

Brakes On Inflation

BY ELMER DAVIS

THAT the golden prime of good Haroun-Cal-Coolidge was also the great age of American literature was generally admitted at the time, at least by the people who were producing the literature. The subsequent depressions, in business and in letters, were roughly contemporaneous, and so were the beginnings of the upturn; "Anthony Adverse" flourished at about the same time as National Distillers Products and Owens-Illinois Glass. Now the reascending business spiral is beginning to worry the administration, and there is talk of putting on the brakes before we have another runaway boom. No such craven moderation is discernible in the world of let-

ters. Few publishers would object to another runaway boom in reputations, and any author worthy of the name would rather pay for brief greatness with long oblivion than drag out a miserable lifetime of respectable mediocrity. But even the crudest economic determinist can hardly believe that there is any close and necessary correlation between the *New York Times* average of fifty selected stocks and the rising or falling curve of literary brilliance. Whatever may happen to business, the basic conditions that made the greatness of Coolidgean literature are no longer present.

What were those conditions? Credulity first of all; the Golden Age was made golden not so much by the creative writers as by the critics. Most of those critics are still around but they seem a little discouraged, less inclined to discover a new Balzac, a new Voltaire, a new Rabelais every morning. And a fresh crop of critics is coming along that is not quite so easy to stampede. Even in quarters which till lately have stood firm in their insistence that things are what they seem, skepticism has begun to rear its scaly head.

But the inflated values of the twenties are less important now than the genuine values. If those times did not produce such a multitude of first-rate writers as was then supposed, they did produce more good second- and third-raters who were mistaken for first-raters than any other period in history, and it takes more than credulity to account for the distortion. There was also novelty, most perish-

able of assets; and beyond that were certain conditions inherent in the time itself.

No man yet knows enough to say why any age produces great authors; geniuses are born when and where they are born, and that is all we can make of it. But there are situations which make it easier for great authors to expand to the extent of their capacities, and for fairly good authors to look better than they really are. Study the Periclean, the Augustan, the Elizabethan ages (most worthy of comparison, I suppose, with the Coolidge period) and you can discern some common factors, concomitants if not causes. In each case there was a definite background, a national character and culture recognized not only by authors but by the public; a man could say what he thought with the certainty that people would know what he was talking about. In each case that milieu provoked emotions which were not only strong but clear. Aeschylus and Sophocles knew what Athens was, and liked it; Euripides did not like it so much, but he knew which aspects of the national behavior pleased him and which did not. The Rome for which, and of which, Vergil and Horace wrote was not a polyglot empire, but the governing class of the ruling race; they knew what it had lately been and did not like it at all, but they also knew what Rome ought to be, might be, and in fact did become.

Such clarity has seldom been possible in the United States—a nation moving across a continent and changing as it

went, and then when the limit was reached recoiling on itself in a confusion still unresolved. Whitman's Jeffersonian visions never came true except locally and briefly, nor has any other artist been capacious enough to predict either the probable or the desirable future of this immense unjelled mixture. But for a few years in the twenties America seemed to have jelled. It turned out presently that only part of it had jelled, that the cohesion was confined to a surface which soon cracked open again. But, briefly, the dominant tendencies of the nation fused; and the fusion was for the moment so immensely successful that it looked indestructible. From about 1925 to 1929 America had

a face—the face, so smugly assured that it seemed shaped by an established national character, which is portrayed from somewhat different angles in "Babbitt" and the campaign speeches of Herbert Hoover. To the then dominant groups in the nation it seemed the pattern of virile beauty; but the majority of American authors found it unpleasing and said so, and enough people agreed with them to make dissent not only respectable but profitable.

Why the authors, the so-called intellectuals, disagreed with the dominant groups is a question more intricate than it looks, and irrelevant to the present discussion. The fact is clear that almost all the "important" literature of the twenties was literature of protest—mild or severe, direct or escapist which is protest by indirection. I cannot recall any author of consequence or even of apparent consequence who looked at the America of Coolidge, said "This is fine!" and embroidered on that theme. Tarkington of "The Plutocrat" is perhaps an exception; but piety did not entirely kill the artist in him, his plutocrat is somebody whom he

COOLIDGE VISIONS NEW ERA OF PROGRESS IN AMERICA; HOLDS PROSPERITY A TEST

OUTLINES NATION'S NEEDS

President Urges Flood
Control and More Ships
for the Navy.

OPPOSES LOWER TARIFF

Photographs Encke's Comet,
Barely Visible to Naked Eye

CHICAGO, Nov. 17 (AP).—The first photograph to be obtained of the famous Encke's comet as it approaches the spot in its orbit nearest the sun has been taken by Professor G. Van Belsbroeck of Yerkes Observatory, University of Chicago officials announced today.

Using the 24-inch reflector, Professor Van Belsbroeck photographed the comet, which is

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Next  Week

THE CITADEL

By A. J. CRONIN

Reviewed by Mabel Ulrich, M.D.

ANIMAL TREASURE

By IVAN T. SANDERSON

Reviewed by Henry Seidel Canby

may have liked but whom his own evidence gave his readers plenty of reason for disliking. In any case, this technique of setting up faults as peculiarly American virtues is something that Tarkington was practising as far back as the Taft administration; no special flowering of the Golden Age.

Different writers disliked different aspects of the unity that for a moment was America, but it had plenty of facets that were apt to engender a noble rage in persons of any sensibility; and because it all hung together, dissatisfaction with a part was dissatisfaction with the whole. Far more than the Democrats, who by 1928 had become only a slightly dissident minority sect of Republicans, the writers of America were the Opposition during the whole era of the prosperity-prohibition complex. Not merely a political opposition; in the dominant grouping politics, economics, morals, and esthetics reinforced one another, and if you opposed one you more or less opposed them all.

The Opposition of those days was singularly fortunate. It was permitted to say as much as it liked—far more than American authors had ever been permitted to say before—and was well paid for saying it. But above all—and this perhaps explains the tolerance accorded it by the dominant group—it was in no danger of accomplishing anything, and consequently under no obligation to devise an alternative. The times were such as to evoke indignation, but an indignation not only generalized but hopeless. An example from one who on the whole has been a yea-sayer. In 1926 William Allen White wrote:

What a sordid decade is passing! . . . The spirit of our democracy has turned away from the things of the spirit, got

its share of its patrimony ruthlessly, and has gone out and lived riotously and ended by feeding it to the swine. . . . What a joy it would be to get out and raise the flaming banner of righteousness! Instead of which we sit in our offices and do unimportant things and go home at night and think humdrum thoughts, with the gorge in us kicking like a mule all the time!

Well, the inarticulate citizen, of Emporia or of New York, may have been condemned to this humdrum and futile existence; but it is obvious that here one gorge kicked like a mule to some effect. Bill White got all this off his chest and felt better. So did a thousand other authors; and they were not impeded in relieving their feelings by any burdensome and perhaps hazardous effort to raise the flaming banner of righteousness, because they were not sure just where and how to raise it and there was no prospect that it would do any good anyway.

As few novelists as economists doubted that prosperity had come to stay, and all its Bacchic train with it; and there was no doubt that it had its mitigating aspects. Never before had authors been able to get rich by damning the sorry scheme of things entire, and seldom before had the scheme hung together so well that they could damn it entire without bothering to put in a bill of particulars. There it was, there it seemed likely to stay, and there was nothing to be done about it except to say that you did not like it. The detail which was probably detested by more authors than any other, prohibition, seemed the most firmly established of all; till the spring of 1932, nobody but a little group of devotees believed we could ever get rid of it; and like other components of the complex, it was easy to live with in practice no matter how much you disliked it in theory. So you could register

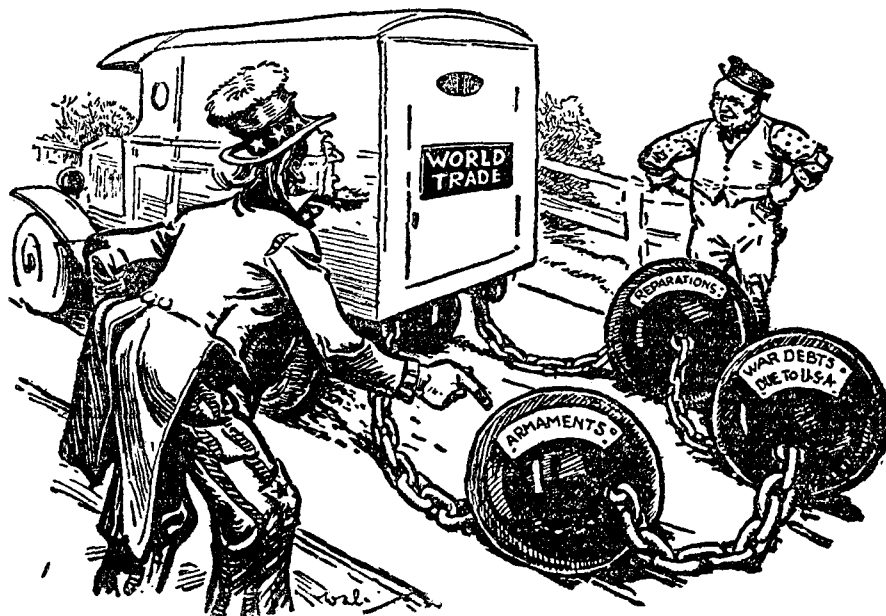
your protest in safety and comfort, confident that it would bring you in a satisfactory income and that you would never have to sit down and think about what would suit you better.

Those happy days are gone; the Great Stone Face of Coolidgean America turned out to be only a piece of soap sculpture that melted in the first hard rain; once more the nation is amorphous and unpredictable. There is still plenty of noble rage at large in the country, as the newspapers prove each day; but it has this profound difference from the noble rage of the twenties, that it is about something specific. Specific and fluid and incalculable; many a gorge still kicks like a mule every morning, but for or against something in particular—the Supreme Court, the sit-down strike, etc. Something may be done about the Supreme Court and the sit-down strike, but nobody knows just what is going to be done, still less how it will work. Gone is that cohesive and apparently unshakable background of the twenties, against which dissenters could rave in a general negative, and the orthodox could let them rave, with no prospect that anything was going to be done. Nowadays—as Genghis Khan used to say when he was declaring war—“that will happen which will happen, and what it is to be we know not. God knows.” But something will happen, certainly.

Complex and uncertain political and economic issues, whose shape may change as you write, are refractory material for art in any but the ablest hands; and unfortunately these are the matters that obsess the minds of all citizens today, authors included. One of the best of American novels was written about the land policy of the Southern Pacific Railroad; but it was written a dozen years later when the material could be viewed in perspective, and its author had more stuff than his contemporaries, or than ours. Numberless authors have explored the drama of the depression, or the feelings of people on relief, without producing more than creditable journalistic commentary. There is excellent material for the novelist in the work of the Resettlement Administration; but to give us anything more than the obvious chronicle of disillusion with the Promised Land would require an artist of some stature. In such conditions, stature is more precisely measurable than it was a few years ago.

Against the static background of the twenties authors could devise their little dramas of dissatisfaction, and they stood out by mere contrast. Now, in the midst of drama on a grand scale, authors do not know what to say about it because they do not know what it means. The proletarians, of course, have the answer written down in the book; what they say about it is art to proletarian critics, pro-

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BRITISH CARTOON OF THE POST-COOLIDGE WORLD
From Adams's "A History of the United States" (Scribners).

Getting Death's Number

ON *BORROWED TIME*. By Lawrence Edward Watkin. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

THIS book has charm, humor, character, and everything but originality, which will not be missed by readers who like this kind of a story—and they are many. "Gramp," who loves his grandson Pud and an honest world more than money, borrows time when Grandma dies to save Pud from a highly objectionable aunt. Death, who (quite pardonably, I say) comes from "Death Takes a Holiday" to foreclose "Gramp's" mortgage on existence, is treed by a single spell that only children and very old unworldly people seem to know about. He is to stay there till Pud is provided for, and lest any one suffers from a too close contact a fence is built round the tree, which becomes an important factor in the plot. Then amazing things happen from this unconventional exhibit in a very conventional town. The story that follows needs no miracle to support it, for it deals with unregenerate age and unspoiled youth both sticking out their tongues at the bourgeois vices and virtues. Even granting the phantasy, this story is highly improbable; yet not the less satisfying to a healthy imagination because very disagreeable people get what they deserve, and love (not sex) combines with satire to make a particularly good blend of sentiment. It's a strain to call the love between "Gramp" and Grandma sentiment, but it is the real thing.

Mr. Watkin could have made this a regional story with a small town atmosphere, for he has plenty of realism. His small time old maid, his pastoral seduction, his deadlock of local industry when death stops functioning, are all very good. Or he could have made it a satire with a cutting edge. One hopes that he will do both in time. He is capable. This book suggests, as it should not, Robert Nathan without the poetry of his phantasies. Humor, realism, and satire, not poetry, are Mr. Watkin's fortes. It is to be doubted whether he needs or profits by his phantasy. Pud's clouds of glory trailed from some innocent heaven of children are made entirely natural for this world by the child's extraordinary ability in describing his own body in a way most embarrassing to everyone but "Gramp" and the reader. And he sends off the two of them to a real Heaven in a scene that does not recall Little Eva. Phantasy should never be used in a novel except when there is a wedding of necessity and imagination. Mr. Watkin's imagination can get along without.

This is a likable book. I think all the

author needs for his future is not to be afraid of his sentiment, let his humor stay as homely as it is here, and sharpen the cutting edge of his highly unfavorable opinion of certain types of American humanity. He will not lack readers, and they will gladly forgive him the miracle which makes this plot turn over, for it's a miracle, really, with its tongue in its cheek.

Twofold Adventure

DEAD MAN LEADING. By V. S. Pritchett. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1937. \$2.50.

Reviewed by LOUIS J. HALLE, JR.

OSTENSIBLY this is just another adventure tale. The title is unfortunate in conveying an impression of triviality, and when one learns that the story deals with three strong men in the Amazon jungle one is already reaching for the grain of salt



JACKET DESIGN FOR "DEAD MAN LEADING"

without which such tales are usually indigestible. But one forgets the grain of salt in the first five pages. This novel bears the marks of literary authenticity, and the adventure it relates is not so much the physical adventure of men confronting the wilderness as the spiritual adventure of human souls struggling to escape the common guilt and loneliness of their humanity.

The dead man of the title is Johnson's father, a missionary who had vanished alone into the depths of the Amazon forest seventeen years before the action begins. Johnson had been too young at the time to retain any affectionate memories of his father, but the obscure desire to escape into the same solitude prompts him to join Charles Wright's exploring party. Wright himself, at forty-nine, is driven on by the sense of his departing youth. Phillips, the third member, is fleeing from his own futility and weakness.

Charles's stepdaughter, Lucy, who remains behind in London, plays the role of Eve to Johnson's Adam. In the disorder of his mind she becomes his own guilt made flesh, and it is the impossibility of escaping from her while remaining with her stepfather that first disrupts the expedition. But Phillips has also known Lucy, and he must be dodged as well. The burden of the novel is Johnson's ineluctable progress toward the doom of his father.

The fact that "Dead Man Leading" deals primarily with psychological adventure, that it has a philosophical undercurrent, does not prevent it from being a thriller of the first order. But the fact that it is a thriller does have something to do with its literary achievement. The theme might have seemed more heroic and the characters more nearly on the grand scale had the novel been slower. Novelists who have handled great themes successfully have never been afraid of being dull, and Mr. Pritchett is. He has sacrificed the magnitude of his material to the swift pace that makes for exciting reading.

This is the more unfortunate as Mr. Pritchett is a profound psychologist, a thoughtful writer, and a master-craftsman. In the past few years I have read only two novels that made equally absorbing reading: one was "Lost Horizon," the other "Gone With the Wind." "Dead Man Leading" falls short of being memorable. But it grazes the heights, and that alone is a rare achievement.

Two Wisdoms

By DWIGHT DURLING

SHE listened as the slow voice said:
Never credit overmuch
Sound and sight or taste and touch,
Any tangled, groping root
Under mind's essential fruit.
Height in soaring thought conceives,
Opens undeciduous leaves
And the flower forbidden sight—
Integral, immaculate light.

Low he bent his prophet's head:
Only mind through being's mesh,
Under the fantasies of flesh,
Probes upon unyielding bone,
The unequivocal skeleton,
Logic structural and terse
In self or branching universe.

Silent she—and lower his head:
Beauties the glozing eyes compound,
Roses in painted cerements bound,
Drift to dust; only the womb
Of the brain denies its doom.

She but smiled—or sighed—and said:
Delight, be as a summer brief!
Love, be as the burning leaf
Driven down a ruinous sky!
Hasten to death—so too must I.
Fill my branches, burgeon—and die.