

The Literary Sampler

Excerpts from the Season's Well-Seasoned Titles

The Art of Staring

THE LEGEND, PARTLY FOSTERED BY HIMSELF, that Winston was a preternaturally stupid little boy has doubtless encouraged habits of indolence in many generations of other schoolboys, and has no doubt often afforded some solace to their parents. We have seen enough of his work to denounce this legend as false. He was not stupid; indeed he early showed originality of mind. He was obstinate, rebellious and mischievous. No one could not make him do or learn anything against his will. Unthinking schoolmasters found it easier to write him off as stupid than to scrutinize and adapt their own methods. Yet, despite his ostensible failure at school, these unhappy years were far from wasted. His parents kept him at a distance and this, combined with his mutinous outlook at school, early compelled him to stand on his own feet and to make his way in the world by his own exertions and by his own methods. He had to fight every inch of his road through life; nothing came easily to him, not even oratory and writing, in which he was later to excel. To achieve success he had to develop that intense power of concentration which, as it grew, was to serve him and his fellow countrymen so well. In later life he was fond of quoting Napoleon's phrase: *L'art de fixer les objets longtemps sans être fatigué*. This priceless gift was perhaps intuitive to Napoleon—but it had to be remorselessly mastered by Winston. Nonetheless history may decide that he ultimately exercised this mental power as abundantly as did Napoleon.

—From "Winston S. Churchill, Youth, 1874-1900," by Randolph S. Churchill (Houghton Mifflin, Nov.).

Mickey Finn for Moths

LET ME ALSO EVOKE THE HAWKMOTHS, the jets of my boyhood! Colors would die a long death on June evenings. The lilac shrubs in full bloom before which I stood, net in hand, displayed clusters of a fluffy gray in the dusk—the ghost of purple. A moist young moon hung above the mist of a neighboring meadow. In many a garden have I stood thus in later years—in Athens, Antibes, Atlanta—but never have I waited with such a keen desire as before those darkening lilacs. And suddenly it would come, the low buzz passing from flower to flower, the

vibrational halo around the streamlined body of an olive and pink Hummingbird moth poised in the air above the corolla into which it had dipped its long tongue. Its handsome black larva (resembling a diminutive cobra when it puffed out its ocellated front segments) could be found on dank willow herb two months later. Thus every hour and season had its delights. And, finally, on cold, or even frosty, autumn nights, one could sugar for moths by painting tree trunks with a mixture of molasses, beer, and rum. Through the gusty blackness, one's lantern would illumine the stickily glistening furrows of the bark and two or three large moths upon it imbibing the sweets, their nervous wings half open butterfly fashion, the lower ones exhibiting their incredible crimson silk from beneath the lichen-gray primaries. "*Catocala adultera*!" I would triumphantly shriek in the direction of the lighted windows of the house as I stumbled home to show my captures. . . .

—From "Speak, Memory," by Vladimir Nabokov (Putnam, Nov.).

Stress

. . . PRESENTLY I HEAR MYSELF saying to WSM, "This beauty [Vivien Leigh] and I had one hell of a scrap the other night, and it was all on account of you."

"How so?" asks Maugham.

"Well," I explain, "we were talking about *Then and Now* and I referred to the play as *mandraGOla*, which is the way we say it in America. At least, it's the way we said it when I was a student at the American Academy and we did the first act of it as an examination play." Maugham's eyebrows are arched. Vivien wants to talk, but I will not let her. "I know it's said differently in England and differently in Italy. But *we* say *mandraGOla*. So, of course, my friend here put me down pretty sharply—"

Vivien interrupted. "Not sharply enough," she said. "I don't know *why* he insists on being so stubborn. We all know it's pronounced *mandRAGola*."

I take over again. "Just a minute, baby. We've got the horse's mouth right here. Mr. Maugham, what is the correct pronunciation?"

"Well," said Maugham, "so far as I know, there is no question that the name—" here he took a sip of his stinger before continuing "—is pronounced 'mmmm-mm-mmmm'. . ."

I was horrified. Something about our nervous excitement had communicated itself to him and he was stuck on that "m." In this case it was not possible to switch to another word. Under the table I saw him snap his fingers and punch his palm; above the table his anguished face was still trying to free the word.

"Mmmmm-m . . ." His face exploded. His jaw went mad, his eyes rolled back in his head, and out roared the word, 'mmmagenaMERingolaMEDranLOLO!'

Ruth closed her eyes. I felt my face flush. People at the surrounding tables looked over at us, and even one or two of the waiters could not help but stare.

"There. What did I tell you?" I heard Vivien say with cool, casual triumph.

—From "Remembering Mr. Maugham," by Carson Kanin (Atheneum, Oct.).

The Looks of Music

ON NEW YEAR'S DAY I took Miss Stein a musical manuscript, the setting for voice and piano of her *Susie Asado*. Reply was instant:

. . . I like its looks immensely and want to frame it and Miss Toklas who knows more than looks says the things in it please her a lot and when I know a little other than its looks but I am completely satisfied with its looks, the sad part was that we were at home but we were denying ourselves to everyone having been exhausted by the week's activities [actually that was the day she cut off her hair] but you would have been the exception you and the Susie, you or the Susie, do come in soon we will certainly be in Thursday afternoon any other time it is luck but may luck always be with you and a happy New Year to you

always

GERTRUDE STEIN.

—From "Virgil Thomson," by Virgil Thomson (Knopf, Oct.).

Order in the Court

HUMOR BUBBLES UP through the dramatic tides of contest in the most unexpected ways. A blue-coated court attendant reported to Justice Geller that one of the jurors was taking notes. This resulted in a conference with counsel and then the judge's learned lecture to the jurors on the inadvisability of this practice. Although it was not forbidden, it sometimes gave the juror the notion, when he got into the jury room, that his arguments were entitled to more weight because he had memoranda to back up his recollection. This would upset the desired objective of free and equally balanced discussion. If a juror needed to have his memory refreshed, he could call for the particular testimony or exhibit and the stenographer would read it to all the jurors. Furthermore, while making notes the juror's attention might be

diverted from other testimony, equally important. When the judge was through with his reasoned strictures, one of the woman jurors surrendered the notes which she had made to the attendant to give them to the judge. He read them aloud:

"Oranges, grapefruit, vegetables, dry milk, meat, desserts, air mail stamps."

—From *"The Jury Returns,"* by Louis Nizer (Doubleday, Nov.).

Winner in Cosmic Sweepstake

IT IS A GLORIOUS DESTINY to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.

I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them—and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not "they" but my own self. There are no strangers!

—From *"Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,"* by Thomas Merton (Doubleday, Nov.).

"I Am Insulted, I Am Grateful"

WHAT IS GIRI? If pressed into Western terminology, *giri* is a moral imperative, a spiritual obligation which, if it cannot otherwise be paid in full, must be fulfilled by destroying one's life. Perhaps it is best expressed by the old French phrase *noblesse oblige*. It has to do with one's personal honor in all relationships. . . .

The smallest favor, even the offer of a cigarette or a glass of water, demands reciprocation. Because each gift, favor, or word of praise must, in effect, be paid for, the Japanese will often go out of their way to avoid being recipients. They

are actually resentful of casual favors or compliments offered by strangers, for they have enough obligations toward their relatives and acquaintances without having to take on obligations thrust upon them by outsiders. So resentful are they of incurring unwanted obligations that they have developed strange ways of saying thank you. In Japanese there is no direct way of saying this simple phrase. Instead they use words and phrases that translate into such expressions of regret, indeed, of rancor, as: "It is unrepayable," "Oh, this difficult thing!" "I am insulted, I am grateful," "This unextinguishable debt!" "Oh, this poisonous feeling!" And it must be a poisonous feeling, to be eternally indebted to practically every acquaintance.

—From *"The People of Japan,"* by Pearl S. Buck (Simon & Schuster, Sept.).

Handling the Reluctant Rejector

THE BEST WAY TO DEAL with someone who seems determined to give you a vote of confidence by accepting an invitation of some kind from you is to offer that invitation in such an embarrassing, self-deprecating manner that he couldn't possibly accept it without descending to the same humiliating level.

We illustrate by developing our first example:

You: "I suppose you already have plans for tonight?"

REJECTOR: "Not at all—why?"

You: "Oh, well, we were thinking of having some people over. I guess it's kind of short notice, though."

REJECTOR: "Not really. We didn't have any particular plans—"

You: "I'm so embarrassed. It's not even for dinner. We invited these two couples for dinner, you see, and there



really wouldn't be enough food for everybody."

REJECTOR: "Oh, well, that's perfectly all right. We planned on eating home tonight anyway."

You: "I'm afraid I'm actually paying off a lot of social obligations tonight—"

REJECTOR: "Oh."

You: "Yes, my husband keeps complaining we only have people over that I like, so tonight I thought we'd have some people over that he likes."

REJECTOR: "I see."

You: "Listen, don't feel you have to be polite and say yes if you have anything you'd rather do."

REJECTOR: "Mhmm. Well, now that you mention it, I do remember some sort of promise to visit my in-laws later this evening. You know how those things are."

You: "No, listen—don't apologize. To tell you the truth, I didn't really expect you to be very anxious about coming over to see us anyway."

—From *"How to Make Yourself Miserable,"* by Dan Greenburg and Marcia Jacobs (Random House, Oct.).

Bequest

(Mary Berenson to Nicky Mariano, Feb. 5, 1944)

DEAREST NICKY,

I am very sorry not to write this with my own hand but neither hand nor eyes are working well. The truth is I am dying only I cannot die. The doctors will not give me receipts for medicines that might kill me and I am too ill to go out of my room to look for anything or to die in the garden. I suffer so much that the gate is already open on the long road we have to travel alone, but I cannot start. However all this is not important. What I want to express I never could express even if I had the use of my hand and eyes. It is the love and admiration and affection of many years. There is no cloud in the thought of you as there is in almost everything else. The end of life, if you remain conscious, is a sort of purgatory in which all your sins and mistakes come crowding upon you, but between you and me there is nothing of the kind—all is perfectly serene and I think of you with the deepest love.

If I die in time I hope you will marry B.B. [Benard Berenson]. You will have my deep sympathy, but all the worldly things are fading away. . . .

. . . I am almost glad that B.B. should not see me in my pain and weakness. I love to think how in spite of all our failings and so-called infidelities we have always stuck together and stuck to Italy and when I am able to think at all I think of him with tender affection.

—From *"Forty Years with Berenson,"* by Nicky Mariano (Knopf, Oct.).

Echoes of Sholom Aleichem

By BEL KAUFMAN, author of *"Up the Down Staircase."*

THERE I am, perched pudgily for all eternity on his right knee, while his left is pre-empted by my cousin Tamara. I am a year old, Tamara six, and we look unblinking into the camera. His arms hold us gently. His wide silk tie, knotted dashingly, his fair hair, cut long in the fashion of the time, his elegant little beard and blond mustache are youthful and debonair. His eyes twinkle behind his glasses; he is half smiling.

We were Papa Sholom Aleichem's only grandchildren during his lifetime, and he adored us. "You see these woods? I just gave them to Tamarochka. You see this lake? I gave it to Bellochka." I envied Tamara: she used to help him write by trotting along on his walks and holding his hand. She went to America with him while my parents and I remained in Russia. She knew him longer.

I was too little to know him. Except for one memory, my sources are not my own, but family heirlooms: "Papa always . . . Papa never . . . Papa used to . . ."

We called him "papa," never "grandfather." He didn't look or act like the grandfathers we knew. (When I was born, he chided my parents in a humorous verse-letter for making him a grandfather for the second time.) To avoid confusion, Tamara and I called our own fathers "papochka"—a diminutive endearment. So it remained: papa and papochka. Later, in this country, we coined a name for our grandmother, his widow, combining the English word "grandma" with a description of her hair: she was "grayma." It was she who once was his fourteen-year-old pupil with whom the young Sholom Aleichem had fallen romantically and irrevocably in love.

With children, Papa Sholom Aleichem was like a child himself, full of fun and jokes and tricks and bits of nonsense. He invented stories and games for them, composed funny rhymes, made up and taught them a special language, and often conspired with them in pranks such as mixing up the guests' rubbers in the hall. His impishness goes back to his own childhood; in his autobiography he tells how, as a small boy, he had classified his stepmother's daily stream of abuse alphabetically, into a Glossary of Curses.

Being with him must have been a delight, but I have only one clear, first-



Bel Kaufman, Tamara Kahana, and Sholom Aleichem: "How can one not write?"

hand memory. (Is it possible, when I was only two?) We are in a zoological garden, Papa Sholom Aleichem and I. There are monkeys on the branches of the tree above us. Papa makes a cone cup out of a sheet of paper, fills it with water from a fountain, drinks it thirstily, and throws the remaining water up at the monkey. Then he bends down and explains to me why the monkey would not drink: "*Ona isporchennaya*." I never knew whether he meant "She is spoiled," like a badly brought up child, or "She is defective," like a broken toy. Since no one in the family can recall this incident, perhaps it really happened—possibly in Badenweiler, or in Albek, a German resort on the Baltic Sea. I learned subsequently that towards the end of his life, at about this time, Sholom Aleichem was plagued by an unquenchable "pseudo-diabetic" thirst. He used to joke about that, too, saying he was sure now he would not die of hunger but of thirst.

It was only long after I had slid off his knee and grown up that I realized how much of Sholom Aleichem had become a part of my life through my mother, who was, of his six children, in many ways most like him. She had the same love of pomp and circumstance. From papa to my mother to me and, in turn, to my children passed the ceremonial of wrapping presents and tiptoeing, in the middle of the night, into a birthday child's bedroom to arrange

them in elaborate pyramids around the bed. She had the same facility for writing letters in amusing verse. The same extravagances, enthusiasms, expectations of miracles. Pretense that all was well when it wasn't. Small vanities, superstitions, eccentricities. Generosity. Delight with success, impatience with dullness. And laughter—the same irrepressible laughter.

Sholom Aleichem loved laughter. Only towards the very end, in the terrible days following the death of his eldest son, when he was felled by disasters and a fatal sickness, was there no laughter in him, though he never ceased, even on his sickbed, to write laughter for others.

He was a festive man. He knew how to make a holiday of ordinary moments: arrivals, departures, meals. He took pleasure in preparing surprises, presenting gifts. He had a talent for giving. ("Coat? What coat?" "The coat you left the house with. Where is it?" "Oh, that. I gave it to a man who didn't have one.") And he had a talent for love. He loved nature passionately; he couldn't bear to see even a flower picked. "No, no," he once told his youngest daughter, "let it live!" He loved little things, anything little: little children, little animals, knick-knacks, watch fobs, gadgets, objects, desk ornaments. He couldn't pass a stationery store without stopping to admire the window display. On his desk were many marvels. There was an imitation inkblot, probably made of celluloid, that he once placed on top of a manuscript, to frighten his family. And the little bicycle, which every visitor felt compelled to pick up and finger; eyes crinkling with laughter, Sholom Aleichem would gently remove it from his visitor's hands and put it back. He loved beauty; an unattractive sight offended him. He once cut in two a hat of grayma's he thought ugly.

He himself was slight, slim, elegant. He was vain of his youthful appearance; if he found an occasional gray hair in his mustache, he would pluck it out at once. He dressed meticulously: colored vests, specially knotted ties, pince-nez on a black ribbon. But then, he was meticulous in everything, his handwriting, his manuscripts, his dealings with people. He had exquisite delicacy and tact, though he did not suffer fools gladly. My mother would describe how he ruined the chances of any dull or pretentious suitor who came to call on one of his four daughters. Papa Sholom Aleichem was a superb mimic. The young man, the moment he was gone, was demolished by laughter.

Sholom Aleichem was a consummate actor, and gave public readings of his works to wild acclaim. But his first and most appreciative audience was his family. "Papa finished a story! Papa is going