



# Stuff and Nonsense

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*A Monthly Magazine of No Importance, Dealing Lightly  
with Matters Pertinent and Profound, and Weightily  
with Those of No Consequence Whatever*

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## BLADES OF GRASS

THE majority middle class of America is made up of approximately forty-three million men, women and children whose summer programme revolves around a lawn mower. On other matters they are variously disagreed, but the care of the lawn is the least common denominator of their national family likeness. The length and breadth of their grass plot is their pride and their affliction. All through the summer they are cutting the lawn, or contemplating cutting it, or wishing it were cut.

The philosophy of their devotion to a personal patch of green is not particularly lucid or intelligible. As a rule they have no definite need of a lawn sufficient to justify its enormous labors and responsibilities. They do not expect to roll on it or sleep on it or even eat it. They may play a little croquet on it, croquet being a murderous game invented by the devil, but croquet comes to a bad end when the man of the house first falls over a forgotten wicket.

Yet the lawn is an essential to the truly suburban scene. It is the green and grateful setting to the home, the velvety carpet edged and adorned by smiling flowers, the skin-deep beauty that glorifies the fruitful soil. Nothing looks so cool to summer-weary eyes as the verdant green of a well-tended lawn. Nothing is so cooling to the innocent bystander or the neighbor across the street as the spectacle of you cutting it.

THERE is a technique to this perennial process, which may be acquired by grim experience or through kindly advice. The latter is preferable, since self-restraint is better than repentance and a word of warning may induce you to be content with your neighbors' lawns and devote your own surplus acreage to cabbages or chickens. We are in an admirable position and condition to offer such advice. We have had a lawn and no longer have one. Nor shall we ever have one again, until kind Providence supplies us with a colored man to cut it.

In order to cultivate a lawn you will need a lawnmower. A lawnmower is an undersized and domesticated harvesting machine with an unfortunate habit of staying out in wet weather. If you fail to leave it out in the rain, your neighbor will borrow it and do so for you, so that after a single season every self-respecting lawnmower is good for nothing. It has coagulated, congealed and ossified; its joints are stiff with rheumatism, its transmission is jammed, its bolts are shot, its back teeth are all gone. It can not be rejuvenated, though you bathe it in oil and swear at it. It can not be repaired, for by the cunning contrivance of American industry there are no spare parts to lawnmowers and the twin to your own machine was never made or is vanished beyond discovery. So every season you will buy a new one, and give the old one to the Salvation Army or the American Red Cross.

**B**EFORE cutting the lawn, you should borrow your neighbor's rake or a fine-toothed curry comb, and remove all foreign matter from the grass. Foreign matter, of course, is everything but the grass, and the average suburban lawn will yield a ton of it per season. Even though you live in a select and restricted neighborhood, sticks and stones and bricks and bones will sprout like mushrooms on your lawn throughout the summer. Cinders and fragments of broken bottles will crawl for miles to hide in your grass and die at last between the jaws of your lawnmower. And if you miss but one, the lawnmower will go looking for it and find it just as you reach top speed across the grass. And the mower will clamp its iron jaws upon it and the wheels will stop and the handle will go on, and you will be hurled like a comet through the air into a rosebush. And the lawnmower, having accomplished its worst ambitions, will break all its blades and die happy.

But patient preliminary labor will

postpone this calamity until the end of the summer, when you will no longer particularly care. In the meantime, the lawn must be cut. The wife says so, the neighbors say so, each waving blade of grass seems to say so. So grit your teeth, spit on your hands, arch your back like a small-scale dinosaur, and charge down the lawn. The lawnmower will rattle, the grass will fly behind you, the grasshoppers will get out of the way and the children get into it. It will be great fun for as much as five minutes, after which the charm of it will diminish geometrically as the square of the distance until your enthusiasm is fifteen degrees below absolute zero. It becomes at last a question which will hold out the longer — your personal vertebræ or the lawn.

**W**HEN you are done, you may stop to gaze with pride, and will find that your lawn is studded all over with the decapitated stems of weeds which have been hiding in the grass and are now mocking you. It is better not to pursue them any further with the lawnmower. Get down on your hands and knees and stalk them with a pair of nail scissors or a razor.

This programme is to be repeated once a week throughout the summer and twice in rainy weather. Drought brings another problem. Somewhere in every summer comes an arid spell, when the lawn goes suddenly bald and brown. So let us get out the hose and water it.

A garden hose is by no means as simple as it looks. It comes fresh and fair from the department store, but it immediately begins to cause trouble. Its initial offense is that like a snake it sheds its first coat, whether of red rubber or black, all over your hands and white flannel pants and Christian disposition. Then it gets itself dirty. Next it gets lost, crawling away into the long grass and lying quiet while you call it pet names and accuse the children of mislaying it. Then your neighbor borrows it,

casually and without troubling to tell you about it, and loans it in turn to another neighbor across the fence, who passes it on to his brother-in-law at the other end of town. By the time you catch up to it, it doesn't look like a member of your family at all, and you are practically charged with petty larceny of your own hose. But perhaps you establish your right to it and start to take it home.

TO GATHER up fifty feet of hose into a manageable bundle calls for the anatomy of an octopus and the agility of a slack-rope walker who is thinking of falling off. The same section of hose which will kink at a thought while you are watering the lawn with it, becomes totally unbendable when you try to carry it. Its head and tail come suddenly alive, and its coils wriggle madly in your arms. While you are getting a half-nelson hold on twenty feet of it, the other thirty are undulating like a sea serpent down the street or climbing up the leg of your trousers. In about ten minutes of trying to carry a fifty-foot hose, you have learned to sympathize profoundly with Laocoön and his relatives, and are partially strangled and entirely and profanely inarticulate.

But perhaps a kind bystander comes to your aid and drapes the hose around you in graceful folds, at which time you discover that there is still water in it and that by some gravitational miracle it is all running down the back of your neck. And so you stagger away with it, and it grows heavier and wetter and meaner every minute, and slips down around your ankles and tries to run away from you, and pulls your shirt off and gets into your hair. And at last you get it home and throw it on the lawn, looking around for a hatchet with which to break its back. By which time it is suddenly dead and quiet again and limp as last year's garter; and so are you.

So you hitch its tail to the water sup-

ply and straighten out its detours and right-angle turns, and then discover that the nozzle is gone. It is altogether gone. Every member of the family has seen the nozzle in as many places, but the nozzle is in none of them. So you resolve to obtain the scattering and sprinkling effect by plugging the hose with your thumb, which will be more fun anyway, and order the water turned on.

Nothing happens. There is a faint gurgling within the esophagus of the hose, but no water. You shout at your wife and children to turn the water on and they all shout back. So you investigate the source of supply and find that the so-called union or connection between hose and house is spouting like a Senator or a playful whale, and that water is pouring merrily through the cellar window and into the gas meter. You wrap the joint with tape and string and hospital bandages and try again.

BUT your difficulties are not over. If you squeeze the hose or foreclose it with your thumb to contrive the fine arching spray which your soul yearns after, a dozen leaks break forth at once throughout its length, and water is spread generously on the gravel path, on the bird bath and the wash on the line, and none at all on the lawn. But if you remove your thumb the stream simply pours into your shoes and practically drowns you in your tracks. Moreover the children all come around and all the neighbors' children come around, and three dogs turn up from nowhere and get wet and shake themselves, and your wife's mother drops in to call and is only saved by artificial respiration. And at last the lawn is thoroughly drowned out, together with most of the adjacent scenery, and you wade wearily in to supper. And within half an hour a thunderstorm comes up, with torrential rains and cloudbursts, and your wife says, "I told you so."

## BEGGING THE ISSUE

SINCE the world first began to call itself civilized it has been in a mess. The pride of progress and achievement has hardly ever been for final victory over disorder and distress but for the hope of it, which has very often seemed justified. Again and again men and nations have nearly solved the riddle of peace and happiness, and as often the answer has been postponed. The world is always in a mess and always hopeful of getting out of it. That mood is civilization, and without it the world would die laughing or weeping at its own blunders.

So it is with politics, which are nothing but the ferment of new remedies for old diseases, which will not stay long enough in one place to be cured out of existence. Politics are always a mess. If order were established and peace and prosperity assured there would be no space or function in the world for politics. But so long as one generation of politicians has made a mess of things, another will be ready and willing to make a new mess out of the leavings.

But sometimes it seems to the innocent bystander that the present mess in American politics is a superlative mess, a monumental mess, a mess so comprehensive and complete that it defies the parallels of the past and the competition of the future. The political arena of today is become like the parade ground of a lunatic asylum. The political discussions of today are like the jabberings of intoxicated jackdaws. The political strategy of today is like the scrambling of small boys for peanuts. There must be particular cause for a condition without apparent precedent in American political history. There has always been stupidity in politics, there have always been corruption and self-interest and trading and treachery. There have always been little men in big hats and wolves in cutaway coats and striped trousers. There have always been public indifference and

political astuteness to take advantage of it.

But there has not always been Prohibition. And whether Prohibition be real and earnest or ridiculous and outrageous, it must be held responsible for much of what has happened to American political life during the past decade. The eighteenth afterthought to the Constitution was intended to provide us with a prisonless peace, with moral order and social sanity. It may do so yet and it very likely may not, but in the meantime it has made a wagon-load of monkeys out of our public servants and political aspirants.

THAT is, unfortunately, only a part of the prodigious mess of the present, with whose full proportions posterity must reckon. It is possibly permissible to anticipate a little. Some day the school books in American history or the more serious records of what is done and can't be helped, must say something about these times. What will they dare to say? Will they tell the coming generation, which we hope will have more sense than this one, that in the Year of Grace 1930, the Supreme Court of the United States was called upon under the law and its own solemn authority to declare a cork a criminal and a can of malt extract a misdemeanor? Will it be believed that bottles were once banned and cracked ice officially condemned? Will the history books of the future show pictures of the public burning of corkscrews and the arrest by armed police of cases of ginger ale, under suspicion of criminal intent? Will our descendants credit the report that we padlocked hotels because soda water flowed too freely within them, and packed our jails so full with offenders against the liquor laws that they each had waiting lists like the Union League or a high-hat private school?

One generation will believe almost anything of another, if only to make itself as complacently comfortable as

possible in its own indiscretions. But the politicians of today will be hard to explain away, supposing that anyone thinks it worth while to do so when their day is done. For they are caught today between the devil and the deep sea, which is the last place a politician chooses for a parking place. Damnation waits for them on both sides, whether it be from the embattled Drys or the embittered Wets. They are used to walking warily, but not to walking on a tightrope above a free-for-all fight.

WHEN there was but one militant minority to be reckoned with, a politician could get along. But now there are two of them. For every rousing Dry there is a wringing Wet, while between the two ebbs and flows the opinion of the muddled majority. If Wets and Drys would have it out with each other like the Kilkenny cats, the politicians would be able to stand aside and saw wood, ready with suitable applause and fair promises for the winner. But in the incredible circus of American politics today the opposing cohorts are intent not on each other but on the political gentry, large and small, who are consequently quite uncomfortable.

Therefore we have all over this nation the spectacle of public aspirants attempting to carry water on one shoulder and whiskey on the other, and running their political races with one foot in the water bucket and the other on a brass rail. Never were politicians so anxious to please, or so uncertain who should properly be pleased. Never was so much dodging in and out of the wet, or such sudden panics of drought. Never were so many or such varied attempts to be all things to all men and a number of others to all women.

The cause of such confusion, at which Socrates would split his sides and Alexander reach for his sword again to cut the worst Gordian knot in history, is the sudden intrusion of a real issue into a

political system which had nearly triumphed over issues. An issue is something which concerns the citizen, and there are very few of them. The tariff, for example, is no longer an issue, for nobody can understand it and nobody cares about it in good times or can do anything about it in bad. Prosperity is only an issue when we haven't got it, and public ownership is a dead horse which can hardly be whipped back to life.

FREE silver, Wall Street, the full dinner pail, preparedness, disarmament and a dozen other matters which could once start a fight are skeletons in the American political closet or have been made too complex or too respectable for politics. But Prohibition is an issue. Whatever else it may be — and a number of suggestions have been made — it is an issue. The public is awake to it, and wants it settled, even though it was supposed to have been settled before. By all the signs, unless we quit dodging the issue soon we shall be nationally and individually crazy.

### *Wanderlust*

It's daffodil time in New Zealand,  
It's artichoke season in Gaul;  
The wandering breezes  
Bring vagabond sneezes,  
While visions and vapors enthrall  
Withal,  
Which isn't important at all.

My heart's in the highlands, or somewhere;  
My arteries yearn for the sea;  
My soul has its eyes on  
A purple horizon,  
Where romance is waiting for me,  
To free  
My spirit from gloom and ennui.

The zephyrs sing soft in my whiskers  
From off of a piebald plateau,  
The wanderlust itches,  
Let's hitch up our breeches,  
And buy us some tickets and go,  
What ho!  
To the land where the daffodils grow.



## THE INLAYING OF THE LINOLEUM

My wife has purchased some new linoleum.

Linoleum, it may be explained for the benefit of those who were born to the purple and the Persian rug, is a product of cork, burlap, linseed oil, and applied geometry, and is intended to be spread on the floor and mopped continuously. If you can believe the advertisements, linoleum also supplies the final touch of distinction to the halls and rooms of the stately residence, which is probably why you never see it there.

WE MAKE no secret of the fact that we use linoleum, even though we know that there are women who would cry for a week if they could not spread a conglomeration of poisonously colored rugs all over their house. We use it, for instance, in the dining room, because the baby or one of his next-of-kin upsets his refreshments on the floor not less than once a day. We use it in the kitchen, in the bathroom, and for patching our oldest son's pants. We are, in fact, one of the largest investors in linoleum acreage that the world has known.

There is no recriminatory bitterness in this narrative. It is simply an exposition of one way to buy linoleum, and the wrong way at that. There is nothing personal in the fact that the incident is ascribed to my wife; it might as well have happened to hundreds of other women, and probably has. One has only to say "linoleum remnant" in the average home to arouse the conscious blush and perhaps precipitate a family fracas.

There stops a truck at the gate. From it emerges a squat and swarthy gentleman, faintly reminiscent of Jerusalem, Dublin, Rome and garlic. Over his shoulder is a roll of linoleum. The door is opened to his confident knock, and the roll which is thrown skilfully across the threshold makes it impossible to shut the door. A torrent of words breaks

enthusiastically from his lips, on the crest of which he rides irresistibly into the house. His remarks are in part as follows:

"Lady, you want see this here wonderful piece of genuine inlaid linoleum what will cover two floors, never wear out, last you a lifetime, beautify your happy home, and us practically giving it away less than it costs us just to advertise, and that's a fact what I'll swear to. We just done finishing the floors of Mr. Wanamaker's house — conservatory and music rooms both — with this same wonderful made-to-order pattern, and if Mr. Wanamaker wouldn't want the best linoleum in his house, why, who would, and that's what I want to know. This here is a remnant of that same linoleum. Lady, if Mr. Wanamaker saw me selling his own exclusive pattern of genuine inlaid linoleum, and two yards wide, mind you, to anybody in his own neighborhood, he wouldn't never forgive me, and that's why I'm here with it out in the country as you might say. Mind you, I ain't offering this here pattern to everybody; no sir — I mean, no ma'am — but I says to myself — there's a home what will appreciate our linoleum; there's a home what deserves a nice snappy remnant, two yards wide and big enough for two rooms, and which will last you a lifetime and me just giving it away.

"LADY, if you live to be a hundred you ain't never going to have an opportunity like this, and I can't hardly bring myself to tell you the price I'm going to offer you on this wonderful piece of floor covering for fear you'll think I'm joking like, but with an intelligent lady like you I'm just going to make a rock bottom price which you can't turn down if you're going to treat yourself right. I'm just about going to give you this here piece of linoleum because I can see that you've got the artistic nature which can appreciate it and I'd sooner give it to you than take a hundred dollars from somebody

what would think it's only a bit of floor covering and not something what will beautify your home. Look at it, ma'am — there's the makings of two big rugs, and all I'm asking is twenty dollars.

"Well, ma'am, if you ain't got twenty dollars, for the sake of these here beautiful children of yours I'm going to make the price eighteen dollars, and that's less than it cost me, and would make John Wanamaker cry, it would. Look, lady, I'll scrape it for you; see the quality of this linoleum goes right through to the back; stuff like this don't know how to wear out. You surely ain't going to let this opportunity go, and as a gift to the children I'll give it to you for fifteen dollars.

"Madam, I ain't going to let you live to repent for letting this chance get away from you. I've set my heart on your having this piece, and the price is twelve dollars, and that's what two yards of it would cost you down town. Think of it, ma'am; enough for both these here rooms, and for twelve dollars — for ten dollars.

"Ma'am, it ain't right; it ain't right to me, and it ain't right to you; it ain't right to the children. If it wasn't that I see how much you need this linoleum, and what a wonderful beautiful thing it's going to be for your home, I wouldn't spend my time talking about it to you. Smell it, ma'am; look at it; scrape it; give me eight dollars for it. All right ma'am. I'll take seven fifty."

WE HAVE laid the linoleum. We approached the job with misgivings, contemplating the problem of fitting it to corners and around doorways. We need not have worried. The piece sits disconsolately in the middle of the room, surrounded by wide strips of bare floor. It must have shrunk since it was last measured. We have had it three weeks and it has gone bald in spots; the pattern comes out in the wash, and we are now wondering what its end will be.

## SILENCE IS REQUESTED

The man who sits silent at a noisy meeting will eventually be suspected of wisdom above the ordinary. Distinction will gather imperceptibly about him, and when all foolish things have been said it will appear that the most cogent comment of all must be hidden in him who has said nothing. If he speaks at last he may wreck this illusion, but at least he will be listened to.

SO THE silence of Charlie Chaplin amid the mad racket of the speaking films has been something portentous in its considered calm. He has said nothing while all his companions and competitors in celluloid have been saying everything. And though the greatest of all talking and singing films has been forty-seven times announced within the past six months, the name of the screen's greatest comedian and pantomimist has been attached to none of them.

But now the Sphinx has spoken. While he was about it, he has said something. Item, he has said that he will never participate in a talking picture. Item, he has said that his forthcoming film is silent as a sunset. Item, he has announced that he will incorporate, finance and forthwith equip himself to produce the biggest and best pictures of his career, and they will all be speechless. Doubtless he has heard somewhere that silence is golden, and proposes to prove it.

This is news, and very comforting to those who can not stomach the raucous barbarities lately practised in the name of drama. The silent screen story is not dead while one of its greatest interpreters will do it so much honor. It may yet fulfil its destiny, which was in danger of being talked to death. There will still be sanctuaries somewhere for the art of pantomime, a very ancient art which waited until the Twentieth Century for its ideal instrument.

This is Chaplin's message to his times, and it clarifies not a little the confusion created by all the mechanical devils of today in the temples of the muses. It is the message of an artist and a gentleman, whose æsthetic sensibilities are at least as keen as his box-office instincts. It may mean that some of us can determine now whether we like the talking pictures or not, and why. It may compel a shade more honesty among producers and a shade more discrimination in the audience, both of which are desirable commodities.

THE movies, we maintain, were made to order for the art of pantomime. They gave it greater scope than it had ever known, they adorned it with settings of magnificence and significance, they freed it from every limitation of space and time. But they did not change its character nor much threaten its artistic integrity. The thing that mattered was the actor and his action, from the least lift of an eyebrow to the behavior of a crowd of ten thousand. There were subtitles, of course, as a somewhat noisome necessity, but the better the film the briefer were the captions. And at their best, the silent films demanded pure acting, or something approaching it.

Charles Chaplin did much in this direction with his genius, his medium, and its amazing opportunities. So did many others. The films were getting along very nicely when they were so suddenly interrupted by their own noisy voices. And since then, nobody has known what would come of them, except that their growing pains were terrible, and their artistic manners worse. Undoubtedly they will eventually achieve something so fine, so true and so artistically honest that our mechanical wisdom will be justi-

fied even of its noisiest offspring. But these bastard products of mismated arts, these incredible alloys of golden beauty and sordid themes, these emasculated dramas and overdressed vaudeville acts are far removed from so desirable an achievement.

THEY have tried everything, because the folk who fashion them know nothing about them except that the public is easily pleased. They have reduced Shakespeare to two dimensions and glorified the American girl in full colors. They have given melodrama a new absurdity and made passion ridiculous. They have revived every threadbare gag and every vulgar wisecrack, offering them as new goods to a public which has had too little theatrical experience to hold them accountable. They have imitated everything worthy of it and a great deal that isn't. They have borrowed or stolen every plot within reach. They have got away with it all because the mechanical marvel of the achievement is still great enough to prevent calm consideration of what it is worth. They have made the screen talk, and while this miracle is fresh nobody complains that it has so little to say.

There are many things correspondingly to the credit of the talkies, including the fact that their best seats cost something less than a full week's wages. They tell some excellent stories, even though we may have heard them before. They have broken the theatrical drought in the great American desert of the hinterlands, and absorbed a large share of the leisure which is a problem of this second industrial revolution of modern times. But they still don't know where they are going, and not even their best friends can tell them.