

Rambling notes while talking to myself

BY JOSEPH LEE, '30

MY three months-old German police puppy has just discovered that his tail will wag, and that he can express some of his moods thereby. I wish an increasingly saturnine humanity might likewise discover the true purpose of the tongue. Not that there isn't enough talk—believe me, Xantippe, there is plenty of that, mostly about the depression—but there is not enough conversation. Where are those almost fictional people who liked strolling off through the woods, arm in arm, to court privacy for a tête-à-tête? Where are those good companions who were not averse to sitting close enough to each other, in colloquy, to use the same footstool? And where—oh where!—are they who took pleasure in the art of reading aloud to one another? Gone, I suppose, to the same oblivion of the past where are the dear forgotten men who believed that depth of mind is not to be acquired in just fifteen-minutes-a-day. Intellectual giants, those men. They picked their own reading and their own friends!

There is no doubt that friendship is a mere pantomime among many classes today. The merchandising of living is almost consuming our personal relationships; intimacy is surely losing ground before practiced cynicism. Why? Perhaps because good conversation, the liquor of amicability, is degenerating into weekly business club pessimism, much as reading is being debased by the sorry practice of yearly subscriptions to a book club.

Nowadays, if by chance I run across a man who doesn't seem disposed to talk about what he has just read in the newspapers, I greet him with glee and rank him, temporarily at least, as a gentleman and a wit. Newspapers, because of their endless concern with the trivial, so preoccupy us with the passing excitement of the moment and so divert us daily from the permanent pleasures that little nervous composure is left for dallying calmly in our conversations with pleasantries and musings.

Repertee and epigrammatic humor are becoming so rare that they who practice those arts are looked up to as suspicious individualists. Such is the stupidity of social evolution (I almost used the meaningless word "progress"). Ironic indeed, when one remembers that the avowed ambition of the ages has been to develop a whole race of individualists. Why, the first mark of any man should be his conversation, because speech is the index of thought. One should be at no loss to identify a gentleman, in spite of conflicting definitions; just look for him who is capable of forgetting himself in his delight with the use of the power of expression.

A good conversationalist does not order his talk with figures and logic; he will roam through a thousand mere opinions and faulty memories before he runs down; he will speak as a train of thought naturally moves, around curves, up and down hills, off on side tracks; he will not eternally talk around the circumference of a circle but will shoot off at tangents of anecdote, incident, comment, observation, opinion; his speech, if it be mapped, will look like the meanderings of the streets of an old world city. Only one thing is always requisite; the mind must be stored with a whole pudding of ingredients, readily and appropriately summoned to the tongue. Such a mind may sometimes wander aimlessly and absent-mindedly, but pleasure is actually sought that way, and after all, absent-mindedness is the soul of concentration.

Perhaps if Mr Average Man would go more to the wits and wags and wise men (they're all the same) of the written page, he might be more permanently inspired and stimulated to pleasant intercourse with his friends.

Now that I have reminded myself of the wits of the written page, my note-taking takes me to four of my very best bed lamp companions: Christopher Morley, A. Edward Newton, James Norman Hall, and Stephen Leacock. I have been

chumming much with them of late, while I idle and loaf and play tennis and read books and look vainly for a job. None of them ever dislodges Stevenson as my favorite, but any one of them is an excellent side-kick. I had meant to ignore Stevenson in this ramble, but I simply can't go on to the others until I cite a perfectly delicious bit I found a few nights ago in his letters. R. L. S. was writing to H. C. Ide to bequeath his birthday date, November 13, to the latter's daughter, Annie. Miss Ide had been born on Christmas day and regarded herself as having been cheated out of her natural right to a private anniversary of her own. Stevenson decided to remedy that inexcusable privation, and chose the occasion to have sport with his forgotten legal training.

I, Robert Louis Stevenson, Advocate of the Scots Bar, author of the *Master of Ballantrae* and *Moral Emblems*, stuck civil engineer, sole owner and patentee of the Palace and Plantation known as Vailima in the island of Upolu, Samoa, a British Subject, being in sound mind, and pretty well, I thank you, in body: In consideration that

But find and read the rest for yourself. I promise you, it's rich!

To think of the departed Stevenson is to be reminded of the living Christopher Morley, whose genius seems to me to be blood kin to Stevenson's. His rambles among people, places, and books, his witty and intimate little essays on every subject under the sun, his stories, all are streaming delight to the informal mind. (I have just seen an announcement of his brand new *Ex Libris Carissimis*,* intended, says the *New York Times*, "to suggest a feeling for books which is purely personal and unacademic." Pleasant anticipation say I!) The really good books were written to be browsed in, to be made permanent companions, and Morley writes such books.

I remember seeing a play once called *The Charm School*, about an institution where modern young ladies went to acquire the charm they hadn't got at home. If I had charge of the curriculum of such a school (which I wouldn't have for anything) I would start the catalogue thus:

"Charm I. S-M-T-W-Th-F-S, 11-12 p. m. Reading in bed of any and all of the writings and sayings of one Christopher Morley, scholar, wit, gentleman, and connoisseur of tobacco. Not a dealer in that dubious quality (or quantity) called culture, but just lovably human."

If you haven't run across his *Confessions of a Smoker* you've missed something good. Here is a just a tidbit from that short (alas) and amiable reflection:

I cannot even read in a book of someone

*Published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

annual state fair edition published each year by the *Daily Oklahoman*. Mrs Ferris has been doing special advertising work for the *Altus Times-Democrat*.

1932

Mary Inzer Davis, '32 arts-sc., Tulsa, has been awarded a sociology scholarship to Smith college, in the school of social work, Northampton, Massachusetts. She was one of twelve graduate students chosen throughout the United States each year. Miss Davis was to begin her work July 1 and will specialize in child guidance.

Morris Frack, '32 eng., and Phillip Klein, '32 eng., and Harold, '32 eng., of Norman; have received notice to report to Randolph Field, San Antonio, Texas, July 2 for army reserve flight training.

1934

John L. Fortson, '34 journ., of Tecumseh, has the varied job of writing all local news, supervising make-up, helping mail out papers and writing editorials in addition to advertising and job work in his new position as editor-manager of the *Shawnee Times-Record*, weekly and official Pottawatomie county newspaper.



RAMBLING NOTES WHILE TALKING TO MYSELF

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enjoying a pipe without my fingers itching to light up and puff with him. . . . The rogue (Charles Lamb) simply can't help talking about tobacco, and I strike a match for every essay. God bless him and his dear Orinooko! Or Parson Adams in *Joseph Andrews*—he lights his pipe on every page. . . . I cannot light up in a wind. It is too precious a rite to be consummated in a draught.

I am reading your thoughts. Someone is wondering just what the young ladies of the Charm school are supposed to draw from an essay on pipe-smoking. All I can say is that the young ladies may draw more than you think. I've seen already a few of them behind trees at night with experimental pipes. Oh! One can never tell to what heights womanhood may aspire!

By the way, I am writing these words on Monday, the 16th day of May. Exactly one hundred and sixty-nine years ago (if 1763 from 1932 leaves that), also on Monday, the 16th of May, James Boswell, then twenty-three, was having his first meeting with Dr. Johnson. It was one of those moments when goose flesh arises on the brain. The memory of it inspired Boswell decades later to write this terse and tense description:

"(Mr Davies) announced his awful approach to me, somewhat in the manner of an actor in the part of Horatio, when he addresses Hamlet on the appearance of his father's ghost, 'Look, my Lord, it comes!'" Christopher Morley once wrote a note to the Johnsonian, A. Edward Newton, revealed by the latter in his *Amenities of Book-Collecting*, to wit: "Let us hereafter and forever drink tea together on this date in celebration of this meeting." Oh, to be in Phila-

delphia this day, and to be worthy of an invitation to drink with them, with the privilege of listening to the conversation they make. What talk it will be! (I wonder if they are tea-talking this minute!)

A. Edward Newton! It is without the slightest difficulty that I adhere to the moral of my introductory remarks and change the subject. I first came to admire, then to love A. E. N. through a series of his essays in the *Atlantic Monthly*, since collected into a volume called *A Tourist in Spite of Himself*. One of these essays, "In Standardland," was indescribably satisfying. It concludes with a typical Newtonism:

In the art of dining we are sadly deficient. Dining is an amenity; it was carried to excess by the Romans; in our zeal for reform we have destroyed it. . . . and, in the interest of efficiency, 'dine' standing up in a drug store with someone waiting behind us for our place. In happier days we occasionally enjoyed 'a large cold bottle and a small hot bird,' with conversation; now we have conversation out of a can, with canned food and canned music. Little by little we are taking all the joy out of life. . . . 'One should retire at nine, sleep on a hard mattress covered only with a sheet, rise at four in summer and five in winter, and never contemplate a woman with curves.' Who would wish to live at such a price?

It was not long before copies of A. E. N.'s *The Amenities of Book-Collecting* and *This Book-Collecting Game* found place but not peace on my bedside bookshelf. These two books boil over the pot-rim with no end of the most fascinating anecdotes and facts pertaining to worthy books and authors, with attention divided about equally between the two. On the inside of the jacket of *The Amenities* is a blurb, I have a notion written by A. E. N. himself, which, if there were nought else, is sufficient invitation to read him and leaves nothing to ask by way of description: "He smokes incessantly, never takes any exercise, has no love for automobiles, regards a screwdriver with suspicion and a monkey-wrench with horror." Good old A. E. N!

James Norman Hall is another writer for whom I have developed enough affection to call him by his initials in my thoughts. Let him be J. N. H. henceforth. Like Stevenson, Hall is a voluntary exile to the South Seas. From his idyllic home in Tahiti, he has written to his publishers, The Atlantic Monthly Co., the following self-revelatory dispatch:

If things go to pot, just you move down here. We will start a new world on a small scale. We haven't a factory of any sort except for an old Chinaman who makes soap, by hand, to sell the native washerwomen. We haven't a stock-broker, or any real estate and loan agents, high pressure salesmen, 'morticians,' industrial magnates—all such vicious characters are barred from entering our island. As for myself, I have one acre of ground around my house at Auré. It produces coconuts, breadfruit, mangoes, bananas, alligator pears, and various other fruits whose names would be un-

familiar to you—and, best of all much contentment and peace of mind. But the best of my garden is the roof at night: the fronds of the coconut palms hanging motionless against the starry sky. I could better do without its material than its spiritual blessings.

Well, if things do go to pot, as they say they will, there couldn't be a better place to seek refuge, nor a better spirit to hope for a neighbor. It is not at all unusual, in view of the manner in which I have had to spend my time since last June, that I think "The Art of Loafing," a recent essay by J. N. H., one of the most soothing pieces I have read. It reads almost as well as its prototype, R. L. S.'s "Apology for Idlers," and certainly I look to Hall, more than to any living man, to carry on the tradition (for it is that now) of Robert Louis Stevenson.

I thought well enough of James Norman Hall as far back as 1926 (which is the dim and dusty past for me!) to take a week-end out of college to highway it a few miles to visit Colfax, Iowa, where Hall had been reared. I was then in my only year at Grinnell college, where Hall was graduated in 1910. In 1916 he left for the wars, destined to become one of the most famous of the World war aces. He was one of the members of the Lafayette Escadrille,—but when the war ended, he did not linger to glory in the aftermath. The most obvious explanation for his taking up residence in the South Seas is that he sought rest from motor-memories and the echoes of machine guns, but because I believe him to be less moved by deeds of war than by the languor of peace, I think he would have gone there had there been no war. At any rate, peace he sought, and peace he finds. Read the essays and exquisite poems he has produced in his ten or more years in the Society Islands and see for yourself.

It is a far cry, with many postmasters on the way, between Hall's balmy Tahiti and Stephen Leacock's chilly Montreal. But it is the easiest thing in the world to have Leacock's *Nonsense Novels* in handy proximity to Hall's (and Nordhoff's) *Faery Lands of the South Seas* on your bookshelf. That makes it easier to shift from one to the other. Stephen Leacock has taught political economy, or just plain, dry economics to us, in McGill university for thirty years. But he doesn't let that discourage him. Possessed of a clever and facile mind, his laughter rings out in consolatory peals to those of us who weep because Mark Twain couldn't live forever.

Only last night I found a pleasant appreciation of Leacock in an unusual place. I was reading the introduction by Alexander Wollcott to the Modern

Library *Alice in Wonderland* (Wollcott is the dramatic critic who occasionally goes so far as to dare his own criticism by acting himself in a play or two, just to show how easy it really is, when you know how), and found this: "One discrepancy between them (the two selves of the author of *Alice*, one known as the Rev. Charles L. Dodgson, Oxford mathematician, and the other as Lewis Carroll) has always been a subject of amused reflection—a discrepancy not unfamiliar to a generation which knows that one of its own hilarious clowns is (in what is sometimes confusedly called real life) the professor of political economy at McGill university."

It is not hard to deduce that Stephen Leacock has a dual nature. Only in this way can I explain a literary humorist teaching economics. The analogy between Leacock and Carroll is not far fetched, although it is a fancy of mine that I would go to hear Leacock on economics before I would have gone to Carroll on mathematics.

I have a good friend who was a student at Oxford when Leacock visited there a little more than a decade ago. I have found out that this friend of mine hasn't as yet read the *Oxford As I See It* that Leacock wrote after the visit and included in his volume, *My Discovery of England*. Before long I'm going to take this hilarious, and withal acute, essay to my good friend Oxon., and I want to be sitting near him when he reads it, so I can enjoy his chuckles. Unless I have a poor estimate of both my friend and the essay, the chuckles will develop into chortles and then snorts and then hoots of laughter. (By the way, the word "chortle" was coined by Lewis Carroll, so Webster's says, to signify a combination of chuckle and snort). The lure of the essay is dangled in the first paragraph:

Arriving one afternoon at four o'clock, I stayed at the Mitre hotel and did not leave until eleven o'clock next morning. The whole of this time, except for one hour spent in addressing the undergraduates, was devoted to a close and eager study of the great university. When I add to this that I had already visited Oxford in 1907 and spent a Sunday at All Souls with Colonel L. S. Amery, it will be seen at once that my views on Oxford are based upon observations extending over fourteen years.

No less than twenty-one pages of the illuminating and inimitable "observations" follow thereupon.

And if my friend lives up to expectations (he can't help but do so) I'll take him my carefully preserved copy of *The Forum* for April, 1931, in which Leacock writes upon the subject, "Americans Are Queer, And They Don't Give a Damn." Only two pages this time, but they will be good for a dozen laughs. And what is to be desired more in life than a good, loud, boisterous

laugh, or the privilege of watching some one of one's good friends, always artists in laughter before they can be called tried and true, rock and shake and cry with glee? Just wait until I lend him (now there's a mark of genuine regard) Leacock's aforementioned *Nonsense Novels*, which is a tonic in every page, and which contains that marvelous (more imaginative than funny) "Allegory of the Future."

And now, with all the fun to be had in reading and in converse with friends, and even in talking to oneself, how can the gloomy Mr Krutch continue to say "Ours is a lost cause, and there is no place for us in the natural universe." Maybe he has been disappointed in love, or maybe, which is more probable, he just hasn't yet realized that in the chemistry of the gods there is a reaction: Existence+Laughter>Living.

But if conversation, even to oneself, must ramble in order to be lively and good, it also must not hang on too long, ere freshness and spontaneity ebb away, like the taste of a good meal or a good pipe, for being too long continued.



ALL THAT IS WITHIN ME

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walk with God! Concerned about treasuries and church buildings, about controversies and orthodoxies? Yes, but only superficially, I am assured. Deep down in their souls, where the clear pure waters flow, they are concerned about nothing so much as close contact with the Holy Spirit of God. Already may we claim the beatitude of those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Ah, great are the unfilled, unexplored depths of immortal souls!

Out in Colorado somewhere, I am told, there is a little lake, the surface of which is scarcely ever fanned by passing breezes, so is it sheltered by crag and cliff and mountain top. Still as glass, it mirrors back the overhanging pine and hemlock and the yellow and green and blue of the sandstone rocks. It seems a very shallow little lake—you can see the bottom of it at any place, you think, in the clear, crystal depths. You think you can reach down and pick up pebbles all over the basin that holds that water; but to the bottom of that little lake, plummet line never yet has gone! Is that not a picture of the human soul? So deep, and so profound that nobody ever yet has stirred its depths!

"But," you say, "that is not a picture of my soul. I am shallow, as that lake appeared to be. You can pick up the stones over the depth of my nature anywhere. I am not naturally religious,

and I am not deep and profound. I am very ordinary and very shallow." My friend, that is the only heresy in life, not to believe in one's self, one's kinship to God, and one's inherent and yet unfolded and undeveloped capacities. That is not to believe in God who made us. Oliver Wendell Holmes says there are one-story intellects, and two-story intellects, and three-story intellects with skylights; and so there are; but there are none but three-story souls, and all of them open to the light of God! We are by nature religious.

"Well," says one, "if there are capacities and powers in me yet unsounded and undeveloped, I should like to know how to reach them—how to unfold them—how to expand them."

Life does this for us. There are two means at least by which we may develop the unsounded depths of our natures, or two kinds of means. These are voluntary and involuntary. Whether we will or no, the inevitable experiences of life deepen and enrich the soil of our souls. To go up against life, which for no one is smooth and even and easy, against the hardnesses and obstinacies of life, the difficulties, the perplexities, the trials and the sufferings of life, is to expand our capacities, to toughen our sinews, to develop our souls!

And here we have at least a glimpse into the purposes of the creator in putting so much of hardness and of suffering into the world. We cannot see his ultimate purpose, but we can at least see the immediate result. It creates men and women. It makes them better, stronger, more heroic, than they ever could be without. Once, when lying upon a bed of intense pain, a friend of mine came to me, and standing by my side, took my hand and said, "Sometimes we do not look up until we are flat on our backs!" I never have forgotten that word. I never could forget it. Sometimes God has to send the iron down, down, down, deep into our souls before the strata are pierced where the living waters are.

Doctor Gunsaulus of Chicago, who after weeks and months of excruciating pain, lost his hip joint, is reported to have said that if he could have the same high thoughts and exalted aspirations that he had upon his hospital cot during the days of agony he would be willing to go through it all again—yes, to walk to that distant city in which he had undergone his operation, to pass once more under the rod.

It is in the exquisite agonies of life that oftentimes we slough off the mortal, material existence and look up into the sky, into the face of God, even as he scourges us, and cry out, "Though he