

Perelman Carries the Nation

CRAZY LIKE A FOX. By S. J. Perelman. New York: Random House. 1944. 269 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by THOMAS SUGRUE

THE publication of a selection of S. J. Perelman's "best" pieces is the most ominous note in American history since the first arrow of the Seminole War whizzed through the Florida night air and found flesh. There is no mistaking the implication of the event. Perelman is turning his eyes to the past, and the future is lost. Secure behind a bastion of twelve million dollars, which he made in Hollywood in six weeks, he has begun to tear up his college notebooks, give away old sweaters, swear off opium, pay up his bill at the dry cleaners, and buy the French maid an annuity for her young son. In short, the old master—*absit omen*—is preparing to retire. Why else would his publisher give out with this forty-six course banquet, complete with dedication, title, and numbers on the pages?

The immediate effect of the retirement of S. J. Perelman on a nation whose predominance in the world depends squarely on muscles and laughter, is apparent and appalling. The muscles can get along without him—he has been getting along on borrowed muscles for years, and moves most of the time on wire springs. But the laughter of the country is another matter. Perelman is America's funniest man, and those who grew up with him, through *Judge* and *College Humor* years, depending on him for strength to endure prohibition gin and speakeasy air, sustained by him throughout the potato famine of the early thirties, cannot quickly find another such singer of heart songs, another so expert at lashing the bloodstream into a wild, Kirghiz frenzy. If no more new Perelman pieces are to appear, what excuse will this ragged little band from the the fringes of schizophrenia have for rolling in the gutter and throwing harpsichords through the studio skylight?

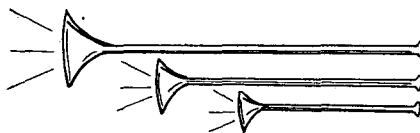
Perelman's humor has always been therapeutic, a penicillin for the wounds which society inflicts on the ego and consciousness of the common man. Just as Fielding, when the reading world was sick to death of the scourge "Pamela," healed it instantly with a single application of "Joseph Andrews," so Perelman, as we reel to our bare pallets after a bout with Hollywood B pictures, a session with the latest batch of novels, or a fast look at the fashion magazines, comes

with magic herbs and healing opiates. Soon we are hanging out the window again, leering at the passing school-girls. Soon we are able to face, again, the girls in the advertisement who point the certain way to *embonpoint*; able to hear, again, the unctuous voice of the radio, softly inquiring for our peristalsis.

Of course, the present volume of alchemical ointments may be the Philosopher's Stone; it may continue to work, in all emergencies, against all social bacteria. It is designed for some such epic service. It contains old and new favorites, and such supernal bits of satire as the pieces on Hollywood and the slick magazines—"Scenario," and "Second-Class Matter" (but there should be more like them, many more). There is the one that gets the old man so bad we have to send for the inhalator—"Hold That Christmas Tiger!" There is mom's favorite—"To Sleep, Perchance to Steam." There are those we all agree on—"the Body Beautiful," "Sweet and Hot," "Somewhere a Roscoe," "Sauce for the Gander," etc. (See Table of Contents for others.)

But one thing is certain, and in that fact lies hope for the coming generation, saddled as it will be with debt, mesmerized by electronics, transported by helicopters: Perelman's pearls wear well; in fact they improve with age, which for humor, a perilously temporal commodity, is extraordinary. His is, indeed, rare stuff, which is all the more reason why there should be more of it. As a citizen of the United States Perelman is a free man (providing he has twelve million dollars) and can do as he pleases. But in a democracy the people is sovereign, and the people, in an emergency which concerns its good, may sacrifice one of its number lest the whole be imperiled. Thus there is but one thing to do.

Perelman is the funniest man in America. Seize him, place him in a white-walled room, and put him to work, that in these hard days, and in the parlous times ahead, we shall have a handkerchief for our tears, and strange, mysterious lightning that strikes us in the street or in the home, so that we fall flat on our face, laughing, and have to be dragged out to the barn, to sleep with the swine and the hired man. We would do as much for him, if we could, and if he didn't have twelve million dollars.



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The Coming Out of a Recluse

HAWTHORNE, CRITIC OF SOCIETY.
By Lawrence Sargent Hall. New
Haven: Yale University Press. 1944.
200 pp. xii. \$3.

Reviewed by ROBERT E. SPILLER

BIOGRAPHERS have always been puzzled by Hawthorne because he presents a personality problem which is virtually impossible of solution. He seems on the one hand to have been an eerie recluse and dreamer who meditated upon the sin of mankind and wrote moral allegories about a fictitious Puritan past. On the other, he is reported to have been a shrewd man of affairs, a keen observer and analyzer of his fellows, and a skeptical materialist. The two characters do not belong in the same man even though the facts support both interpretations. Hawthorne was both these people and perhaps some others, let his biographers and critics make of him what they will.

Perhaps the answer is that he began life as a recluse and, through sheer will power, forced himself to come to grips with the world. The result of this action was to provide him with the most impellingly tragic theme in the possession of any American other than Melville, as Matthiessen has recently pointed out. But his frame was too weak; he could not cope with the forces he had released.

The present study collects all the evidence on Hawthorne's dealings with the world outside of himself and analyzes his social attitudes. Mr. Hall points out that, in the decade of the fifties, he used his friendship with Pierce to its full practical advantage. In spite of protestation to the contrary, he obviously sought the assignment of the campaign biography and, in contrast to his early failures at making a living, he used his Liverpool consulship as a means of endowing himself and his family. In his private life, he learned to accept the competitive terms of American politics and to work them to his own advantage. In his public life, he subscribed to the theory of equalitarian democracy, with its faith in the manifest destiny of America to create a new social order in the world at large.

Mr. Hall's thesis is that this materialistic side of his character provided a "productive maladjustment" because "it contained enough idealism to render him acutely critical of society, but not so much as to make him reject it." His practical adjustment to the political and social currents of the times offset his instinct for withdrawal into the past and thus made his art socially significant.

In order to accept this thesis, however, one is forced to disregard chronology. Hawthorne's greatest fiction, "Twice Told Tales" and "The Scarlet Letter," were written before he developed his social philosophy and, during the decade when he was learning to deal critically with men and affairs, his art declined more or less steadily. His maladjustment was productive only when it was limited to the world that he knew, that of the individual soul. "The House of the Seven Gables" lost compact artistry because it shifted focus from the individual Pyncheons to the problem of social decay. "The Blithedale Romance," his one attempt to deal directly with a contemporary social problem, was successful only because it treated its subject in intensely personal terms and avoided the problem of reform as such. In "The Marble Faun," the personal redemption of Donatello and his friends rather than the conflicts between American and European ways, between experiment and tradition, gives the romance its form and its power, and reclaims some of the old artistry. It is significant that Mr. Hall draws his evidence from letters, later notebooks, and the confused and unfinished final romances, leaving consideration of the major fiction for a postscript chapter and omitting altogether an analysis of "The Blithedale Romance." Hawthorne's maladjustment was not productive when it ceased to be personal and became social. An equilibrium was established in the early fifties before the social critic had emerged. His adjustment to what he called reality may have been necessary to his personal sanity and it obviously made his life more nearly tolerable. But he had not the esthetic stamina nor the physical health to enlarge his scope and to remake his art as social analysis. Once he renounced his isolation, his decline as an artist began.

Mr. Hall's study is valuable in that it makes that decline more understandable and it gives credit to Hawthorne for achieving in his personal life a degree of adjustment to the world which is not apparent in his fiction and which has been underestimated by most other critics and biographers. It even gives him a limited value as a commentator on his times. But to make the thesis work, one would have to forget the final failures of "Dr. Grimshawe's Secret" and the other unfinished novels and to move the great romances to the end of his life. His disregard of chronology has led Mr. Hall to emerge from a thorough and admirable piece of research with all the wrong answers.

The Saturday Review