

# Four American Impressions

GERTRUDE STEIN, PAUL ROSENFELD,  
RING LARDNER, SINCLAIR LEWIS.

## I

ONE who thinks a great deal about people and what they are up to in the world comes inevitably in time to relate them to experiences connected with one's own life. The round, hard apples in this old orchard are the breasts of my beloved. The curved, round hill in the distance is the body of my beloved, lying asleep. One cannot avoid practising this trick of lifting people out of the spots on which in actual life they stand and transferring them to what seems at the moment some more fitting spot in one's fanciful world.

And one gets also a kind of aroma from people. They are green, healthy, growing things or they have begun to decay. There is something in this man, to whom I have just talked, that has sent me away from him smiling and in an odd way pleased with myself. Why has this other man, although his words were kindly and his deeds apparently good, spread a cloud over my sky?

In my own boyhood in an Ohio town I went about delivering newspapers at kitchen doors, and there were certain houses to which I went—old brick houses with immense old-fashioned kitchens—in which I loved to linger. On Saturday mornings I sometimes managed to collect a fragrant cooky at such a place, but there was something else that held me. Something got into my mind connected with the great, light kitchens and the women working in them that came sharply back when, last year, I went to visit an American woman, Miss Gertrude Stein, in her own large room in the house at 27 rue de Fleurus in Paris. In the great kitchen of my fanciful world in which I have, ever since that morning, seen Miss Stein standing, there is a most sweet and gracious aroma. Along the walls are many shining pots and pans, and there are innumerable jars of fruits, jellies and preserves. Something is going on in the great room, for Miss Stein is a worker in words with the same loving touch in her strong fingers that was characteristic of the women of the kitchens of the brick houses in the town of my boyhood. She is an American woman of the old sort, one who cares for the handmade goodies and who scorns the factory-made foods, and in her own great kitchen she is making something with her materials, something sweet to the tongue and fragrant to the nostrils.

That her materials are the words of our English speech and that we do not, most of us, know or care too much what she is up to does not greatly matter to me. The impression I wish now to give you of her is of one very intent and earnest in a matter most of us have forgotten. She is laying word against word, relating sound to sound, feeling for the taste, the smell, the rhythm of the individual word. She is attempting to do something for the writers of our English speech that may be better understood after a time, and she is not in a hurry. And one has always that picture of the woman in the great kitchen of words, standing there by a table, clean, strong, with red cheeks and sturdy legs, always quietly and smilingly at work. If her smile has in it something of the mystery, to the male at least, of the Mona Lisa, I remember that the women in the kitchens on the wintry mornings wore often that same smile.

She is making new, strange and to my ears sweet combinations of words. As an American writer I admire her because she, in her person, represents something sweet and healthy in our American life, and because I have a kind of undying faith that what she is up to in her word kitchen in Paris is of more importance to writers of English than the work of many of our more easily understood and more widely accepted word artists.

## II

When it comes to our Ring Lardner, here is something else again. Here is another word fellow, one who cares about the words of our American speech and who is perhaps doing more than any other American to give new life to the words of our everyday life.

There is something I think I understand about Ring. The truth is that I believe there is something the matter with him and I have a fancy I know what it is. He is afraid of the highbrows. They scare him to death. I wonder why, for it is true that there is often, in a paragraph of his, more understanding of life, more human sympathy, more salty wisdom than in hundreds of pages of, say, Mr. Sinclair Lewis's dreary prose—and I am sure Mr. Lewis would not hesitate to outface any highbrow in his lair.

I said that I thought I knew what was the matter with Mr. Ring Lardner. He comes from out in my country, from just such another town as the one in which I spent my own boyhood, and I remember certain shy lads of my own town who always made it a point to consort only with the

town toughs—and for a reason. There was in them something extremely sensitive that did not want to be hurt. Even to mention the fact that there was in them a real love of life, a quick sharp stinging hunger for beauty, would have sent a blush of shame to their cheeks. They were intent upon covering up, concealing from everyone, at any cost, the shy hungry children they were carrying about within themselves.

And I always see our Ring Lardner as such a fellow. He is covering up, sticking to the gang, keeping out of sight. And that is all right too, if in secret and in his suburban home he is really using his talent for sympathetic understanding of life, if in secret he is being another Mark Twain and working in secret on his own Huckleberry Finn. Mark Twain wrote and was proclaimed for writing his *Innocents Abroad*, *Following the Equator*, *Roughing It*, etc., etc., and was during his lifetime most widely recognized for such secondary work. And Mark was just such another shy lad, bluffed by the highbrows—and even the glorious Mark had no more sensitive understanding of the fellow in the street, in the hooch joint, the ball-park and the city suburb than our Mr. Ring Lardner.

### III

Which brings me to a man who seems to me, of all our American writers, the one who is most unafraid, Mr. Paul Rosenfeld. Here is an American writer actually unashamed at being fine and sensitive in his work. To me it seems that he has really freed himself from both the high and the low brows and has made of himself a real aristocrat among writers of prose.

To be sure, to the man in the street, accustomed to the sloppiness of hurried newspaper writing, the Rosenfeld prose is sometimes difficult. His vocabulary is immense and he cares very, very much for just the shade of meaning he is striving to convey. Miss Jean Heap recently spoke of him as "our well dressed writer of prose," and I should think Paul Rosenfeld would not too much resent the connotations of that. For after all, Rosenfeld is our man of distinction, the American, it seems to me, who is unafraid and unashamed to live for the things of the spirit as expressed in the arts. I get him as the man walking cleanly and boldly and really accepting, daring to accept, the obligations of the civilized man. To my ears that acceptance has made his prose sound clearly and sweetly across many barren fields. To me it is often like soft bells heard ringing at evening across fields long let go to the weeds of carelessness and the general slam-it-throughness of so much of our American writing.

### IV

Of the four American writers concerning whose handling of our speech I have had the temerity to express my own feeling there is left Mr. Sinclair Lewis.

The texture of the prose written by Mr. Lewis gives one but faint joy and one cannot escape the conviction that for some reason Lewis has himself found but little joy, either in life among us or in his own effort to channel his reactions to our life into prose. There can be no doubt that this man, with his sharp journalistic nose for news of the outer surface of our lives, has found out a lot of things about us and the way we live in our towns and cities, but I am very sure that in the life of every man, woman and child in the country there are forces at work that seem to have escaped the notice of Mr. Lewis. Ring Lardner has seen them and in his writing there is sometimes real laughter, but one has the feeling that Lewis never laughs at all, that he is in an odd way too serious about something to laugh.

For after all, even in Gopher Prairie or in Indianapolis, Indiana, boys go swimming in the creeks on summer afternoons, shadows play at evening on factory walls, old men dig angleworms and go fishing together, love comes to at least a few of the men and women and, everything else failing, the baseball club comes from a neighboring town and Tom Robinson gets a home run. That's something. There is an outlook on life across which even the cry of a child, choked to death by its own mother, would be something. Life in our American towns and cities is barren enough and there are enough people saying that with the growth of industrialism it has become continually more and more ugly, but Mr. Paul Rosenfeld and Mr. Ring Lardner apparently do not find it altogether barren and ugly. For them and for a growing number of men and women in America there is something like a dawn that Mr. Lewis has apparently sensed but little, for there is so little sense of it in the texture of his prose. Reading Sinclair Lewis, one comes inevitably to the conclusion that here is a man writing who, wanting passionately to love the life about him, cannot bring himself to do so, and who wanting perhaps to see beauty descend upon our lives like a rainstorm has become blind to the minor beauties our lives hold.

And is it not just this sense of dreary spiritual death in the man's work that is making it so widely read? To one who is himself afraid to live there is, I am sure, a kind of inverted joy in seeing other men as dead. In my own feeling for the man from whose pen has come all of this prose over which

there are so few lights and shades, I have come at last to sense, most of all, the man fighting terrifically and ineffectually for a thing about which he really does care. There is a kind of fighter living inside Sinclair Lewis and there is, even in this dull, unlighted prose of his, a kind of dawn coming. In the dreary ocean of this prose, islands begin to appear. In *Babbitt* there are moments when the people of whom he writes, with such amazing attention to the outer details of lives, begin to think and feel a little, and with the coming of life into his people a kind of nervous, hurried beauty and life flits, like a lantern carried by a night watchman past the window of a factory as one stands waiting and watching in a grim street on a night of December.

SHERWOOD ANDERSON.

## Russian Folks

### I

**S**ERGEY was one of Chicherin's secretaries, a Siberian boy who had won a gold medal at the University of St. Petersburg in 1914 when he was sixteen. He had meant to be a professor of Greek. But the war came. They made him a Russian lieutenant and he seems to have taken good care of his men. He carried no revolver, only a whip. When his peasant troops ran every which way he tried to keep them together. One day they all found themselves in a shambles and he led them to surrender. Two or three wild fellows wanted to die fighting. "But what was the good of that?" Afterwards Sergey was in a German prison camp. His fellow prisoners were mostly officers from the Gordon Highlanders. The Germans he disliked, not apparently because his country was at war with them but because they were accustomed to do things by rule, and himself and the Scots, Sergey believed, had tapped a secret fountain of inspiration, common sense.

Sergey was a sensible boy. When he got out of his prison camp he did various odd jobs for the Bolshevik Mission in Berlin. Then he made his way back to Russia. He was no politician, and he was too little troubled about his fellow men to be a sentimentalist about the Revolution. It was there. It was the life which had turned up in front of him. He did as the Revolution bade him. There was a whining Hindoo who had no passport and wanted the communists to get him out of Russia. Sergey piloted him to Berlin, and the Soviets were rid of a troublesome visitor. It was a game with risks. Sergey loved it. Because he had long

ago learned stenography the better to take lectures on Ovid, he found himself in the secretariat of Chicherin.

I went to dinner with him in his room. He and his comrade, a general in the Red army, and two other families each had a room in a flat off the Petrovka. Vera Pavlovna began to scold as soon as we came in from skating. She had devised a rule whereby, since there was no servant, each co-lodger should take his turn guarding the flat, and Sergey had been to play with me instead of taking his turn. "Why should I guard?" he said. "I am careful to have no goods, no property. Why should I sit at home guarding things, for myself or for another?" An old woman was busy in his room frying navaga, a sweet fish like perch, in a pan in the stove. Annushka came three times a week to clean for the boy and cook him food. She was very cheerful. Besides having his job, Sergey was a student in the academy of Oriental languages and for that he got an extra payok of bread, and the bread he gave to Annushka. Why he was studying Japanese, he did not know, but though he was twenty-four only, he took up studies as old men take up golf, "to keep him in condition." He took lessons in piano, too, and he had cut wood for a friend who taught him the tango. Nights he worked for Chicherin. Days he busied himself reading Latin and English, and now and then he read *Pravda*, though he, too, made the stale Moscow joke that there was not much *Pravda* in *Izvestia* and not much *Izvestia* in *Pravda*—not much Truth in News, nor News in Truth.

When the communist party cleansings were on, I asked him whether he would mind it if he were cleaned out. He seemed to expect no such event. He replied, "I don't know if I should mind. It would leave me with no political home." Afterwards when he and Gai, Litvinov's aid, and a dozen more prosperous looking young men in the Narkomindel were cleaned out and their party tickets taken away, I asked him how he felt. He replied that now he felt he belonged to himself. He would have leisure. There would be no regular meetings of his nucleus to attend, nor would he feel always at the beck and call of the party. As he explained, I could not say whether he were either morose or sad. It was after the cleansing that he began to take up the tango, and came often to see me, sometimes to talk, and sometimes because Bessie Beatty had left me an illegal electric stove, and it was warm to sit on my floor, to paint his Japanese ideographs.

"What reason did they give for cleaning you out," I asked him. "They said 'What is the use of