

Letters to the Editor: *Poets and Railroad Crossings; Who Invented the Steamboat?*

Robinson and Frost

SIR:—My newly acquired and still somewhat tender New England conscience will not let pass unchallenged the statement of Mr. Ledoux in the Oct. 19th *S. R. L.* to the effect that Robinson had taken his motto, STOP, LOOK, LISTEN, from some railroad crossing of the Boston and Maine. We New Englanders are a proud race. As in all things we preserve our God-given independence even in the matter of grade crossing insignia. Let all the other railroads play the mimic, our grade crossing legend stoutly reads: LOOK OUT FOR THE ENGINE.

In short, Mr. Ledoux is guilty of some confusion. It was Robert Frost, deriving from California, who brought with him the more ordinary admonishment to STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN. It is Frost who stops to embrace a boundless moment, Frost who sees the strayed colt, Frost whose ears are exclusively attuned to the unmistakable accents of the New England farmer.

Robinson would have little or none of these. He was looking out for the engine. External or adventitious peculiarities interested him not at all. His was the search for motivation, for the hidden springs to human action. The train and its passengers were for him only surface phenomena. His study was the engine which hauled its human load over a roadbed considerably more hazardous and toward a terminal even more uncertain than any on the dear old B. and M.

V. FOSTER HOPPER.

New York University.

Personal: Books Wanted

SIR:—In *The Literary Digest* I saw an article on another article in your magazine to the effect that you print "ads" of the unusual needs of humanity.

I want to put in an ad to the effect that we are a group of intellectuals, radicals, and literary hounds marooned in the wildest mountains in the U. S., where our men folks are miners. We need magazines and books and Victrola records to help us pull through six months of snow when we can't get out to *anywhere*. We must have literature, and most of what we make now goes for mine supplies. We are women, children and men. Come to our aid!

ELIZABETH YOUNG GEORGE.

Cecilville, Siskiyou Co.,
California.

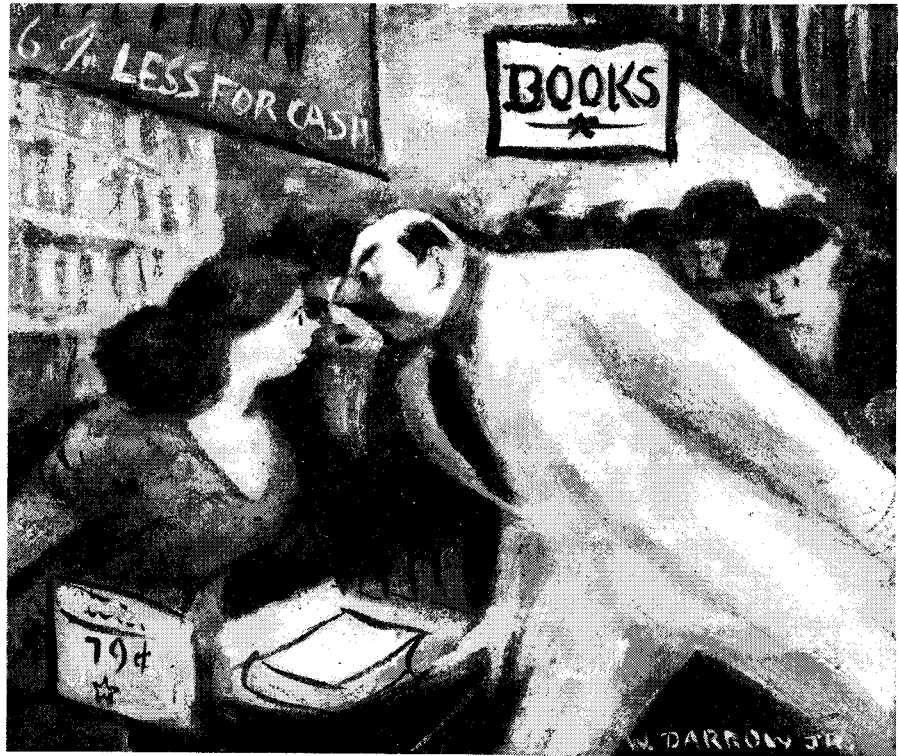
The editors are glad to print this request in the correspondence column, and hope it will meet with response.

Poor James Rumsey

SIR:—In your issue of October 5th, I find a review of the late Thomas Boyd's recent book, "Poor John Fitch."

May I ask space for a few words, since your reviewer brands Fitch's contemporary inventor, Rumsey ("Poor James Rumsey" will fit him also) as "unblushingly mendacious" in his claims to priority of invention?

Anyone who examines the models of



"KNOCK BALZAC DOWN TO 69 CENTS. STERN'S IS HAVING A RUN ON SEX PSYCHOLOGY."

the boats made by Rumsey and Fitch, which are in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, can see that they are entirely different in construction. The close margin of time between the two inventors' accomplishments and the fact that Fitch had the advantage of carrying on his projects near a great city, while Rumsey was working in an obscure village in the Virginia mountains, and that Fitch is now generally conceded to have made his first successful demonstration from one to four months before Rumsey's final demonstration in this country, has caused confusion.

Your reviewer might look over "James Rumsey, Pioneer in Steam Navigation," by Ella May Turner, head of the department of English, Shepherd State Teachers' College, Shepherdstown, West Virginia, Mennonite Publishing House, Scottdale, Pa., 1930. It was reviewed favorably in your pages. In it, I think, Miss Turner effectually shows that Fitch did not propel a boat by steam until the summer of 1787, and that James Rumsey invented and propelled a boat by steam against the current of the Potomac River in the Fall of 1784, in April 1786, in September 1787, and finally made a big public demonstration in December 1787.

Rumsey left for England shortly after his demonstration and fell dead of apoplexy as he was addressing a scientific gathering in London in 1792. Poor Fitch, as your reviewer states, committed suicide in 1798. His multitude of words, sometimes contradictory, and his behavior would indicate a definitely psychopathic personality. But he was cer-

tainly a genius who made a boat move by steam and is entitled to the credit as one of the pioneers in steam navigation. Rumsey, on the other hand, seems to have been a much more normal person, of the dogged, persistent, patient type, and like the tortoise was in a fair way to have got ahead of any number of nimble hares when death took him out of the race. Fulton knew them both and he also knew the plans of the many other pioneers who had dreamed and invented more or less impractical steamboats.

But as Mr. William Allen White says of Mr. Boyd's book: "Fame has made her award—Alas, who cares."

HELEN B. PENDLETON.

Shepherdstown, W. Va.

Miracle in Philadelphia

SIR:—Hurrying home to hotel in a driving rain, cold, dark night, I was stopped this Sunday night (Sunday night in Phila!) by a lighted window—stopped—eyes surely fail me (Sunday night in Phila!). Do I see on tables and chairs in this store window an open Plantin Bible, a Nuremberg ditto, a lovely 14th century MS. Bible, the very copy of Holy Writ given by Dr. Johnson to Mrs. Thrale, a 1571 Anglo-Saxon New Testament, a copy of the 1661 Eliot Indian Bible, the wondrous pages of the Doves Press Bible before me—all in a lighted store window in Phila on a wet, cold, dark Sunday night? Miracle!

Can you guess whose window it was?

J. EDGAR PARK.

Editor's Note: Our guess is Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach's.

The Man of Promise

BY RANDOLPH BARTLETT

TWO decades have passed since Willard Huntington Wright's "Modern Painting" created a sensation in the art circles of two continents. The earnest seekers who were trying to break away from the domination of the academies hailed the author as their prophet because he had rationalized their principles of form and color.

The following year the same young men extended his field, and in "The Creative Will" sought to expound, or at least introduce, a system of esthetics applicable to all the arts. Soon he published a novel, "The Man of Promise," in which he endeavored to prove in practice the soundness of his precepts. He had already spent two years (1912-14) as editor of *The Smart Set*. Between times he sponsored art exhibitions, wrote extensively for the more serious magazines, and established himself as the leader of the New York intelligentsia. He was less than thirty years old and it seemed that the world was his oyster.

Almost on the twentieth anniversary of the appearance of "Modern Painting" Mr. Wright's *alter ego*, S. S. Van Dine, presents the latest and one of the weakest of his nine popular detective stories, "The Garden Murder Case." The ending of one brilliant career, the barren, intervening years, and the achievement of spectacular success in an entirely new direction, combine to make Mr. Wright one of the most interesting enigmas of the American literary scene.

In the period when Wright was Wright, he tried to do more than was humanly possible. He had been a football player on one of the roughest teams in the Southwest, but no physique was equal to the strain he placed upon it in the "Creative Will" period. Suddenly he disappeared from New York, and it was nine years before he again engaged in sustained work.

In these barren years Wright knew illness and poverty, but he never relinquished his dream of continuing his writing on esthetic subjects. He subsisted on hack work for California newspapers and movie magazines, and even flirted with the movies themselves, but to the few friends who encountered him from time to time he always spoke of the plans he was cherishing for better days. The one reminder of past triumphs was a slender volume, hardly more than a pamphlet, "The Future of Painting," which appeared in 1923*.

Then came the Van Dine period, and while the story of the gestation of Philo

Vance novels has been widely publicized, more or less accurately, there is one scene that has never been described.

Wright was living in the Belleclaire Hotel on upper Broadway. Not more than three or four persons ever saw him there. His room was lined with letter files which he was using as receptacles for carefully tabulated notes. He was ill. One day in the fall of 1925, a friend called, and during the conversation Wright said:

"I've worked out the formula of the detective story, because Doctor Jake won't let me do any serious reading or writing and I had to do something. As soon as I am well, I'm going to write six of these novels, and that will give me all the money I'll need for the rest of my life. Then I'm going to get a country place somewhere, perhaps in England, up the Thames, and finish those things," and he waved his hand proudly at the impressive array of filing cases.

Just what specific subjects were covered in that accumulation of notes, I do not feel at liberty to state. One of the enterprises was so ambitious and yet so practical that it was surprising it never had been attempted. It would have been a work of high scholarship, and libraries are much poorer because it has never been done. It was to gain the leisure to carry out these designs that he proposed to write six successful detective stories.

Less than a year from the day he made this announcement, "The Benson Murder Case" was published. Wright used the pseudonym of Van Dine and swore his friends to secrecy, but when the tremendous success of the series was assured, he lost all desire for concealment of his authorship. The first six novels certainly should have enabled him to carry out his idea of retiring, to work on his former program, but now there are nine. A tenth, "The Purple Murder Case," is announced in preparation, and he is still only 47 years old. The unfortunate thing about it all is that since the "Greene," their deterioration has been constant, until now all there is to the novels is the formula.

The ninth milestone in this departure from early principles, the ninth stitch in the literary shroud, the ninth of the six-letter "Cases" concocted to display the

excellence of a reference library, is perhaps not quite so bad as its predecessor, the "Casino," for it contains no such "True Confessions" writing as this gem from the penultimate opus:

"That last terrible scene will haunt me to my dying day and send cold shivers racing up and down my spine whenever I let my mind dwell upon its terrifying details."

This, and the substitution of a circus performer's life-line for a bullet-proof vest are the main points of difference between these last two concertos for Philo. The significant fact lies in the cumulative evidence that Mr. Wright is becoming so bored with Mr. Van Dine that he probably cannot tolerate him

much longer.

Wright was never slipshod in his work and Van Dine is. Wright was as elegant as his own Philo, and Van Dine needs a mental shave and a haircut. He might profit by reading from Mr. Wright's earlier works a passage from "The Creative Will."

"Fantastic and eccentric surfaces are often the disguises of spurious and worthless works. The greatness of true art,

like aristocracy in the individual, is easily recognized beneath the most commonplace integuments."

Unless he has remained overlong in this mummy case of his own making, Wright may yet resurrect himself. He adopted the pseudonym of Van Dine to conceal himself from the world. Today it appears that all the device has accomplished has been to conceal him from himself. Mr. Wright's attention might be called to this remark of his own hero, Stanford West, in "The Man of Promise":

"I'd rather die in want and exile and know I had done something new and worth while, than to receive all the benefits and emoluments of the world for something I didn't believe in."

Perhaps he has come actually to believe in Philo and Régie cigarettes, but all who remember Wright's own novel will perhaps see a parallel between the frustration of Stanford West and that of his creator. At least there would seem to be material here for another book, "The Wright Murder Case, or What Happened to the Creative Will?"

Randolph Bartlett, now on the staff of the New York Sun, was a newspaperman on the West Coast when Wright was there. He wrote for the old *Smart Set*, and was one of the first to see the manuscript of "The Benson Murder Case."



S. S. VAN DINE

* "Who's Who" lists a work called "Modern Literature" as published by Wright in 1926. I have never seen this except in manuscript. It is not in the New York Public Library, or the Library of Congress Catalogue, and it does not appear in the book trade lists of that year. Can Philo solve this mystery?