American banker. The effort to put down the critics of these things by force and terror has not been made altogether by rich men; it has been made especially by the poor men—many of them actually out of work!—of the American Legion and other such mob organizations. The stupidity behind it is not merely capitalistic; it is national, and perhaps almost racial.

Which brings me to the point, viz., that the chief difficulty confronting a newspaper which tries to carry out the policies ascribed to the two *Sunpapers* by Mr. Villard does not lie in the direction of the advertisers nor in the direction of the board of directors, but in the direction of the public which buys the paper. It is here that the ambitious editor encounters his real enemies, and genuinely skins his shins. What he always discovers to his dismay, soon after he tries to substitute intelligent discussion for the usual platitudinizing about public affairs, and a relentless pursuit of the truth for the usual lies and imbecilities, is that his customers have a very defective appetite for the new fare—that, in the main, they prefer what they are used to, not only because it is familiar, but because they positively like it. In brief, very few Americans in any average community want to be bothered with sense in their newspaper. It is hard to grasp; it lies outside their habitual field of thought; it is somehow offensive to their pruderies. They prefer to find in print exactly the same sort of puerile, rubber-stamp balderdash that they hear all day from their colleagues in human endeavor, and from the soothsayers who customarily instruct them in lodge and union hall, and from the reverend clergy who belabor them with piety on Sunday.

## IV

No doubt Mr. Villard would dissent from this doctrine. As a Liberal he is necessarily convinced that the people crave

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from the *Baltimore Evening Sun* of April 3.

better things than they have, and would be grateful if such things were given to them. But this is true, I believe, only within very narrow limits, and those chiefly material. In the realm of ideas they are satisfied with what they have and resent any effort to improve it. No objection to the imbecility of moving-pictures has ever come from the habitual patrons of moving-pictures; it is brought forward by those who seldom suffer from it personally. No statesman ever lost office on the ground that his notions were idiotic, but many have been retired because they tried to be intelligent. And no newspaper ever lost readers—save out of a small and negligible minority of strange fish, chiefly well-to-do, and hence scoundrels by the democratic theory—because it distorted and invented news, and preached childish platitudes, and printed Mutt and Jeff, and assumed constantly that its average reader was a moron. Such enterprises as the *Sunpaper's* attempt to report the Disarmament Follies intelligently are not undertaken as devices for increasing circulation; they are undertaken as private luxuries of the responsible editors and proprietors. Mr. Villard used to run the *Evening Post* as a luxury; in precisely the same way the *Sunpaper* tried to cover the West Virginia strike as a luxury. Nine of its readers out of ten would have been quite contented with the customary blather and garbage of the Associated Press.

[NOTE.—Mr. Villard is in Europe and his comment on this interesting critique is for the moment not available. Two errors crept into his article. On page 390, second column, four lines from top, the sentence beginning "So the president," etc., should read "So Mr. Paul Patterson, the president, and Mr. John H. Adams, who is vice-president and also editor of the *Sun*, went abroad," etc.; and in the same column, line 28, the sentence beginning "Mr. John H. Adams," etc., should read "Mr. Frank R. Kent, also a vice-president of the *Sun*, who went to Europe to cover the foreign reaction to the Conference, 'scoped' even the *London Times* and the *Daily Mail* upon Lloyd George's plans for the Cannes Conference—a feat which naturally attracted widespread attention, just as his recent interview with M. Loucheur, the French Minister of Reconstruction, led to exchanges of opinion in public utterances between Senator McCormick and various French politicians."—EDITORS THE NATION.]

## In the Driftway

AT last the Drifter's worst fears about himself are confirmed! Partly in bravado, partly in jest, partly in panic he recently confessed doubt of his ability to rate 50 per cent in a civil service examination for a reliable and experienced moron. Now comes this letter to confound him:

In *The Nation* for March 15 a letter from a lady medic of Philadelphia causes you to throw up both hands in perplexity, ready to confess yourself a moron of the second degree, half doubting whether you might pass even such a test. Might it interest you to receive a little help from one who has had experience in that line, one who has spent three months in one of our foremost institutions for the insane, presided over by an alienist of international reputation, who has been photographed, recorded, and card-indexed as a member of that ever-growing army of a half million mental defectives that crowd the land, and who is at large today without the consent of "the earnest men and women" who have charge of such matters.

Having followed your column for some time and with great interest, I am quite convinced that you would qualify as a subject for the attention of the aforesaid "earnest men and women" trained to sift the wheat from the chaff of our mixed human material. Anyone that strays so far from type as to be interested in the wide range of subjects that your column covers justifies the presumption of a pathogenic strain; and the lack of respect for established authority that you evidence clearly indicates an advanced neurosis. You would without doubt be enrolled in the national army of half a million defectives gathered in by the "earnest men and women" that are so eager to carry the social burden for us, if only some presumptuous fool could be found to press your case. It is this little "if" more than anything else that constitutes the guaranty of our liberties so far as the members of the Philadelphia lady's profession are concerned; make no mistake about that. . . .

Psychology seems to have become the magic wand with which our progressives hope to cure all the social ills, from vocational maladjustment to crime, and about all they achieve is the wrecking of individual lives and foisting an army of incompetent dabblers upon an industrial society that is already topheavy to the danger-point. When things have reached a stage where a very large percentage of the recruits in the late war can be officially given a mentality of ten years old or less, when at a gathering of alienists in the city of New York, some five years ago, a luminary of that profession could say that one man out of every four that one meets on the streets is mentally incompetent and ought to be confined for his own good, there is something so radically wrong that it behooves our public scribes to take notice and also a very decided stand.

Your words have been as a breath of fresh air to at least one who has felt the suffocating effect of the prevailing rage for all the new-fangled theories and practices that cluster about this newest science of psychology. Being one of its victims, you will hardly expect me to add to my mortification and distress by signing my name. I must therefore beg you to accept my congratulations on your brave words anonymously.

In the language of the street, now what do you know about that? The Drifter knows nothing about it, and he is beginning to question if he knows anything about anything else. The letter is inserted here merely as a warning to Constant Reader and Old Subscriber not to be surprised if any week they see this column headed as special correspondence from the State asylum for the insane at Matteawan, New York, or Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

THE DRIFTER

## Correspondence

### From the *World's* Executive Editor

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: I think your newspaper series are admirable. Because of that I wish to be able to give them even greater approval, and therefore I write you in the hope of giving them, in at least one instance, greater accuracy.

In your justified praise of the Baltimore *Suns* you give them credit for the printing of the "entirely unedited and quite divergent accounts and comments of H. G. Wells and Henry Nevins." Both of these men were members of the *World* staff—Wells by special arrangement under which the *World* brought him to America for the express purpose of reporting the Conference, and Nevins by virtue of our agreement with the Manchester *Guardian*, under which we have the right to all their news in America.

I am sure you will be interested in having these facts set before you.

New York, April 7

SWOPE

P. S.—The Baltimore *Sun* uses the *World's* news service.

## Marx's Theory of Value

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: Will Mr. Preserved Smith, who writes Notes on History in your issue of March 1, please explain for the benefit of your readers some points he raises in criticism of Maurice William's "Social Interpretation of History"? Mr. Smith says: "Mr. William accepts practically all the principles of the Gospel according to Marx, including the theory of value finally abandoned by Marx himself."

Now, as one who has read for a number of years the "Gospel according to Marx," and accepts it unreservedly, I should like Mr. Smith to elucidate just where, when, and how Marx abandoned his theory of value, the basis upon which his whole economic work is built.

ROSCOE A. FILLMORE

Oromocto, New Brunswick, Canada, March 12