

Two; on the Aisle

By LOUIS STARK

A GOOD many years ago a department store owner named John Wanamaker disagreed violently with his fellow merchants and announced an extremely radical policy. After a certain date, he said, the price of articles would be marked plainly and the public would know that goods were sold at but one price.

The innovation of Mr. Wanamaker's day is the commonplace of today. Haggling has been relegated to the purlieus of the lower East Side in New York City, and even in that teeming section the trend has been to the one price system.

Since Mr. Wanamaker's day business has developed along many progressive lines. A policy of pleasing the public and making it easier to buy has replaced the old hit-and-miss method of the days when "the public be damned" was an eminently proper slogan for the "big interests."

With these preliminaries permit me to inquire whether you know of any great industry which still maintains, not one price for its wares but four or five; which makes it as difficult as possible for the public to get its wares, and which, with rare exceptions, has no more use for a modern accounting system than an African savage has for the Einstein theory. I will not keep you in suspense. The example of modern backward industry which I cite is the theatre.

EVER since I can remember the theatres have been urging me to get my tickets at the box office. Let us assume I follow the suggestion. My tickets are marked at \$3 each. Next to me sit a couple who bought their tickets from a sidewalk speculator. They paid anywhere from \$2 to \$4 for each, depending upon the play's drawing power, the weather and the number of minutes before or after curtain time that they made their purchase. On the other side sit a couple who bought their seats at a ticket broker's at an advance of seventy-five cents a ticket. Down the line is another couple who dropped in at a "cut rate" agency where seats are half price or a little over. And next to them sit a couple who belong to a "two-for-one" organization and buy their entertainment at half price.

What do you think of a business that turns its choicest products (its best seats) over to a middleman called a

ticket broker and allows him to charge all the traffic will bear? I know of a novelist, somewhat deaf, who must have front seats, and who has been unable to obtain seats down front this past season until he paid the ticket broker \$30 for a pair. The box office price of the tickets was \$3.50 to \$6.60. Under the law half of the excess, above the seventy-five-cent broker's premium, goes to the government. That means that Uncle Sam and the ticket broker, neither of whom had any hand in producing the play, get more out of it than the producer who made the capital investment and the playwright who wrote it.

Suppose I want a couple of seats to one of the hits. The box office man tells me that the choice locations are sold out a month in advance. I go next door to one of the "gyps" and there I am offered a ticket at anywhere from \$2 to \$10 above the box office price. If the performance is a week off the "gyp" will ask me to come in on the day of the show because "the tickets may be hard to get." I come in a week later and he pulls out the tickets which have been reposing snugly in his drawer. But now I must pay the price. I have made the engagement and therefore I pay. A week ago the tickets were worth less to me, but I could not get them.

If I belong to a well known club I have the same experience—the price is out of sight by the time I get the tickets. I have heard of a club ticket agent who ordered the ticket broker to add \$2 to the price of each ticket because the higher the price by the broker the more the club agent could exact. This practice is frowned on by the governors of the clubs but they have been unable to do anything to counteract it.

Difficult as it is for the New Yorker to obtain seats without paying tribute, the out of town visitor is lost from the start. In the first place, he leans heavily on the ticket agent in the hotel or club for an opinion as to the best play to see. The play recommended may or may not be an outstanding hit. If it is not, there are plenty of seats at the box office. If it is, the price is apt to be \$4 or more above the box office price "because they are so hard to get."

Should the visitor demand seats for a specific play, the agency, with tickets

on the shelf, pleads for "a little time because they are scarce." Half an hour later a breathless attendant explains that after great effort he was just able to get two tickets, "scarce as hen's teeth." If the price seems too high the visitor is assured that the agent had to pay \$2 premium above the box office price and stood to make but a measly dollar on the entire transaction.

Frequently the visitor, timid soul that he is, pays the exorbitant price and says nothing. If he is attending a convention and "out for a good time" he is apt to pay the price cheerfully and then add a cubit to his social prestige "back home" by boasting that the "highway robbers set me back fifteen smackers for a tenth row seat at the Follies."

A plan is now being worked whereby the out of town patron may be able to buy seats by telegraph, ordering them through an accredited agent in his home town before leaving for the metropolis. After that he will have no further trouble, merely picking up the seats at the box office on the night he attends the play.

IS THE theatre a racket? Figure it out for yourself. Take the poorly paid clerk in the box office; treasurer, they call him. He handles thousands of dollars worth of merchandise and gets about \$75 a week. His assistant receives about \$45 a week. Give the treasurer one hit and he is in clover. How? He has friends among the ticket brokers. They will gladly pay him from twenty-five cents to a dollar for every choice seat he slips them "on the q.t." That explains why some treasurers have country homes, automobiles, butlers and real estate.

The treasurer does other favors for his friends. Bad nights hit the best of shows. On a rainy night the ticket speculator has to "eat" (theatrical parlance for take a loss) many tickets. If the treasurer is his friend he takes back some seats and tries to sell them at the box office. For every one he sells the ticket speculator is out that much less. And the treasurer gets additional commission, collecting both ways, you observe.

There are several producers reputed to take a dollar premium over the box office price from the sale of choice seats to friends among the ticket agent gentry. One of these astute managers keeps a

batch of premium seats in his pockets for sale to ticket brokers. There is, of course, no record of the transaction and Uncle Sam is minus his share of the profit. A few of the wisecracks among the Broadway folk know how much this manager has had to pay the government since he was caught withholding the government's due. The picture would not be complete if I failed to mention that this manager's solicitude for the public is so great that he disports himself in his own box office for a short time every day. Lately he has obtained much publicity for his prescription of what should be done to help the theatre. His panacea for all the ills of the theatre is—sell the tickets at the box office.

In the matter of "gypping," the broker is not entirely to blame. If he can, the manager compels the broker to make a "buy," that is, to purchase blocks of seats for every performance months ahead. Some producers finance their lavish shows from the proceeds of such "buys." If the show is a flop, the broker has the tickets on his hands and he "eats" many of them nightly. If the theatre were run along business-like lines, the failure would be taken off to make room for another show, but that is not done. For several months the ticket broker, under his agreement, buys tickets to every performance. He sells a few, dumps some into the "cut rates," and sells some at the door of the theatre in competition

with the box office. I have been offered tickets in the fifth row of a musical show produced by a well known manager at prices lower than box office rates, three hours before the show. At the box office the best I could get was the fifteenth row. And that was on a Saturday night!

Now what happens when the ticket agent "eats" blocks of seats to poor shows which he has been compelled to buy under threat that he would not get tickets to the hits produced by the manager? The answer is simple. He boosts the price of tickets to the hits.

How high? As much as the traffic will bear. The ticket brokers who would like to restrict the premiums to seventy-five cents are placed in a difficult position by the system of "buys." The brokers were hard hit during the past season. But the way to a more legitimate plane of business may be open to them through the plan of the New York Theatre League, of which Arthur Hopkins is president. The plan of Hopkins and his associates,

by licensed brokers; brokers caught "gypping" will be deprived of tickets by managers who are members of the League.

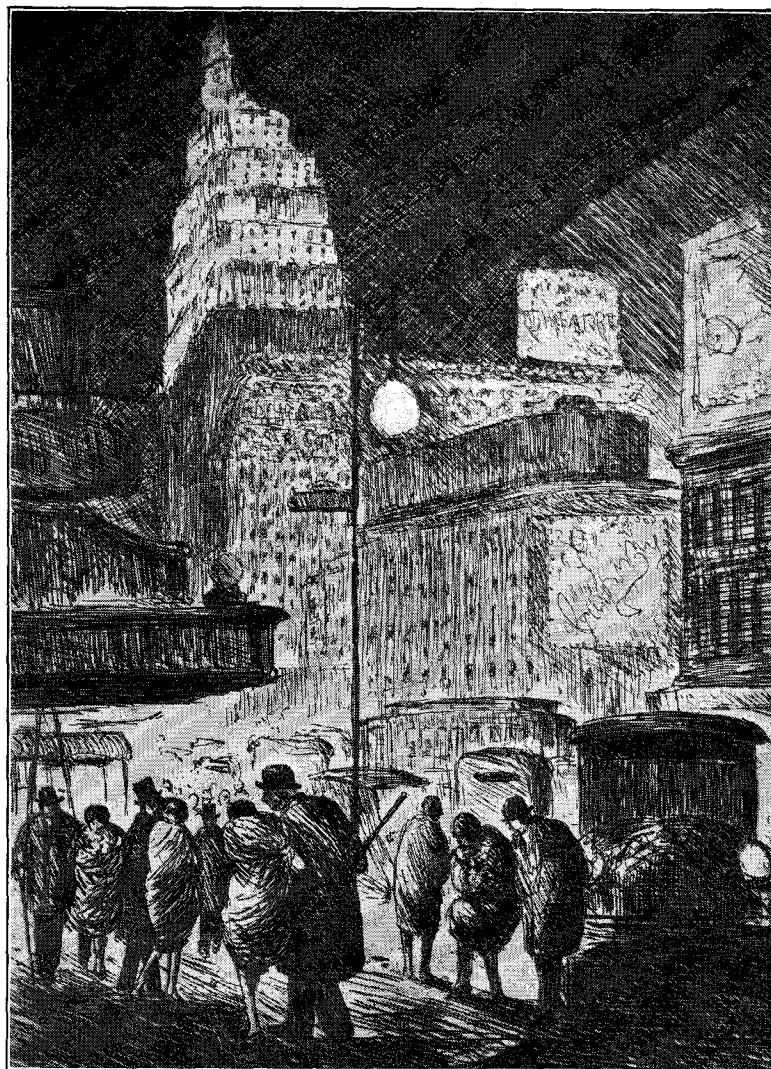
As an earnest of their sincerity in framing the plan for the League, the managers and those associated with them placed Alfred E. Smith, former Governor of New York, on the board of governors of the League to represent the public which has seen so many experiments for ticket reform come and go.

Does the theatre make it easy for the man who wants to sustain it, the ultimate consumer? Let's see. My wife telephones downtown for some seats. She finds that the box office has just what she wants. But the theatre will not hold the tickets beyond 7.30. Dinner and a long ride prevent us from calling in person before eight. Perforce we spend the evening at the movies. Or suppose I buy the tickets at an agency and they are left at the box office. When I arrive at the theatre I wait on a line in a small, overcrowded lobby jostled by the audience which is passing into the house. The theatre makes no attempt to serve me quickly. How simple it would be to have a separate box office for tickets left for patrons. Or an attendant might be on hand to extract from the box office the agency seats.

Once inside the theatre, after evading the nightly traffic conspiracy to keep me from getting there, my

coat is snatched away and I am shown to a seat where only by the most painful effort do I keep my knees from digging into the back of the person in front of me. No atmosphere of glamour or illusion is created for me in the ten precious minutes that I spend in staring at the curtain. Music is absent except in a few theatres. After the last act I dash for my coat only to be held up an additional ten or fifteen minutes.

The theatre casts sheep's eyes at the talkies but fails to learn anything from the adroit showmanship of the movie



Courtesy Kennedy & Co.

BROADWAY AT NIGHT

Etching by Irving Wolfson

who include nearly all of the managers and other factors in the theatre, is not to sell tickets to the brokers but to consign tickets to them for sale at a premium of seventy-five cents. No manager is to force a "buy" and no broker is to exceed the service charge of seventy-five cents. A quota of the best tickets is to be sold at the box office to those who do not wish to patronize the agencies and pay the premium. Violation of the agreement will mean that the manager found guilty will be unable to have his tickets sold

managers. Contrast the cavalier treatment of its customers by the theatre with that offered its patrons by the movies. The seeker for entertainment, entering the Roxy or some other movie palace, is impressed by the politeness and deference (too much, sometimes) shown him by the attendants. He enters a spacious lobby and an usher, trained on the West Point model, shows him to an upholstered seat into which he sinks with comfort while his knees unfold before him with an ample spread between them and the seat ahead.

Suppose you were in a business that made a profit once in ten years. If you remained in that business more than ten years it would indeed be a triumph of hope over experience. But what would you say of theatrical producers who have but one hit in ten years? Obviously such fellows do not know their business. Yet the New York Rialto has many of the one-hit-in-a-decade type of showman. He blames everybody but himself for his failures. The lack of knowledge as to the possibilities of a play and as to what is good theatre among some veteran producers would astound those who regard these men as touched with the glamour of the stage and its traditions.

How terribly in love the public must be with the theatre if it supports such producers and keeps them going for years in the hope that some time they may bring forth a great production. The theatre is said to be a gamble. So it is in many respects. But surely the producer who knows so little about plays that he puts them on year after year and only rarely strikes the public fancy, must be lacking in discernment and intelligence.

What makes it possible for the incompetent and the shoe string producer to survive? He survives because the theatre in New York and elsewhere is largely a real estate venture. New York is overbuilt in theatres. Instead of seventy-five theatres, thirty-five would be sufficient to supply the needs of the

theatre-goers. First class playwrights are not turning out enough significant plays to fill all the houses. A dearth of good plays means many poor ones. The poor ones die, leaving the houses dark. Therefore the theatre owner—the Shuberts, Erlangers and others—must charge rents sufficient to cover the cost of the months of dark houses. A house may sometimes be dark twenty-five weeks. It is obvious that if the theatre were open forty or forty-five weeks the rent would not be as high each week.

And the producer of a hit can make pretty nearly any terms with the theatre owner.

In the middle of the past season there were fifty-three legitimate theatres housing plays of which thirty were doing no business to speak of. If these thirty houses had been closed, the other twenty-three would have been run at a profit. At the time of which I am speaking there were only three real hits: two musical comedies and one comedy. Of the others, eleven did a fair business and, with four or five exceptions, the others did virtually no business.

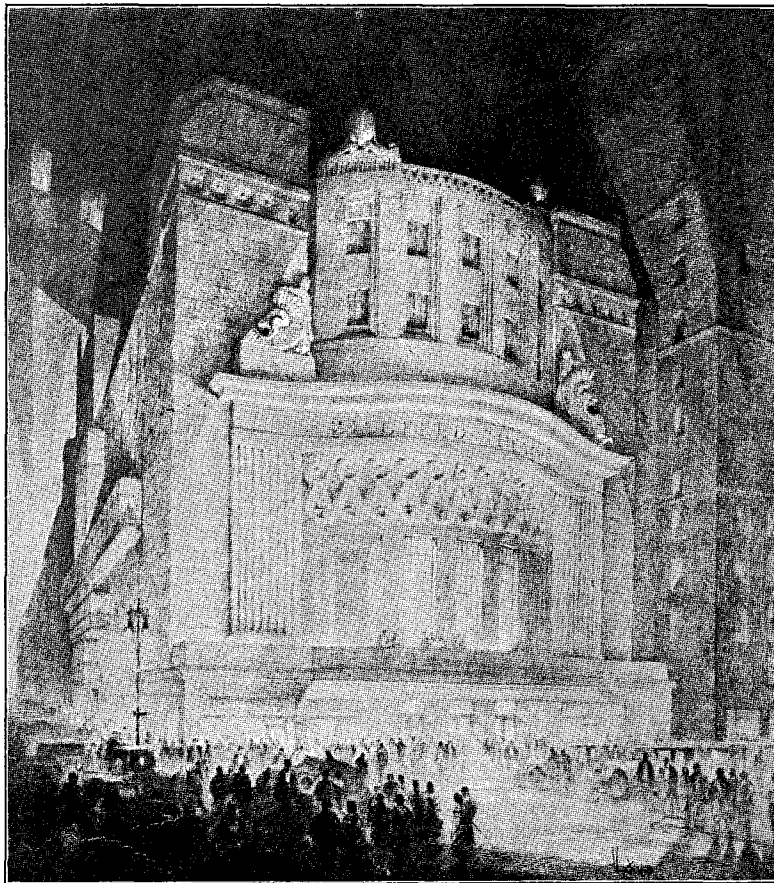
business and, with four or five exceptions, the others did virtually no business.

The surfeit of theatres has opened the way for people like Tony the Wop (that is not his correct name) and other bootleggers and gamblers to take fliers in "show business." Needless to say, Tony is not in business for his health. Tony looks over a manuscript or has some one who can read look it over, and if it has enough sex appeal he puts on the show. Tony is another incubus that the patient theatre-goer has to support.

An hour with any producer will yield a crop of stories that would make Job's plight sound like a fairy tale. The strange part of it is that most of the stories are likely to be true. The producer pictures himself (correctly) as the lone individual sniped at on all sides by

the organized forces within and without the theatre. He must meet competition from the talkies and other forms of entertainment. The stage hands, carpenters, electricians and musicians, he feels, are in league against him. His box office man is likely to double-cross him. The scenic painters, transfer men and actors are organized to get as much out of him as possible. The cut rate wolf is ready to swallow him if he doesn't watch out. He is the Little Red Riding Hood lost in the forest and the voices he hears are all those of his enemies.

Take the cut rate business, for instance. Here is an excrescence on the theatre that has grown, thanks to the



ZIEGFELD THEATRE, NEW YORK
Drawing by Hugh Ferriss

Theatres in New York have been built without regard to the requirements of the business.

The theatre as a real estate venture has given rise to many evils. A fairly good play with a decent chance of success is choked to death early in life by the terms of the contract. The theatre owner wants to house a hit as this will mean a higher income for him. There is constant warfare between the theatre-owner and the producer. The latter claims that the owner will not allow his show to become successful but exacts his pound of flesh. Sometimes this works both ways, for occasionally the owner reduces his rent to prevent the play from getting into his competitor's house.

managers, from the practice of selling complimentary billboard passes at cheap prices, to an industry which handles hundreds of thousands of tickets a year at less than box office rates. The cut rates have not increased the number of theatre-goers but have decreased the box office receipts by half.

Every ticket sold at the cut rates could be sold at the box office. Some producers advertise that their plays are not at the cut rates and as a result people go to the box office. The cut rates and their audience are waging a war of attrition against the theatre. The cut rate audience seldom visits the box office, so that when a hit exhausts its sale at the agencies and good seats can be had at the box office, the cut rate audience knows nothing about it. A hit settling down to a steady run finds tickets unsold and closes earlier than necessary.

The cut rates doom a fairly successful play. People let their friends know that tickets can be obtained there, and at the next performance the box office trade falls and the theatre is compelled to sell more and more tickets to the cut rates. Now and then the cut rates help a play to survive, as in the classic example of *Abie's Irish Rose*.

Movie competition has put a serious crimp in the cut rate audiences that used to buy balcony seats. The balcony-goer's argument is: "Why see a poor show from the balcony when I can go to the movies and sit downstairs, listen to an orchestra and watch a ballet, some vaudeville and a feature picture." The cut rate patron is interested in the "show," not in the "theatre." He may be a theatre-goer, but is not a theatre-lover in the best sense of the term.

The legitimate manager who might have kept his balcony audience in the face of movie competition, has, with few exceptions, alienated him because of the high prices for balcony seats. If he can afford to sell balcony seats for about one-third of the marked price to the cut rates surely he can afford to sell them direct to the public at half or two-thirds. This scheme was tried out during the past season by Kenneth MacGowan with *Children of Darkness*. Instead of \$1.50 to \$3.50 the balcony seats were repriced from \$1 to \$2.50. The first week after the change, six hundred more people saw the play as compared with the previous week and they paid \$800 more.

The business man who peeps behind the scenes is astonished at the lack of

business methods in so many theatres. Instead of business executives handling valuable property, he finds house managers not far above the level of ushers so far as bookkeeping goes. Many producers do not keep permanent records of important cash outlays. The treasurer may be ordered to honor a slip of paper on which is a notation from the head carpenter saying: "Eight men at six hours each." There is nothing to show what the men did for six hours.

A producer spends \$50,000 or more to put on a legitimate play, and after two or three nights he avoids the theatre like the plague. Actors, like other human beings, tend to become careless occasionally and need to be "jacked up," and the producer who leaves his play severely alone after the first week is a poor business man.

Production costs, not to say the other handicaps visited upon the producer, are so great that only the hit can survive. The audience for the play that is fairly good but not in the smash hit class has been driven from the theatre. Even the Theatre Guild, whose subscription audiences insure a run of about six weeks, is frequently compelled to close up productions that have not been outright hits, once the subscription list is exhausted.

Why can the producer afford nothing but success? The cost of producing is so high that the margin of profit, as compared to ten years ago, is much lower. One-set plays with eight characters or less are in great demand. One set means fewer stage hands. Fifteen years ago members of a road crew received \$30 to \$35 a week. Now the pay is \$95. Once upon a time the stage hand worked for nothing. He was the casual employe found in every town who was glad to shift the scenery for the sake of seeing the play. The day arrived when the stage hands asked for a living wage. The producers refused and thus forced union organization. Then came the musicians with their demands. Again a tug of war ensued between managers and musicians and the latter won.

One fine day the actors followed the example of the stage hands and musicians. Grievances long unredressed burst out into union organization. With the organization of a union among scene artists the costs of scenic painting mounted. But unionization did not stop there. The truckmen who transferred scenery from theatre to theatre or railroad station, formed a union.

Nowadays a manager may not have his stage hands or casual laborers transfer scenery even if he should merely require that it be moved into a theatre next door or across the street. I asked one manager what would happen if others than the union transfer men were engaged to move the scenery across the street from one theatre to another.

"By the time it got half way across the street there wouldn't be anything left of it," he replied.

Even if the transfer men have to move the scenery a few feet they call out a truck, circle the block and then come to rest at the stage door.

Rules made by the musicians are regarded as onerous by the managers. A manager may have several special rehearsals to perfect an oboe player in his part, yet on the opening night the player may send a substitute to carry on while he, the rehearsed player, accepts a last minute invitation from the opera or from an orchestra which is playing a special concert. The high cost of music has compelled most of the producers to dispense with entr'acte music.

In one show a phonograph was played less than a minute but the local union musicians insisted that a member put the needle on and take it off—for \$85 a week. One local union insisted that all actors who played musical instruments must join the union.

Within the theatre, no secret is made of the hostility felt by the actor towards the stage hand. The actor observes the stage hand playing the perennial game of pinochle all through the play, interrupted only by a few minutes of labor during the intermission and he compares his precarious income to that of the "grip" whose wage is fixed by union agreement.

The stage hands insist on a lower berth when traveling. The actor must take pot luck. If a play has been on a try-out tour more than six weeks, the producer must retain the road crew of stage hands in addition to the crew provided by the theatre where the piece settles down to a run.

In the past season some companies which went "co-operative" paid the actors \$25 a week and in some cases just "coffee and cake." There is something akin to "gallows humor" in the spectacle of an actor working for no salary and being expected to give two weeks' notice before he can quit.

Conditions for the actors have been so bad in the last season that it is

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►► Lazy Americans ◄◄

By MARK VAN DOREN

AMERICANS pride themselves on their energy. They talk of themselves, sometimes apologetically, as creatures whose principal fault is an incapacity for rest. "Up and doing," "get a move on," "bright and early," "he's got the pep"—these are national phrases. If America has a gospel, if it believes anything, it is the virtue of being tireless, and of being rather childishly strong, that is the gospel and the creed. Certainly this is the sermon which young men hear from secular pulpits—business offices, newspaper rooms, Y.M.C.A. headquarters, Rotary lunch tables, and Boy Scout tents—all over the country. In the light of such doctrines we judge the foreigner in our midst, or judge a distant civilization. Reinforced by our peculiar faith, we only smile at the European visitor who complains of the hurry and bustle on any metropolitan American street. Yes, it is mad enough, we admit; but we thrill at the thought that the admission is there to make. For we have no doubt whatever that our outstanding trait is vigor; and in turn we have no doubt

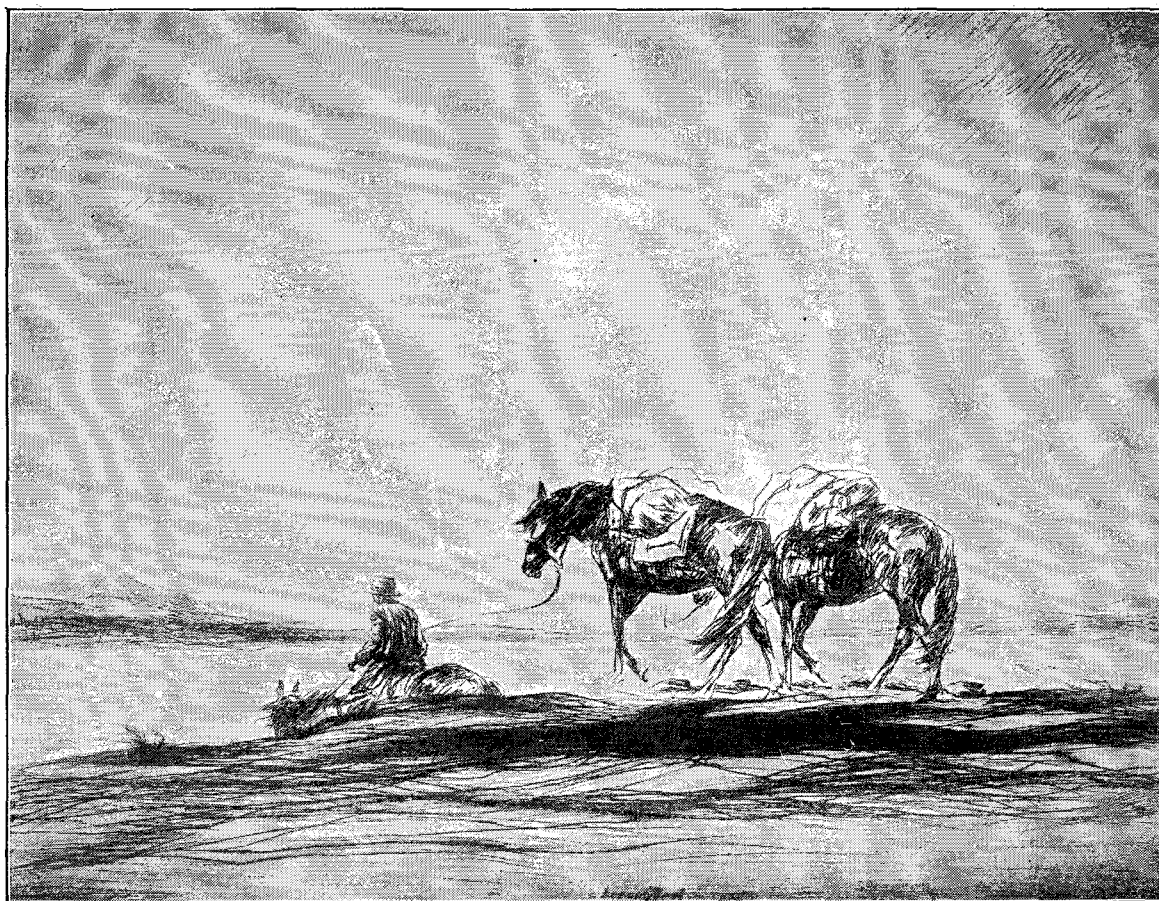
that vigor is a good trait to possess.

And it is. The question is whether we have it in that excess we hear about, or even, perhaps, whether as a nation we have it at all. To say that the dominant American characteristic is laziness would seem to be flying in the face of all that everybody knows to be true. Yet the statement is worth making, if only for the fun of seeing what can be found to support it. I suspect that a great deal can be found to support it. Indeed I am sure that the statement is quite simply true.

IN THE first place we should be suspicious of the fact that we preach the opposite quality. It is a pretty safe rule that when a man is found to be terribly interested in a certain virtue, he hasn't got it. He may think he has it, but the thought is not clear enough to let him alone; it keeps urging him to lecture on the subject, or to denounce those who—unlike him, it appears—lack

the quality in question. So with nations, which in so many instances act like individuals. When a nation begins to be aware of its virtue you may be reasonably sure that it actually has its mind on its vice. The ancient Greeks, a very turbulent people whose passions were hard to control, thought and wrote almost exclusively about order and balance. The ancient Hebrews, who had excellent heads for practical affairs like business and war, were conscious only of a passion for godliness, and listened with rapture to the denunciations of the prophets. The modern French, whose intellectual vice—if it is a vice—is logic, and whose behavior is astonishingly regular, have managed to give the impression that they are unaccountable whirlwinds of emotion. The British, who are a gentle, soft-spoken race if there ever was one, spend their time in praising the virtues of the bully and the bruiser. The Germans, the arch-sentimentalists of the modern world, dress themselves in stiff intellectual armor whose very formidableness makes us forget the melting soul within. The Russian, who by nature is a perfect skeptic, revels in pictures of himself as a simple man of faith. And the American, who at bottom and on the average is incorrigibly lazy, has invented the gospel of pep.

Historically considered, this heresy is no heresy at all. The first people who came here, like most I think who have come since, came to avoid difficulties in the life at home. We are proud of our fancied ability to face difficulty and conquer it—to ignore it even, and to snicker at it—but our ancestors had no such pride. The Pilgrim Fathers gave up the ecclesiastical game in seventeenth-century



Courtesy Kennedy & Co.

THE TYPICAL AMERICAN IN LEGEND
The Prospector; an etching by Levon West