

Cartwright vs. America

By Chard Powers Smith

*A forecast of revolution—but not in the name of Marx and Lenin.
A defense of the American character in reply to Edmund Wilson's
devastating portrait of Mr. Cartwright in the March SCRIBNER'S.*

IT is not difficult in these dubious days to foresee radical economic change. It takes no Marxian to see that the capitalist machine, grown formidable since the turn of the century, is already wobbling. And coincident with economic maladjustment we see public and private morals degraded to the standard of expediency, until there is scarcely visible in our sky a leader or an aim to which we can attach either personal or national aspiration. The signs of the bourgeois decay of the Marxian prophecy are all around us. It is clear that change must come, and by force if necessary. What apparently is not clear is the quarter from which change will arise, the forces which in this peculiar nation will gather to cast off the parasitic system which has been growing over it for a generation.

The communist's answer to this question is facile. He need only open his Marx. There he will find it written that the condition of the workers will grow worse until they are ripe for revolution, until indeed they have "nothing to lose but their chains." Meanwhile competing capital will have concentrated in vast combinations which will grow so unwieldy that they will no longer be profitable even to their owners, while their organizations will be so centralized as to invite easy appropriation. The proletariat will rise with the repressed rage of centuries and hand over the machine to their dictators. It will all be easy. The workers need only have patience a little longer. It is all in the book. And if the communist will further glance at the statistics he may take comfort in the fact that his potential army—all the mine and factory workers, whether native or foreign-born, augmented by those of un-American tradition in other occupations—are about 40 per cent* of the population, set off against a reactionary class of perhaps 5 per cent whose motto is the war-cry of Commodore

Vanderbilt—"The public be damned." Surely the proletariat are the class in the country with the numerical strength and the common cause to bring about change.

The communist has his ideal prescription for sick countries everywhere. It is written in his book. Surely it will apply here. He need not consider the peculiar nature of this patient, her special neurotic organization which was determined a long time ago. He need not consider the character of America. And he does well to neglect this factor in his diagnosis, for the true communist does not and cannot know this country for which he prescribes. The genuinely conditioned revolutionary who damns Jesus, Shakespeare, Ford and clean finger-nails as all equally bourgeois, this single-minded individual has never experienced America. He lives in the glib European illusion that America is young, that she has no past, only a future. He is likely to be foreign-born or—what is the same thing—he is born of one or two generations in industrial centres where his formative period received little or no influence from the culture of America before 1900, where his vision has been limited by the horizon of the factory or the mine, a horizon occupied only by his afflicted fellows and their afflicting rulers. He sees his 40 per cent growing yearly more restive and better consolidated. And he sees his 5 per cent of reactionary bosses crouching in their webs like spiders whom the flies will presently overwhelm. He sees his 40 per cent and his 5 per cent gathered with their economic issues around their chimneys and their holes in the ground. But what he does not see is that beneath the surface where the flies and spiders crawl there is a gigantic organism animated by a single spirit and a single tradition of three hundred years, an organism which in its own good and ponderous time will rise and shake off both flies and spiders in a cata-

*These, and the other estimates that follow are adapted roughly from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

clysmic gesture peculiarly its own. The communist does not see that a successful revolution by the workers under the red flag and in the name of Marx and Lenin, and a dictatorship of, for, or by the proletariat are all impossible in this country. The force of change, if it comes to force, will be applied by a majority of the American people, *of no special economic class*, rising against a minority who have denied their traditional rights as Americans, rising in the conviction that they are fighting "to make men free." And the names on their lips will be Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. And their symbols will be the same song and the same flag and the same eagle we have followed before, despite their sometime degradation by the capitalists.

This lethargic majority will be slow to move. They took about fifteen years to gather momentum before 1775, under the goading of the then progressives. They took about twenty-five years, under similar goading, before 1860. In their inertia they are like conservatives. But when they act they are like radicals in ruthlessness. In fact no European terminology can be applied to them. They are Americans. They are barely stirring to-day. They are still living under the characteristic hope that everything will come out all right. It may be another twenty-five years before they focus their power on a common cause. It may be much less. If the foreign idealists start a capitalist-labor buzz they will hasten the major move. And I hope they start their buzz, and I welcome the atrocities that may precipitate it. For it will be a minor skirmish between alien forces severally squatting on our land. And in pitching the communists back into the ocean America will awake to her ills. She will gather into a rumble and a hitch ahead, and will proceed to pitch back into the gutter the predatory system that has fed on her for thirty years. And she will emerge on a path of continuity visible back, not to Russia of 1917, but Plymouth of 1620 and Jamestown of 1607.

The peculiar soil of that path is the American soil, the soil of individualism, "liberty," "the dream of the common man"; the principle that I am the source of sovereignty, that I give up to government only so much of my freedom as is needful for my better security, and that I retain a maximal residuum of authority in moral, spiritual and economic choices; the principle that I do not exist for the state but the state for me. Absurd as are the demo-

cratic excesses to which this Anglo-Calvinistic notion has carried us—and they have been sufficiently pointed out!—it has yet been the integrating force of the nation for three centuries, and could no more be bred out by a generation of dictated education than it has been bred out by living for a generation under the capitalist anæsthesia. That individualism was valid and affirmative to meet its trials in the past. It is alive to-day in the unspoiled majority of the population, and presently they will hear again the soul of John Brown marching on.



In that up-rising the communist will be treated with as little patience as the capitalist. Despite his utopian message the American ear will not hear him at all. For better or for worse we are too far gone in democracy. I can resent to the point of war the fact that my country is not giving the worker and the farmer a square deal, that the state is not existing for them as well as for me. But I can feel nothing but a flaccid sag in my abdomen at the prospect of a utopia in which my neighbor and I, however poverty-bound, shall no longer be able to stand up severally and say "I," instead of collectively "we" or "the state" or the name and number of our soviet. That may be possible for the Russian peasant who begins, individualistically speaking, from zero. It may in fact represent the final state of humanity at which, after bloody centuries, we shall all arrive. But to me as an American living in this particular century it represents a final degradation of the race, an ant-hill in which the peculiar distinctions and justifications of the species *homo sapiens* will be lost. Limitation of the power incident to ownership?—certainly. Limitation of the amount of wealth to be enjoyed by an individual?—by all means. Central planning to stabilize production?—of course. Government supervision of hours, wages and the right to discharge?—the sooner the better. The laborer to have some voice in the management of his factory?—certainly, on the analogy of the farmer's voice in the affairs of his township. Collective control of markets by the farmers?—long overdue. Generally we must move with the world toward collectivism, but a collectivism peculiar to our traditions, not a collectivism borrowed from Russia or imposed by any alien dogma, a collectivism voluntarily entered into by a majority of the people involved, and sav-

ing the American dream. Never the loss of the individual in the state.

Quantitatively speaking, the force for progressive reform in America resides in the farmers and the inhabitants of village agricultural centres who wear the same character as their rural neighbors. No distinction need be made here between native- and foreign-born, for I have noticed in rural communities how quickly the soil impresses those who work it with the character of the generations who have worked it before them. Conservatively estimated, these agricultural people, like the workers and the foreign-born, make up 40 per cent of the population. Here is a homogeneous block of the country that would rather die than see its land collectivized or receive from above any dictation of its way of life. And the farmers will be very hard either to persuade or kill. Unlike old-world peasants they are already equipped with the automobile and the radio, and are generally in contact with the world beyond their mail-boxes. And unlike old-world peasants they are accustomed to think of themselves as free men with a share in and a responsibility for government. They have no sense of inferiority or class. They are conservative and satisfied with their own inner integrity. But they are the repositories of the crusading spirit of the Puritans, and when they move they will move fanatically, in the American way. The farmer may not rise without an economic impulse stronger than that goading him to-day. But when he does shoulder his gun he will march to the tune of an old moral impulse to tear down tyranny and make men free. Already he is awaking to the tyranny of middle-men and of industry. When his need is a little greater and he can couple it to a moral issue, let the capitalist and the communist alike beware. It will be John Brown again.

But the farmers alone can hardly be counted on to produce and put into effect a programme of reform applicable to industry as well as to agriculture. They will need leavening from other elements of the population whose interests are ramified throughout the country. They will look for leadership to men whose opportunities have opened to them national rather than local horizons. Where then are we to find these leaders who will make common cause with the farmer and co-ordinate his needs with those of the industrial worker?

One looks to municipalities with a population in excess of 5,000. (I take an arbitrary figure from the

statistics.) One deducts a fair estimate of the number engaged in manufacturing and mining, part of that 40 per cent of the entire population which I have conceded to the communists as the body of their invading army. One deducts also that 5 per cent of the population whom I set down as stand-patters. And one comes up with 15 per cent of the nation, city-dwellers, American-born and conditioned by the pre-capitalist culture, a group distributed over every economic and social stratum—laborers in transport and the crafts, government employees, shopkeepers, aviators, salesmen, professional men, scientists, educators, and all the innumerable occupations that grade between these and cluster around them. Here is a formidable group, not only a considerable man-power but the source to which America will look for leadership, as communism will look to that group of literary idealists who are becoming more and more articulate and who profess such a singleness of purpose. Is there an analogous singleness in this group that we may call the city Americans? Is there among them any living homogeneity, any social integrity which may be counted on to crystallize the country in its hour of trial which is coming nearer with every dawn?



At this point comes Mr. Edmund Wilson assuring us that there is no such integrity, that this important nucleus of America is lost beyond redemption in the void of capitalism. In an article called "The Best People" (SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE, March), he gives us in the person of one Cartwright a plausible portrait of a very ordinary kind of snob, a person who is helplessly committed to the standards of wealth, smartness, keeping up with the other "best people" by surrounding himself with the gadgets distributed to the socially ambitious through fads created by radios, electric signs and arty advertisements; a pathetic half-man who, reminded by a rudimentary humanity of the meaninglessness of his existence, makes a belated gesture toward art or literature, recoils from the failure of this into gin, and ends his days as a neurotic, an alcoholic, a suicide, or better, all three. Mr. Wilson professes a familiarity with this futilitarian. He tells us in some detail of his bathroom fixtures, his green tub and his purple toilet-paper. I daresay that my experience with America and Americans is as wide

as Mr. Wilson's. Yet I have never found it necessary to invade the smart *Vanity Fair* privacy of Mr. and Mrs. Cartwright. They are a peculiar phenomenon, the American version of the Old World little-bourgeois snob, but it is hardly necessary to identify them with the country. The peculiar set of determinants seeded down to every one born before 1900 somehow never took root in them, or sprouted so faintly as to produce only that nervous disquiet that asks another cocktail. Something was wrong back there in the days of their parents and their grandparents. They left whatever they were born to and chased off somewhere after wealth. They were on the move then and they are on the make now. Let them rest, with a bottle of gin as their headstone. But the inscription is "Cartwright." It is not "America."

But Mr. Cartwright, if his author wishes, may be made a symbol of a condition of chaos in which he is the most formless of all the unformed powers. As Mr. Wilson says, he is caught between the upper and the nether mill-stone. The upper mill-stone is the new-rich, the new very rich, the great capitalists who set out frankly after power and attain it, and to whom life's only meaning is the gathering of more power. These super-Cartwrights are included in the 5 per cent of the population I have set down as stand-patters. And beneath these and their Cartwright parasites the nether mill-stone is that loud section of the urban population who, stripped of all social standards by the new-rich whom they imitate and who prey upon them, have poured their vitality into hysterical pseudo-standards and make up that vast loud-speaking, electric-flashing, bathing-beautifying, Emily-Post-reading, fad-chasing, marathon-dancing, flag-pole-sitting, crooning, emasculated, speed-loving, sensation-loving, crime-breeding, wholly uncivilized horde that sprawls upon the country and is delighted to give it their appearance. Just who these people are there is no telling, to what extent they are included like the Cartwrights in our 15 per cent of city Americans, to what extent they are industrial workers or foreign-born and so outside this group. There is no telling to what extent they are a phenomenon already past with prosperity, and even now dividing in the quest for standards between the communists on the one hand and those we shall call the old Americans on the other. They are an uncertain lot, without social integration and so not of themselves formidable. But in so far as they represent a strain of

helplessness in the old American stock they may be significant. Together with the true Cartwrights and the new-rich we may lump them all under the name of Cartwright. For they are all afflicted with the same virus, Cartwright's disease, the anemia of wealth that leaves man-like bodies still gesticulating long after their inner being has vanished. The direction of the future may depend to some extent on the depth to which this disease has eaten. The question is whether, among that 15 per cent of the population we have called city Americans, there is still a solid body of old Americans with the integrity and the unanimity to lead the country along its determined way. It is a fight between the loud forces of wealth and the silent forces of tradition. It is *Cartwright vs. America*.



If Mr. Wilson had been content to point out his Cartwrights and their entourage as a disease and let it go at that, we might accept his criticism with the silent shame with which we read that of our other negative critics, the Menckens, the Lewises, the Dreisers. But Mr. Wilson, in his fury of a convert, goes farther. In one sweeping gesture he identifies his tissue-paper gentlefolk with all of American civilization. He assures us indeed that there is no such civilization, that in fact there never was. Cartwright is himself the inheritor of all his country ever had to offer. In addition to his pretense to plumbing, it seems that he makes some pretense to tradition. He models his morals feebly on the standards of the past. Wherefore, in the view of his author, he "manages part of the time at least to live in a world which does not really exist, which has never except briefly and locally existed." That is the dismissal by Mr. Edmund Wilson, social critic, of three hundred years of history whose continuous and consistent flow carried all of the population up to about 1900 and to-day carries at least half of 120,000,000 people, the only half that "really exists." That is the dismissal by Mr. Edmund Wilson, herald of American reality, of all that half of his country bred in a tradition that seeks no wealth beyond basic security and looks for reality only in moral and intellectual terms, a reality that Mr. Wilson, along with the other smug cynics, says "does not exist" and "has never except briefly and locally existed."

Is it perhaps needful that I enumerate that half

and more of the population in whom the reality of America persists? I have already indicated the bulk of the quota in the farmers, many of whom I have known, both east and west. Must I also point out that incalculable multitude of old Americans in cities, whose social integrity is one with that of the farmers? Must I point out that considerable number of my father's generation who submitted to the capitalist ether about 1900 and are now mumbling back into consciousness, mightily torn between their intelligence and their "anti-socialistic" prejudices? Must I point out, at the nether end of the scale, that characteristic preoccupation with social matters on the part of contemporary students who concern themselves at first with utopias—a healthy youthful phase—but after a few years will turn from curing humanity to see what can be done about their own country? Must I point out the people with whom I went to public school in my small native city, whom I find to-day taking their reverses with a laugh, going off to shoot ducks or play—and why not?—golf, poor people mostly, good fighters and uncheapened? Must I point out those wealthier among them who went to college, who knew the travails of the "lost generation," but who now are awaking to their traditional responsibility and are substituting capitalism, liberalism and communism for sex and liquor as subjects of conversation? Must I point out all of my university friends whose snobbery, when it existed, was a snobbery of genuine gentility and responsibility, family pride, and disregard of the Cartwrights? Must I point out that considerable minority in New York who hark back to the farm or the small town and have yielded not one whit to the electric sign and the radio?—although generally I give New York to the Cartwrights, along with perhaps two or three other enormous meccas of cheapness. Must I point out, in my present neighborhood, my hired man, carpenter, plumber, mason, grocer, butcher, garage-keeper, and all the rest who, along with my immediate farmer neighbors, are the same Yankees that their grandfathers were, and their great-great-grandfathers. Must I point out to Mr. Wilson and his comrades that we of America are still America? And may I point out, perhaps to their annoyance, that *we are not in any sense an economic class*? I will stand with my farmer neighbors, and with my

neighbors who like me are immigrants from New York. I will stand with my college friends some of whom are desperately poor. I will stand with all the clerks and shop-keepers in my native town and all such towns. I will stand with the man who has risen into prosperity with an industry he or his ancestors founded, an industry in which loyalty and mutual trust still obtain between employer and employee. I will stand with the very rich man who went mad after power and won it and recognizes his futility, refuses to be a Cartwright, and is raising his children in the old tradition to seek reality outside of money. We will stand together, we Americans. The capitalists will not buy us, and the communists will not budge us. We will move against the Cartwrights and their disease in our own time and in our traditional way of a crusade. We will brush the communists aside in passing and will, in our own way, remedy most of their complaints. We remember a time when wealth was pretty evenly distributed, when "the best people," in Mr. Wilson's silly phrase, were a third to a half the town, when social distinction was chiefly between landowner and "help." We remember the American scene as it was only day before yesterday, and we will set up an analogous scene on the industrial stage. We are sick of the negative critics who walk round us with their eyes closed and point out the Cartwrights and the Babbitts—albeit the Babbitts at heart are with us and will be with us. We have seen the Cartwrights and we don't like them. As for Mr. Wilson and his comrades, we shall hardly see them at all, especially when they fail to behave like guests in this country they clearly do not know.

We shall be slow to gather momentum. We have been dazed by the prospect of a prosperity that apparently did not need us. What is worse, we have been disorientated by the substitution of Freud and gin for Jehovah and decency. But we are not dead because we have been out of a spiritual job for a generation. Our problem is more difficult than that of the communist. He need only look in his book. But ours is the custody of the fact of America, and when we move we are a race upon its way. We have lost our gods, and we are groping for new ones. For we are addicted to gods and we follow them with a power that is, for all we know, unopposable. Our new gods are already looming.



The Happiest Time

A COMPLETE SHORT NOVEL ENTERED IN THE
\$5,000 PRIZE CONTEST

By Grace Flandrau

Author of "One Way of Love"

BACON smoke and cigarette smoke no longer curled toward the windows but blued the after-breakfast air in strata, quiet. The room was filled with the bland whiteness of reflected snow and in the morning pause, always the same but pleasant, Lily waited. She sat straight on her chair holding her coffee cup in her thin long fingers. Built like a little prima donna Lily was, full breast, trim small waist. Her Camellia-white face was smooth, her eyes at once blank and observant, and they rested on her furniture, her window curtains, all her things, contemplative. She waited for the exact moment when she should feel like getting up to do the dishes.

"... mauve baby pants, sixty-nine cents. Waterproof. Maids' aprons ..."

Lily's intaking, uncommitted look swerved to her mother.

"... eyelet trim, a dollar fifty. Wicker bird cages ..."

Mrs. Miller was sitting half turned from the table, scrunched up a little. She had one hand to the small of her back and the other clutched the morning paper firmly. Lily felt her own gaze on her mother, felt herself seeing her like something you see in a picture and for the first time. That was the way she saw things—or so Amy said—without thought, like an artist. I think too much, Amy said, to see things. Amy was funny.

Sharply Lily saw her mother's purple woolly dressing sacque fastened with the cameo pin. Never a time when she couldn't remember that pin, carved face of homely old man but ringletted with curls, sculptural, like the leaves on a Greek capital. Saw the gun-metal button pinned to her breast and the thin chain that held the glasses. When her mother

pulled a certain way the button ate the little chain quickly up and left the glasses dangling. And on top of her head that awful boudoir cap. *Honestly*. Nobody wore boudoir caps any more, and on crooked too, the coquettish frill hanging down over one eye. Well, that was Aunt Rose's fault, always giving her mother those awful caps. And you could see her hair on curl papers inside—This way I don't have to fix my hair when I get up. I can wait till you get ready to fix it for me, girly. And there would be, when she explained about the cap, that certain smile, timid, deprecatory, wistful. In her contemplation Lily seemed to see that smile, to see indeed the whole of her mother's life in a certain look on her face so gentle under coquettish frill.

And she saw too, the edges of her nostrils whitened by the pain under her shoulder blade. Gas, I knew I oughtn't to touch that cabbage. But I *will* do it. Always telling them what gave her this and what gave her that. And when she talked that way Lily sent Amy a little look, she just couldn't help it, and Amy got so angry with their mother she left the room. Or else burst out with something. But Amy went too far. Amy was terrible.

"... wicker bird cages, assorted sizes, from four ..."

A tremor that did not become a smile passed over Lily's full finely shaped lips. "Well, mother, as there aren't any babies or any maids or even any birds in this house ..." Still, if she would read the newspaper aloud it might as well be advertisements as weather reports or chicken born with two hearts or family of baby snakes brought up by mother cat! Lily gave a short laugh and got to her feet. Poor mother, bless her heart.

Gosh, honey, can't you stop her? Thatch com-