

At the Capitol

The Senate as Auctioneer

THE past week has been an active one for both houses of Congress. On Monday the Senate passed a bill for the development of the country's vast coal, oil and phosphate resources. On Tuesday both houses were addressed by the President on the status of international affairs. On Thursday, delivering the morning invocation in the House of Representatives, the Reverend Billy Sunday re-stated American war aims. And on the same day, by an exactly two-thirds majority, the House passed the federal woman suffrage amendment. Of this program only the first item has failed to receive wide attention. To the Senate's coal, oil and phosphate bill, public opinion has for the most part been indifferent.

Indifferent, in the first place, to the vastness of the public interest affected. We who make up the public own land that contains six hundred and fifty million barrels of oil. We own two million acres of phosphate reserves. We own four hundred and fifty billion tons of coal, of which fifty billion are bituminous tons that can be easily mined. These great stocks we want to see put to use: so that coal and oil and phosphates will be available to each of us, if we want it, at a lower cost than they have been in the past. This is "development," as it interests us. But we have, at the same time, plenty of evidence of what "trusts" can do in the way of charging prices, and of what "competition" can do in the way of waste and poor distribution. And we have our present experience of requiring, in a time of particular national peril, the ordinance of a federal Fuel Administrator and a federal Oil Administrator. And we have British labor's recent declaration that the public interest demands public development of basic natural resources. And the last thing that we as a public should want to do, would be to part altogether with these millions of acres of coal and oil and phosphate.

And that, under the terms of the bill which the Senate has just passed, is precisely what we are on the verge of doing. The Senate's bill provides a choice of alternatives: the Secretary of the Interior may either sell or lease these rich lands to prospectors. But the choice, in practice, will not be the Secretary's to make. It will be the investor's. And if the investor chooses to buy outright, the public in that transaction surrenders all control of output; control of waste; control of prices; control of labor conditions; and control, through rents and royalties, of profits. And in return for the surrender, what does it receive? Not even a certain assurance that the resources will promptly be developed. Under existing law, public mineral lands are valued for sale upon the basis of what they contain. Their selling price accordingly depends on the market price of the product. And this variable selling price discourages speculators from buying up the lands for their own purposes. Under the Senate's new program, however, any speculator may force the government into selling mineral lands by making application for them, and then, in the absence of another bidder, paying a fixed minimum purchase price. After that, his only obligation is to make certain formal improvements upon the land, which will cost him in the neighborhood of four dollars an acre, annually. Meantime he may hold the lands undeveloped, waiting for a profitable turnover.

There is, to be sure, an alternative to outright public sale. There is the alternative of a lease, if any prospector chooses to take that method of securing his property. But in the Senate's bill the lease provisions are no better than

the sale provisions. No private landlord would draw a contract with as unnecessarily generous terms as the Senate offers to coal and oil and phosphate prospectors. Its bill makes no adequate provision for controlling the service that the lessee may give to the public or the price he may ask in return. It does not provide that when the investor has recovered all of his outlay, plus a full profit on his energy and capital, any additional increment shall be shared with the public. Its "recapture" clauses set up conditions which will make it exceedingly difficult for the public to recover the property it has loaned.

These leasing provisions, however, are not the last faults in the measure which the Senate has passed. There are several sections in the bill which go to the rescue of oil prospectors in the West. A number of these men claim to have suffered losses when President Taft, in 1910, took back into public ownership certain lands which had previously been open to private exploration. No doubt there are among these claimants certain deserving prospectors who have a right to expect federal relief. But the relief provided in the Senate's bill is not partial enough. It will open the door to all sorts of claims, vicious as well as honest. Many of the claimants are dummies for large corporations. So many, in fact, that Senator Reed Smoot, never an alarmist about the public interest, asserts that if the bill is enacted in its present form, "the Standard Oil Company will control at least four-fifths of all the oil in Wyoming, or at least twenty thousand acres of oil lands in the state."

There is no need for this sweeping sort of remedial legislation to be tacked onto a bill which should lay the careful ground-work for a policy of future conservation. The Senate is now waiting for the House to act, and the House can make a good beginning by cutting from the bill these equivocal sections and leaving relief to the courts, plus special legislation, if necessary, to take care of honest individual claims. The House now has pending a coal, oil and phosphate bill drawn by its own Public Lands Committee. It is a better bill. It does not provide for an outright sale of these rich public resources. It proposes instead a system of leases exclusively—not completely satisfactory leases, but considerably better than those provided in the Senate's bill. And if the House is given active support by its constituents and by the administration, it will have a good chance of forcing the Senate to give up its plan for sales and accept the principle of leases. In fact, if the House secures the right sort of encouragement it may even go so far as to accompany the leasing system with a provision that would give the government power to operate its own mineral and oil deposits, where it was a clear advantage to the public to do so. Under pressure from the administration, Congress wrote such a provision into one "development" bill, passed last summer. Every experience of the present and outlook for the future points to the wisdom of making similar provision in the present bill, before another great part of our mineral wealth is allowed to slip permanently away from the public domain.

There is no one who does not admit that in the past we have grossly mismanaged our public domain. If we still had in our national possession the natural resources with which we have recklessly endowed private speculation, we should have a solid basis on which to proceed with the work of reconstruction after the war. Is it not almost incredible that at a time when these facts are at last permeating the public consciousness, our representatives at Washington should be proceeding calmly to alienate the resources still remaining to us?

C. M.

Books and Things

A FORTNIGHT ago, when I read Percy Mackaye's letter to *The New Republic*, I had not had the other pleasure of reading *Young France and New America*, by Pierre de Lanux. When I found Mr. Mackaye saying that M. de Lanux brought "us a challenge—a challenge to create," it never occurred to me that these words were closely descriptive. I recollected too many of the many other things which have been so fortunate as to challenge the creator in Mr. Mackaye—a tale by Hawthorne, a play by Shakespeare, a fragment of Sappho, an oaken table, a European war, a waiters' strike at St. Louis. "After all," I imagined myself saying to Mr. Mackaye, "what have you told me about a book when you've said it calls upon you to exercise your creative faculties? You have not characterized it. You have attributed to it a power which it shares with the rest of the universe. You have merely named the greatest common denominator of this book and of all things visible and invisible. Of course it challenges you to create. Vous êtes orfèvre, Monsieur Josse."

Tonight, after finishing *Young France and New America*, I am forced to apologize to Mr. Mackaye, and to admit that he did not read this challenge into it. His judgment was not subjective. The challenge is objectively there. "In the instance of our two countries," says M. de Lanux, "this is how I understand our literary relations: The greatest need for France"—he is looking forward to peace after war—"will be to feel the abundant, vigorous, generous production of your young writers whose inspiration is related to her own. If we happen to hesitate they will reassure us, owing to their solid virtue of genuine and direct inspiration." Many of us know M. de Lanux as an expert in the politics and languages of the Balkans. The passage just quoted reveals him as no less an expert in amiability. He expects from America, and very soon too, "some great artistic revelations." Until I came upon another sentence, near the end of his book, I was afraid we might not justify M. de Lanux's good opinion of us: "This interchange of art and artists may well be expected to increase after the war, and parenthetically it may be said that the counsels of Whitney Warren and other American architects will be profoundly appreciated when the work of rebuilding ravaged France is taken in hand." Emphasize this parenthesis, and you will acknowledge that the standard M. de Lanux sets up for us, if it be the same in letters as in architecture, is not impossibly high.

By this time you will have guessed my opinion, though you may not share in it: I think M. de Lanux writes about us with too obvious a will to be kind. What he says of America's coming influence upon French art, literary and plastic, may be true or may be mistaken, but certainly, to my taste, it is written by too glad a hand. Other parts of his book, however, are wholly free from this taint. He makes us desire a better acquaintance with a younger generation of French writers than those who are the subjects of Miss Lowell's *Six French Poets*—with Péguy, Vildrac, Henri Franck, Ghéon, André Suarès, Pierre Hamp, Rivière, Duhamel. He is such a competent and engaging literary critic that one cannot help wishing he would give us another book, in which he could describe more fully the younger writers who have so deeply influenced the younger Frenchmen who are fighting this war. Listen to him on two of the older men whom Miss Lowell has included in her volume, on Verhaeren first: "His voice rapped out words that, with a gesture, he seemed to fling into space. He

tramped forward, shoulders rounded, like the abutment of an arch, as one ready to push forward something heavy. . . . Above all, his work weighs. His most largely winged verses are always cut from hard metal, and those most charged with divine spirit are in solid blocks, four-sided, like the masonry of a cathedral. . . . The heart of the poet traverses and expresses the most tragic crises. Strenuous conflicts and stormy images torment the soul and suspend it in space." How imaginative and admirable! Yet no better in its kind than this: "Let us then travel to the southern extremity of France. At the foot of the Pyrénées is a sunny little town, Orthez. There we find the poet Francis Jammes, who loves the poor, the animals, the gardens, the seasons, the young girls and the other things of God. He writes about them simple poems where the blood of Virgil runs and sings."

Even more interesting is the book's first chapter, where M. de Lanux describes the successive states of mind of those Frenchmen, his contemporaries, who were born much too late to remember the days of 1870 and 1871; their hopes, their masters, their impatiences, and finally, as more and more clearly they saw how Germany threatened France, their determination to live in a world set free from fear.

Here indeed is a new France, new even to those of us who did not know the old. Some idea of France we had, an idea generalized from a little knowledge and much ignorance, and it is against this generalized background, familiar and ill-seen, that we see these newer Frenchmen, perhaps no more justly. They are not more serious than the older generations, but their seriousness is nearer the surface, they spend themselves less in mockery, they are less afraid of being bored, they see less merit in living so as to escape boredom, they are not afraid of being duped, except by life through failure to understand it. Their malice is less, or less often a weapon, a gift that they are too busy to cultivate. Let our touch be heavier on the keys of life, they seem to say, if life will not sound its most authentic tones in answer to any lighter touch. For the sake of truth, of sincerity, they are willing to make more and more sacrifices—of pleasure to themselves from life, of pleasure from their art to others. Tired of mere cleverness, of mere dexterity, they seek new and significant forms in art and in life, and appear at first too tolerant of lack of form. They are less *rusés*, superficially, than the older generation, but even more resolved to see things as they are. Esteeming science no less, they know its place in life more accurately, do not expect from it more than it can give. A deep religious current runs through them all, believers and unbelievers alike. Their desire to be strong has not killed in them their fathers' desire to let live.

Pierre de Lanux himself belongs to this newer generation. He represents what is best in it by his wide interests—in sport, travel, business, foreign lands and foreign tongues—and by his ability to see all these interests as one, as a desire to enrich French life and to do what he can toward spreading French civilization wherever its humanity and tolerance will be welcomed. Hopeful, and the author of a very hopeful book, his interest in the future never leads him to forget the present, its gravity or its passion. He knows there is a generation not only younger but newer than his own. "Le Bleuët," he writes, "is the young soldier from the classes of 1914, '15, '16, '17, called during the war. He is now from eighteen to twenty-two. The young man who is now about to enter the fight, after he had had three years of moral preparation through the fight carried on by his elders, is a new kind of man. He grew up aware of the near presence of death." P. L.