

"THE CUSTOMERS ALWAYS WRITE"

FROM THE COLLECTED PAPERS of Donald Porter Geddes, out at Macmillan: Profitt to De Graff to Brett:

We are very fond of the following letter, which is framed and hangs on our wall: "Cambridge, March 10, 1933. Thank you for sending me the notices of my book. This latest, from the London *Times*, seems to confirm the general verdict, that the book is pretty good, considering the unavoidable defect that it was not written by the reviewer. I am different, but reviewers are all pretty much alike. Very sincerely yours, Ephraim Emerton."

The Bible, including the Apocrypha, contains 926,877 words. An Englishman, many years ago, spent three years of his life finding this out. . . .

Once upon a time there was a saint who was so saintly that he had been able to train a fly to aid him in his work. Now most of his work consisted in reading long, ecclesiastical volumes, and as he read the fly would follow the course of his eyes back and forth across the page. And when, as often happened, the saint had to leave his book, the fly would sit faithfully on the word last read, thereby marking the exact spot where reading had been stopped and was to be resumed. . . .

Richard de Bury, who lived long ago, said, "Books are masters who instruct us without rods or ferrules, without words or anger, without bread or money. If you approach them, they are not asleep, if you seek them, they do not hide, if you blunder, they do not scold, if you are ignorant, they do not laugh at you."

FROM TWO JUNIOR EDITORS of *Good Housekeeping*, who understandably wish to remain anonymous, comes this memorandum, labeled "Planned Authorhood":

In the interests of a strong and healthy American literature, it is essential that authors, particularly those of the lower classes, learn some elementary facts about story control. It is with this purpose in mind that the Planned Authorhood Association is being formed. Naturally, opposition is expected from the dignitaries of the Newspaper Guild. This sect believes in the rhythm method, but it is only too apparent that this method is not reliable.

We are not against novels; we are against *unwanted* novels. We recommend to new authors judicious spacing of their literary work. Consider the agony of countless young authors who, without the benefit of Agent, find themselves with novel. Frequently, these "fallen" writers seek to solve their dilemma by destroying their novels before completion, rather than bring another

unwanted novel into the world—a novel which will bear the stigma of illiteracy. This is acknowledged by all authorities to be a highly dangerous process, since they may never be able to have another novel.

We are, of course, merely an educational agency. For further details, see any reputable editor. . . .

FROM GEORGE FEATHERSTONE, at Castle Point Hospital, N. Y.:

A friend of ours complained so bitterly about his health, that we persuaded him to take a West Indies cruise. Passage was engaged on a Cunard Liner, but she never left the dock. Upon entering his stateroom, our friend looked through the porthole, and saw only the galvanized roof of the shed. Four days later, he looked again, and saw exactly the same view. He debarked, announcing "I don't feel very much better, but it was an enjoyable trip." Actually the ship had never left the dock because of the heaviest fog in the history of the port. Also, we neglected to tell you that our friend went aboard with two dress suit cases full of gin. . . .

FROM A. W. BARNES, publisher of the *Gallup* (N. M.) *Independent*:

In a recent TRADE WINDS column you stated, "Louisiana is the one state in the Union where election returns are announced in two languages—English and French." I take it you are not familiar with practices in New Mexico, where, after this area has been a part of the United States for a hundred years and a state since 1912, the Spanish and English languages are still widely used. Until recently our legislature regularly employed inter-

preters, they are still frequently required in our courts, ballots are printed in the two languages regularly, notices of election and constitutional amendments are printed and published in both languages, political campaigns are made in both languages, and some of the schools are conducted in Spanish.

I had an idea that Quebec was the only other place in North America where this situation prevailed, but from your column I infer that Louisiana has a similar problem. . . .

FROM WILLIAM SHEPARD, of Daytona Beach, Fla.:

This item belongs in your collection of Shaviana. My mother, Sallie Gannaway Shepard, of Buckingham County, Virginia, asked Bernard Shaw for an autographed square to put into a quilt which was to be sold for the local church. She explained that the quilt was to be composed of irregular colored pieces with autographed squares at intervals, and sent him a patch for his signature. "We call these things crazy quilts," she added. Mr. Shaw obliged with his signature in very legible script, and then added this appropriate thought for the pious: "Crazy quilts cover multitudes of sins."

Mr. Shepard adds that his mother died before she could sew the autographed squares together. Presumably he has them in his possession now. Interested parties can locate him at 119 North Ridgewood Avenue, Daytona Beach. . . .

K. KAUFFMANN-GRINSTEAD ASKS, "How many magazines does it take to fill a baby carriage?" and answers his own question with, "A *Country Gentleman*, a *Mademoiselle*, a few *Liberals*, and *Time*. . . . William Cole, at Knopf's, tells me, "George Jean Nathan claims this is the best triple pun he (or anybody else) ever made. Seems he was sitting around a table with a number of Irish literary lights,



"What's this about me being sold to Philadelphia?"

including George William Russell, who was known as 'AE'. They got to arguing, and George William Russell took a large amount of Gaelic umbrage at somebody's remarks and commenced to jump up and down with anger. At that point Nathan reports himself as having murmured, 'A.E.'s Irish Rose.' . . . Dudley Nichols also has been pondering about the State of the Nathan:

Say, I've been looking through G. J. Nathan's new yearbook with no small interest. Nathan is an odd character. You read a paragraph or a column of his and you are nettled as if you had ants in your mental pants. But read the whole book and you come away respecting the man. He may irritate but he has an integrity and he does smite fools and pretenders. Someone ought to tell him however that film is like white paper—you can't condemn it altogether because Pegler writes on it. Conrad "blackened" white paper too. Film, I believe, is the white paper of our epoch: all literature will have to be republished on it. But Nathan has footlight blindness. He takes *The New Yorker* attitude, that all films are bad, only some are worse than others. Phooey. It is a superb medium if you want to say something; the trouble is it is so good that even if you have nothing to say (which is what the new censorship wants) it can still dazzle and entertain. . . .

JON CORNIN, OF BERKELEY, Calif., writes:

Reading Housman's "A Shropshire Lad" the other evening, I was dimly aware of something overriding the rhythm of the lines. The radio was on, although I had turned it quite low during some forgotten moment of the day. The combined reading and humming grumble produced a strange cacophonous quiet, which resulted in the following. Now I'm not sure I shall ever dare to look "A Shropshire Lad" in the contents page again:

If the radio fare offend you,
Turn the dial, lad, and be sound:
'T will none harm, but serve to fend
you
For the programs foul, ill-found.
But if plugs and jingles send you,
Spots and middle-ads make you
glad:
Then I beg, lad, that you end you,
Here's a gun, lad—start a fad. . . .

FROM L. M. BIRKHEAD, national director of Friends of Democracy, Inc.:

I think your readers should know about the Poor Richard's Book-of-America Club. It is set up like almost any book club you can name. Its members are obliged to buy so many monthly selections each year; each selection is available at a reduced rate; bonus books are offered ever so often.

But Poor Richard's differs from other book clubs in that it has a mission; it wants to sell America a

bill of goods, and therein lies my story.

The new book club, for public consumption, is characterizing itself as a staunchly "anti-Communist" defender of American institutions. Because practically nobody likes Communists, this could prove to be good sales talk, unless someone points out what's beneath Poor Richard's "anti-Communist" label.

For example, passages in one of Poor Richard's initial selections (Frederick Charles F. Weiss's "Germania Delenda Est") are far more anti-democratic than they are anti-Communist. ". . . that which a nation needs quite as badly as a healthy race is the existence of an elite to lead it," Weiss's book says, and adds: "Germany . . . had its officer corps which unwaveringly upheld its ethics and made good in the darkest days of Germany."

That future Poor Richard books will be written in a similar vein is indicated by the committee of judges who pick the club's monthly selections. This committee includes:

G. Seals Aiken, Georgia attorney who urges that Negroes be denied citizenship and the right to vote.

Austin J. App, Texan, who says the "German Armies" were "the most decent armies of the war" and that our policy toward Germany is one of "revenge" and "lust" which is "responsible for making this 'history's most terrifying peace'."

K. D. Magruder, Pennsylvania lecturer, who strongly implies that Roosevelt and Churchill promoted an "international conspiracy to create World War II and force our nation into it for sinister purposes."

Lawrence Dennis, Massachusetts author, who has written: "Let me say categorically that I do not believe in democracy or the intelligence of the masses."

Frank A. Parker, New York pamphleteer, who recently distributed a leaflet called "Has Congress Abdicated to International Jewry?"

But of course all of this will be played down in the early days of the Poor Richard's Book Club. Only after getting well under way and after building a sizable "anti-Red" following will the book-club managers be able to inject increasingly strong doses of Nazi-like material, à la the F. C. F. Weiss passage quoted above.

And the moral is: we mustn't let these who oppose our democratic way of life delude us by protestations of being anti-Communist. Poor Richard's Book-of-America Club is an important case in point. The club must be unmasked in full view of book lovers everywhere before its siren song can grow loud and irresistible.

I personally have never even heard of this club. If the directors thereof care to answer Dr. Birkhead's charges, space will be provided. Meanwhile, they might peruse themselves a little book just published by Doubleday at the modest price of one dollar. It contains, in clear, readable type two documents: The Constitution of the United States and The Declaration of Independence.

BENNETT CERF.

Random House

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AUGUST 7, 1948

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Don't Resign from the Human Race

Notes on the Third Anniversary of the Atomic Age

AN EDITORIAL

HAVE you ever wondered what you would say if you were suddenly called upon to defend the human race?

Suppose you were invited to participate in a great debate or, better still, a mock court trial called for the purpose of deciding whether the human species had justified its right to survive—whether, on the basis of its virtues and weaknesses, it was actually entitled to the gift of life. Suppose your job was that of attorney for the defense. How would you go about collecting your evidence? What witnesses would you call? What arguments would you use?

You would have the satisfaction, of course, of knowing that you represented the popular side of the argument and that the preponderance of the evidence was with you. But what do you do when you discover at the trial that your opponent has anticipated most of your argument and, indeed, is using it against you? And what do you do when you find yourself gradually being won over by the sheer logic of his position?

Naturally, you had intended, when your turn came, to talk about the dignity and nobility of man, his capacity for great ideas, great works of art, great deeds. You had planned to describe his capacity for evolution and growth and progress. You had planned a long procession of witnesses—men who not only exemplified genius and nobility in themselves, but whose words might be used to support and dramatize your argument. You had planned to summon Aristotle as an example of the Whole Man—one who combined rounded, integrated knowledge with wisdom, and intelligence with conscience; one who understood the elusive but necessary balance between thought and action. And you were especially anxious to offer Aristotle's testimony that man, at his best, was the noblest creature of all. You had planned, too, to bring up Seneca as a witness, so that all might hear him say that man was a social and reasoning animal. You had planned to offer in evidence Longinus's observation that, from the moment of his birth, man had had implanted in him by nature an inextinguishable love for the noble and the good. You had planned. . . .

But all these plans never materialized because your opponent, the prosecuting attorney, admitted their validity at the outset. No one could

deny that individual man was capable of great deeds and words, of vast loyalty and integrity and courage. But this, he said, was not the point at issue. He then proceeded to draw a very careful sharp distinction between traits that characterized the individual and traits that characterized the species as a whole.

It was upon this distinction, he said, that he intended to build the main part of his argument. For the central question under consideration concerned the entity that was the human species—the aggregate of men—peoples rather than persons. There could be no doubt, he said, that countless individuals had easily justified the right to survive. Consider, however, that for every symphony or work of art representing individual genius there was an instance of the collective evil of war, or of group injustice in the form of slavery, or starvation or torture. If you were to take the debits and credits on the overall balance sheet of collective man, the final figure would not be in his favor. Nor was there in operation anywhere in the world a group conscience—assuming conscience to be, if not the source, at least the filter, for determinations of right and wrong.

AS soon as group conscience was mentioned, you wondered whether the prosecutor had overlooked religion. What was Christianity if not the very means of developing the group conscience?

But the prosecutor, it appeared, had overlooked nothing. The great tragedy of the past two thousand years, he said, was that man had plucked out of Christianity for his own use whatever seemed easiest and most convenient, ignoring the rest. He had longed for spiritual security and he had seized upon it in Christianity. But that was only one aspect of Christianity. The aspect of ethics in Christianity—the development of a higher morality for himself and the group as a whole, the refinement of conscience—this he conveniently ignored. Thus Christianity became not so much a new way of life which could ennoble individual and group behavior as a heavily subdivided and even competing series of theological systems which man regarded most often as offering preparation for death rather than for life. This particular emphasis also had the effect of causing people to regard Christianity as a convenient cleansing op-

