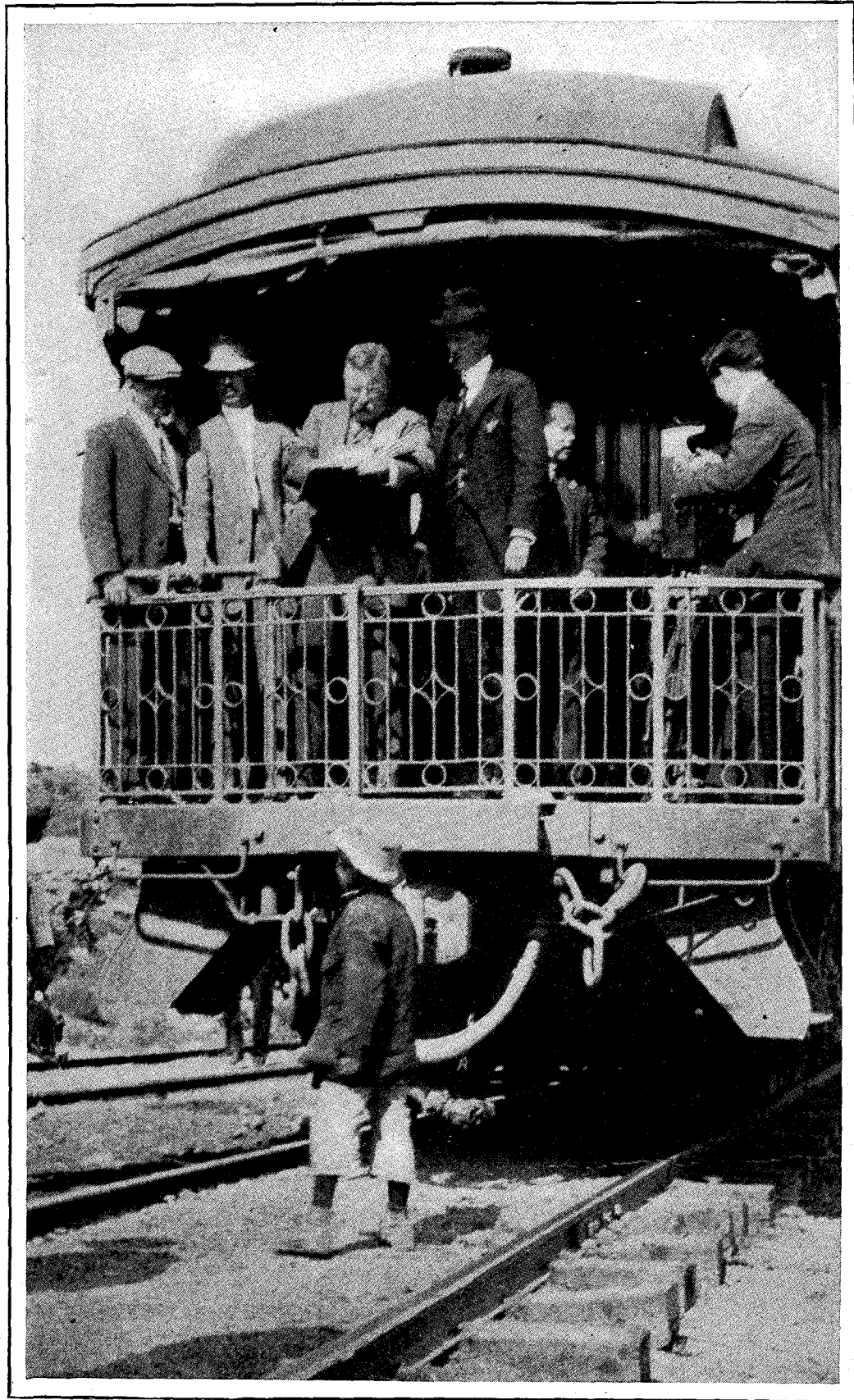


NEVER TOO BUSY FOR A FRIENDLY ACT

PICTURE FROM AN OUTLOOK READER



From E. A. Frey, Exeter, California

THEODORE ROOSEVELT ON A SPEAKING TOUR IN ARIZONA AUTOGRAPHING
A BOOK FOR ONE OF HIS LEGION OF ADMIRERS

THE BOOK TABLE

A COLYUMIST HISTORIAN

BY WILLIS FLETCHER JOHNSON

A CYNIC, regarding the recent agitation for more accurate writing of American history, and remembering the futility of similar movements for other ends, might well have applied to it the Horatian epigram, "*Parturient montes; nascetur ridiculus mus.*" But not even the most pessimistic of cynics would have been likely to anticipate the birth of a mouse quite so ridiculous, and withal so pernicious, as that which has actually appeared. It would, for very shame, be more agreeable to pass by in silence so gross a reproach upon American scholarship and letters were it not that fatuous friends have insisted upon touting into conspicuousness a work concerning which its author should have no desire save that for charitable oblivion, and that men of supposed discretion and authority have placed upon it the cachet of their high approval and have commended it to public confidence. The widely blazoned declaration of the publisher that it is "the one indispensable work" and "the most remarkable book of the century" may be passed by as a characteristic "blurb." But when the Children's Librarians Section of the American Library Association awards its first medal of honor to Dr. Hendrik Willem Van Loon for his "Story of Mankind" as "the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children" written during the year, more serious attention is prescribed.

WITH the actual work named I shall not here concern myself at length, because it purports to be a universal history, and my present theme is the history of the United States. "The Story of Mankind" has indeed been adequately disposed of by the discriminating editor of the New York "World" in reprinting it as a serial in connection with the comic supplement of his paper. It will serve the present purpose for me to cite two sample passages from that limited portion of it which relates to American history. One is his reference to the Pilgrims of Plymouth as "a sect of Puritans who were very intolerant." The other is his criticism of Emerson's "exaggeration" in writing of the first shot at Lexington as the "shot heard around the world," because "the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Russians, not to speak of the Australians and Hawaiians, never heard of it at all." In this amazing utterance he displays the lack of imagination and of humor which seems to be one of his salient characteristics. We may almost wonder that he did not say that it would have been impossible for them to hear it, because the wireless transmission of sounds, which has since reached from America to Hawaii, had

not then been invented. His lack of accuracy is shown in his verbal misquoting of Emerson's famous line, and in his attributing to Lexington the poem written specifically for Concord. He also in the same place refers to the Australians and Hawaiians as having "just been rediscovered by Captain Cook, whom they killed for his trouble." Cook did not discover Hawaii until 1778, three years after Lexington and Concord, and was not killed until 1779.

MORE pertinent for consideration in connection with the demand for revision of American history is the later work which Dr. Van Loon has brought out upon the strength of his medal-adorned "Story of Mankind," and which has been widely disseminated by a newspaper syndicate as a daily serial. This is entitled "America for Little Historians;" it purports to be a children's history of the United States, and there is much talk of securing its adoption as a reading text-book in schools in place of the American histories now in use.

It will, I assume, be generally agreed, as a basis of critical consideration, that a work of history should be accurate in statements of fact, just in its judgments, and serious—not solemn—in spirit. It need not be overlaid with dates and names of places, the bane of many histories; but those which it gives should be given correctly. It need not be a critical commentary upon all the incidents and processes which it records; indeed, there are those who advisedly hold that a history should be a statement of facts alone, and not of opinions; but certainly so far as it does express opinions these should at least be rational, judicious, and honest. It need not be dry and dull; indeed, it should, if possible, be vivacious, entertaining, and even touched with humor; but it should have a spirit so serious, or perhaps I should say so earnest, as to cause the reader to regard it as a veracious narrative and not as a burlesque composition. Moreover, there is the greatest need of these three qualities in a history designed for children, because they have not the knowledge and discretion necessary to protect themselves against errors which their elders would promptly detect and reject.

Now it must be said that in every one of these three essential qualities "America for Little Historians" is greatly lacking. It is replete with glaring errors as to concrete facts of record; it is profusely marked with implications and judgments which are perniciously misleading; and it frequently manifests a flippancy calculated to inspire contempt rather than respect for the history of the country, and better suited to a news-

paper "colyum" or comic supplement than to an informative book of reading, reference, and study.

THE inaccuracies of statement—to describe them with courteous euphemism—are of two major kinds. There are those which are misstatements in themselves and nothing more, their errors not affecting the general purport and teaching of the narrative, and which are presumably due to mere ignorance or carelessness; and there are those which, whatever their source or cause, almost inevitably lead to a misunderstanding or misconstruction of historical forces or tendencies far beyond their own literal limits. To cite a few samples of the former class:

"The West Indian Company . . . bought the island of Manhattan from the Indian tribe . . . and built a fortress called Fort Orange. This was in the year 1621. . . . It made New Amsterdam (the town which had grown up around Fort Orange) a hustling little city." Here are three glaring errors. Fort Orange was not built on Manhattan Island, but at what is now the city of Albany, a hundred and fifty miles away; and it was built, not in 1621, but in 1623 and 1624; and Manhattan Island was purchased and New Amsterdam was founded, not in 1621, but in 1626.

After an account of Howe's capture of Fort Washington and his advance upon Fort Lee, we are told:

"When he arrived, Washington and his men had vanished. . . . Washington had gone to Hackensack. . . . Washington sent an urgent message to Gen. Lee to join him with the 7,000 men whom he had at Northcastle. . . . At last, on the 3rd of December, sixteen days after he had been ordered to start, Lee set off with his army for Morristown, a short distance west of Hackensack. But he had hardly arrived there when a party of British dragoons captured him. . . . New York and the surrounding districts were now all in the hands of the British, and Washington began his famous retreat through New Jersey."

Here are four gross errors. Washington had not gone to Hackensack, but to West Point; Morristown was not "a short distance" west of Hackensack, but more than twenty-five miles, a long distance for those days of primitive roads and transportation facilities; Lee was not captured at Morristown, but at Baskenridge (now Basking Ridge), some miles distant; and Washington did not wait to begin his retreat until after the capture of Lee, but began it long before, having got as far as Princeton before Lee started from Northcastle, and being in Pennsylvania before Lee was captured.

"A representative from Pennsylvania, David Wilmot, had asked for an amendment to the Constitution prohibiting slavery in the lands acquired from Mexico," is the account given of the

¹ The Story of Mankind. By H. W. Van Loon. Boni & Liveright, New York. \$5.