

Norris, the Discouraged

THE saddest, heaviest-hearted man in the Senate, in the whole of Congress for that matter, is George W. Norris, of Nebraska. Yet he has been, and he probably is today, the least laden of all members with that supreme travail—how to get back and how to stay on, and on, and on. To stay in Congress, particularly in the Senate, for ambition's sake, for pride's sake, for pleasure's sake, and, in some woeful instances, for bread-and-butter's sake, that is what darkens the days and makes fearful the nights of the run of Congress, who reached there by ruthless adherence to rule of devil take the hindmost, and are subject to constant attack under the same merciless order.

But Norris's vitals never are torn by that. He behaves in a way that not even La Follette or Borah on the progressive end, or Brandegee on the conservative end, or Robinson on the Democratic end, would dare. Any time at all he tells the sovereign voters of Nebraska that he cares not three whoops in a gale of wind whether they send him back or not; rather hopes they will not; will not play ball with his own party at home, and it can go to the devil if it does not like his manners; and is perfectly willing to apply the recall to the nomination, election or anything else given him by the public.

What, then, causes his strange sadness? The same fact that, mainly, gives him the strange independence which would equal all human joy for ninety-nine in each hundred of the other members of Congress. His real interest, his profound concern, is to do big and fine things for the common man; and he knows he will not, cannot, realize one percent of his purpose.

These big and fine things do not constitute some elaborate and clearly formulated program for political, or social, or economic reconstruction. His purpose is to use government, so far as may be, to make daily life comfortable for the plain people, particularly the farmers of the Middle West whom he knows and loves; to make the agencies of government decent and helpful. In the pursuit of that purpose, his instruments and immediate objectives vary from year to year, from condition to condition. Even so, he is as downhearted as though he had followed some brilliant, dazzling dream. After more than a score of years' unbroken service in Congress, he may be heard to say, time and again, when a test of strength is coming: "Oh, they (the old line politicians of both parties) will be together to beat this idea."

Coming from an unsophisticated people, his urge to bring blessings upon mankind was not disciplined by reckoning the slow, almost infinitesimal steps by which progress is realized, and thus he has hurled himself unguardedly, times without number, against

the enemy. Now, conscious that he is bruised and battered, he has the most realistic sense of the odds to be encountered. He goes on, it is true; he bares his breast and charges as bravely as in any earlier day. But the light of victory is not in his eye, and he will not repine when the order of honorable discharge is given him. He goes on, but it is because Nature gave him a heart that knows no other manœuvre.

Senator Norris's disappointments and defeats in legislation which he has sought for the common weal have been the more emphatic and the more saddening, I believe, because of the quality of his mind, the way it operates. He thinks in terms of the particular, not of the general—which is perhaps natural in a man who came to maturity in the small world of the Nebraska of the 'eighties and 'nineties. When he sees something to be done, or to be undone, he sees that almost exclusively. Direct, regardless movement toward his objective inevitably has often involved possible and even patent dangers as grave or worse than those at which he aimed. Consequently, he has been made to endure opposition not only of old line politicians, but of men at one with him in general purpose, such men as Borah and William S. Kenyon.

But though so often thwarted in his specific undertakings, he remains one of the men in Congress who thrill you. That is because he has had part in daring and dramatic enterprises, such as that of the little group of Republican insurgents in the House fourteen and fifteen years ago who went up against intrenched and seemingly impregnable Cannonism, and won in no-quarter, hand-to-hand fighting. It is because of the ways in which he manifests the independence that has been mentioned: for example, his leadership of the Senate fight against Ford's offer for Muscle Shoals, when his own crowd, the Middle West farmers, were as hot as the Southern farmers for acceptance.

And, above all, it is because of the man himself. He has personality, individuality. Years ago, I read a vivid description of a peasant leader who arose in eastern Europe, a man who acquired education, position, power and contact with the great and famous, but remained rough-hewn, the possessor of homely virtues and the interpreter of the hopes of homely folk. There are no peasants in this country, city intellectuals to the contrary. Peasant stock is not bred from men touched with the argonaut spirit. But I never see Norris on the Senate floor—burly body; massive head and face; direct, candid, fearless speech—that I do not see that peasant of eastern Europe who lifted himself to mastery. Norris is the plain man in a fine and rare mold.

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

June 11, 1924



Wm. G. A.
March 24

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CONTEMPORARY PORTRAITS
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