

Spotlight

BY WINIFRED JOHNSTON, '24

OF THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE

Norman, January 2

I

More than any other humorist of our time William Penn Adair Rogers represents the Great Typical American. He is the voice of democracy. He is the living embodiment of the free, shrewd, friendly Southwest, as yet untainted by public education and untamed by mass production.

The genius of Rogers is not a decadent one, nor even one of disillusion. It is certainly not one to which classicists would point with pride. Yet he is near related to the great masters of gusto, at once as universal and as local as Aristophanes or Shakespeare. Like Ring Lardner he speaks the language of the people. And like Mark Twain, in subject he is as "native as a bluff to the Mississippi or a pine tree to a red spur of the Rockies."

His art is one of drawing elaboration—based on reversal, exaggeration, or incongruity of phrase, comparison, or situation. He's a movie fellow, he confesses, but not a regular one, of course: he's been married twenty years and still got the same wife. It is an art lighted by common sense. When newspapers reported that Hoover was saving the country much expense in feed and care by moving the White House saddle horses to an army post, it was Rogers who credited Coolidge with the guess that the horses would quit eating when they got to the Post.

His aim, if aim must be assigned such seeming ingenuousness, is to portray rather than to correct. Yet there is a wholesomeness in his most Rebelaisian moments. He takes a sly poke at his constituents in reviewing a recent best seller: "Remember, History in miniature, you don't have to read!" At politics he is more than a reviewer. The variations he works on the daily news are equalled only

by the figures he weaves with his flying lariat. And was there ever a nicer evaluation of human interest than his description of a visit to the "Mack Sennet end of our Legislative Body," a day "when the fish wasn't doing much but the visitors saved the show."

Brookhart of Iowa was supposed to denounce Fess of Ohio. Well as everybody knew there was plenty of subject material for him to work on, why the place was packed.

Well in the meantime, Mr Hoover had got em to the White House and fed em the day before, and you feed a Senator and he is just like an old stuffed house cat, he is no good for practical denouncing. You got to keep em hungry to make em work good. In the meantime Alice and Mrs Gans happened to come up on the same Elevator and into the Senate Gallery and sit down together. Well Farm Relief, National Anthem Relief, Smoot and his Sugar relief, it all vanished.

If Mabel Willerbrandt had been caught going into Texas Guinans with Bishop Cannon it wouldnt have caused any more of a commotion. What a senator does is of no interest to Washington for he will do the same thing over again tomorrow. But what Alice does at anytime is news to the World. If Tom Heflin had been caught at mass it couldnt have been more front page.

His writings as a whole are social documents of worth. Wilson found his comments illuminating as well as funny. Some day *The Letters of a Self Made Diplomat to his President* may be generally recognized as more than an amusing picture of post-war Europe.

II

Rogers has none of that contempt for his fellows which links Lardner to Swift. His chaffing can be swallowed when Lardner's scorn sickens. For Lardner does not love his champions, chauffeurs, caddies, pick-me-ups, and impresarios; and one cannot hate humanity without wishing it annihilated.

Rogers never exploits the individual in

his meannesses as does Lardner in his savage indictments of democracy. The spectacle of Tom Heflin baiting the Catholics gives this cowboy no more pleasure than seeing a horse charged by a bull. Like Lincoln, Rogers seems to have a second nature "compact of instinct and loving kindness." Understanding and sympathy make light his reproof. His correction is gentle and indirect. Even in such a field of prejudices as politics he seldom slights justice to the individual. It was the system that sent Americans into Nicaragua that he was hollering, he says. He admits that the American boys may have suffered danger in spite of them fighting with planes and the Nicaraguans having to defend themselves with beanshooters. But he reminds the boys that you can be killed just as dead in an unjustified war as you can in protecting your own home.

True to his nativity Rogers sees no man-made halo. Like Mark Twain he has been accused of lack of taste. And like Twain he could only be bewildered at such a charge. If there is partiality in his hitting it is because those in exposed positions are the natural targets for wit. Possessed of the proverbial American irreverence for personalities and ideals, he exercises it with the liberty of the licensed jester.

He spots celebrities with practised eye. He makes Charles Francis Adams shake hands with Babe Ruth; and then introduces to the Boston audience "a bigger man than either," "bigger than both of 'em put together," the giant of the Ringling Show that was to open the next day in the center of American conservatism.

The Coolidges, however, still entertain him at dinner. It has been reported that Will Hayes recently held up a show for five minutes by locking himself into Rogers' dressing-room in order to avoid being introduced to the comedian's crowd. For the most part people are not such modest violets. They accept Rogers' attentions and introductions as they do Tex Guinan's knowing it a part of the American scene and secure in the man's essential kindness of heart.

Tolerant of humanity, Rogers is at the same time observer and brother.

III

Out of Oklahoma came this ambassador of the people and for the people.

Strong, crude, but kindly and far-seeing, his is the spirit of the last frontier. Covarubias has portrayed him in flannel shirt and knotted kerchief. But the store suit and the made-up tie seem as expressive of this prairie Punchinello. He knows the world. But he has never attempted to wipe the red clay of his native soil from his yellow shoes. His mother was a Cherokee Indian; he was named for an Indian chief; and was himself originally a cowboy with

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creased as rapidly as it did, the stock market boom (based on higher profits and fed on bank credit) would not have occurred, and we would not have had much credit inflation. Installment buying would not have been as great, neither would the balance of foreign trade have been as large; but the home demand for consumers' goods would have been supported by actual money received rather than by artificial means.

Time will not permit me to discuss the difficulties in the way of recovery from the present depression. However, I must say that I do not agree that the present widespread unemployment situation would be relieved materially by lowering wages. The larger part of the present unemployment is due to the closing down of industry which in turn is due to the excess of goods in the markets.



SPOTLIGHT

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Muhlbach's rodeo. He indulges in neither war-whoop nor song of the "lone prairie." But he swings a mean rope and the breath of the prairie is in his sandy hair.

He sticks his head around a prop, and the audience receives the pleasure and the shock of recognition. His awkwardness is not foreign to America. Here again is that which was lovable in Lincoln. With his ruffled hair and protruding lip Rogers too has the charm of ugliness.

Of the professional funny-men it has

been said that only Rogers and Cobb suggest their calling: they alone have the "anxious air of getting ready to cut the plate with a hot one." There is about Rogers however none of the profitable cheerfulness and the busy briskness of American citizenry. The slouch suggests his vast indifference to time. His is the easy fellowship of the leisured class: that club life made up of a male countryside which humanized Lincoln's wisdom and made his expression popular. Rogers too has the gift of dramatizing experience that springs from the swapping of yarns with one's neighbors. And with the good-nature, strength, and innocence of the average Western American, he too gives the impression of possessing in addition something of that personal, moral, and intellectual discipline that Herbert Croly claimed places Lincoln with the classic types of consummate personal distinction.

Will in person is irresistible. He is the friend of college presidents and the Prince of Wales. He ropes, hog-ties, and brands his audiences. And they like it, in the capital of the United States as well as in the University of Oklahoma. He pricks the collegian's sophistication, jokes at Oklahoma's traffic rules, jibes at Washington's social wrangles. He is initiated into the collegian's pet fraternity, has hotels and statues raised to him in his home town, and is in on whatever is served at Capitol tea-parties.

Ambassador of the United States to Europe, without Portfolio: Will Rogers, ready to crack his gum on any joke "from Birth Control to Mass Production."

More than any other funnyman of his period he represents the Great Typical American. Like Charlie Chaplin he too is

a symbol. But Charlie's comedy is one of manners; and though he wanders on and off the screen in an eternal isolation, his is the great tradition of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Rogers has no tradition. And he is never alone. Behind him always are the people. Gauche, wise, friendly, he is the people.



BEAUTY'S VOTARY

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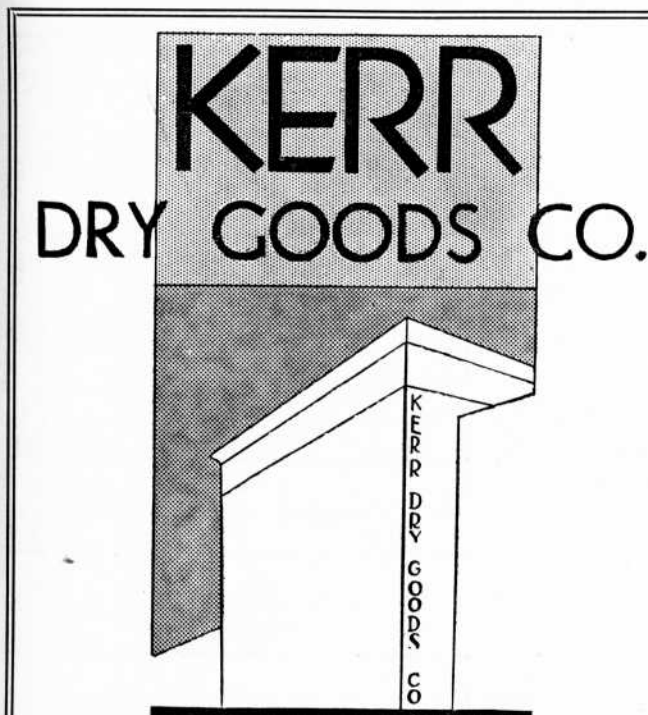
sieurrr-a wishes, but the storm will surely come." I have never seen a man's face resemble so much the face of a disappointed trail-hound.

"Oh, good then let us go. I have seen all and I am very tired."

His face lighted up incredibly, and he was all attention to my comfort as we got under way. He became excited and as happy as a boy. He was alert to every movement I made and anticipated my statements. I became suddenly interested in him and his changed mood. He lost some of his graceful movement by sudden quick jerks at the oars, and his one eye actually became bright and intelligent. He took one of his hands from the oar to wipe the sweat from his forehead, and before taking the oar again pointed to where the placid water was splashed pink by the after-glow.

The air was soft and the evening calm, and the grinding of the oars in the locks seemed exaggerated. One could hear the voices from the fishing boats far out on the lake.

"Pietro," I said suddenly, "you are



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