



THE POINT OF VIEW

An Inveterate
Chautauqua
Fan

IN SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE, last July, was an article called "The Tents of the Conservative," in which the writer turns the search-light of analysis upon the average Chautauqua audience. The article is sane and in many ways admirable, but a little one-sided in that it is written by one whose chief acquaintance with such audiences is formed from the platform instead of the benches. I can but feel that the outlook of such an observer is a bit distorted by the smoke and cinders of hot, dusty trains, and his judgment a little warped by the monotonous rush of one-day stands sandwiched between "bowl and pitcher" hostleries.

I speak as a dweller (by marriage) in the tents of conservatism, and have mingled with my particular Chautauqua tent-mates for about the same length of time that the writer has been catching his moving-picture views of other tents and other communities. I have studied the reaction to programmes with the peculiar interest aroused in the wife of a stand-pat guarantor who is in annual danger of sacrificing a new hat or gown in the interests of community uplift. Every woman will therefore understand that my interest in audiences is earnest and persistent. As an inveterate Chautauqua fan, therefore, I hope that I have no chip of provincialism ready to be knocked from my shoulder, but I cannot help taking a little exception to one or two phases of Mr. Albert's summary of our psychology. I feel throughout the article an undercurrent of what he himself calls "the undersurface contempt of the representative scholar for the concessions required to hold the attention of general audiences." Well—perhaps—I admit the need of the concessions, but not of the contempt. We who come to the Chautauqua lectures come, for the most part, as eager-minded learners, earnestly seeking the truth from the best teachers who can be persuaded to visit our communities; and, as intelligent thinkers, willing to be led into new paths of thought, we deserve no scholarly contempt, though we must have technicalities explained or omitted. We tent-listeners are, as a bunch, not so

keenly interested in material details and scientific processes of trades and arts—that is, as mere processes—but we are tremendously eager to know and reasonably able to assimilate what that trade, art, or profession is doing or may do for the world. So that lecturer who can arouse our best and most wide-spread enthusiasm is he who can hold in honest respect our ignorance of the material side of a question, and has no intellectual disdain for our keen searching for the real meaning of it all. Such a speaker can hold our interest on almost any subject, from the making of pins to the development of our criminal classes.

Oversqueamishness in moral life, no appreciation of real music—we are even behind the jazz wave, it seems—not up to our college youths in free verse, no progressivism in politics, no appreciation of the arts, and, "most unkindest cut of all!", penny-pinching!—these are the chief characteristics that we present to our lecturer, a general all-around lack of progress. In only one respect were we overestimated, and that was our implied knowledge of Shakespeare and the Bible and—was it Drinkwater? Some of us know the Bible, but Shakespeare is a mere name to at least half of us, and we are one hundred per cent ignorant of Drinkwater.

Now, in the face of all this evidence, first-hand and seemingly irrefutable, how am I to spring my anachronism and state that we conservatives are the true progressives? We of the narrow-path type are the really liberal-minded. Why? Proof? Let us consider who it is that makes up the Chautauqua audience.

I look around my own particular tent of conservatism, which is, I think, typical of this great American institution. Here is a group of nurses from our hospital, women whose thinking process is made up from a first-hand and continuous intimacy with life stripped of all veneer and illusion. Progressive? Yea, verily, too progressive to be caught by any new theory until it has proved true. They know in their profession that blind experiment is impossible, yet how keen they are for any real advance. Over

there are some teachers from the public schools. Behind the glasses of every one of them is a mind ever on the alert for some real step ahead. No class of people on earth has been so weighed down and hampered by such a mass of new theories, doctrines, and foibles, coming from the would-be progressives, as these same teachers; yet every real thinker among them knows that the pure art and science of teaching have advanced very little in the last twenty years. They have learned to be very wary in their acceptance of all the attractive folderols presented to them. Are they non-progressive thereby? After all, it would seem that the truly progressive fish is the one that has learned to avoid the carefully camouflaged hook.

There is always in the tent a goodly sprinkling of business men and farmers, as genuinely interested in business principles and developments as J. D. Rockefeller himself. Here is a bunch of post-office clerks, whose service and intelligence are usually way beyond the measure of their salaries, and whose insight into the workings of the United States Government is keen and understanding. Scattered all over the tent are women who are wives and mothers, and among them is a sprinkling of college women, who, viewed from the platform, look exactly like the others. They, too, have learned to weigh and prove before clasp new theories to their hearts. If a woman's only text-book is a woman's magazine, she learns what a mass of useless theory must be cast aside for every grain of real help in her own field.

And we are all, every man and woman in the tent, politicians. Some of us are calling ourselves Democrats and others Republicans. Many of us have tried out the Socialists and found them wanting, and most of us scratch our ballots, proudly and unblushingly. Almost to a man we are ready to hop off our rotten little old party planks, because we know them to be unreliable and unsound. It is not from blind fanaticism or gross ignorance that we still hover over them, but because we are too really progressive to leap into the stream until we see the next safe stepping-stone. We are waiting with fasting and prayer for deliverance from political corruption. Some are looking for a Moses, a great leader to guide us out of this political Egypt in which we find ourselves

making bricks without straw; some are wondering when the American people will wake up to the fact that they have the power to stop these infernal machines; all are waiting in their hearts for some glimmer of a truly progressive light. We are in too deadly earnest, we conservative progressives of the tents, to be blown about by uncertain winds of doctrine.

We are a tolerant lot, too, we of the Chau-tauqua audiences. Few of us have any claim to be called real critics (we are so seldom technical), but many a comparatively mediocre entertainment has received fairly generous applause, given from sheer good nature. One may speak with twenty friends on the way out and hear such comments as: "Yes, that will do for a starter"; or "Pretty soon they will give us something real"; "Of course they have to mix some poorer things along with the fine ones." Rank and file, we are never fooled. The bombastic "home and mother lecturer" who doesn't ring true would be horrified to know how many understanding glances and whispered "hot airs" are exchanged by the conservative listeners leaving the tent.

There is, no doubt, a golden vein of truth and right running through religion, morality, arts, sciences, and politics. We who frequent the "tents of conservatism" believe that we have, in a few rare instances, struck that pure gold in the midst of much useless ore. Which, then, is the true progressive—he who tries to stay near the vein, patiently sifting and melting the ore, always hoping to recognize the next pure gold, or he who runs noisily in all directions, picking up useless dross and often losing sight of the proven way?

The true progressive, often dubbed conservative, is like unto a man scaling a high precipice, who, finding a foothold, however narrow and uncomfortable, stays his feet therein until he is sure of the next step; while his companion, trying here and there a new possibility, often falls, and is of no use in finding the upward way, except to show Progressive where he must not step.

FOR ages it was man's uninterfered-with right and privilege, and indeed his most distinguishing attribute—that of enjoying ill health. If he wished to do the things he ought not to do, or not to do the things he ought to do, it was nobody's busi-