

JULY

1931[★]

The American
MERCURY



Edited by
H · L · M E N C K E N

THE CASE AGAINST HENRY FORD

Murray Godwin

NEAR A FLAG	<i>James Branch Cabell</i>
THE VOYAGE OF THE <i>BUFORD</i>	<i>Emma Goldman</i>
RADIO CITY—AND AFTER	<i>Ralph Adams Cram</i>
AFTERNOON OF A PSYCHOLOGIST	<i>Patrick O'Mara</i>
THE GEORGIA PLAN	<i>Carter Brooke Jones</i>
THE ART OF THE PULLMAN PORTER	<i>H. N. Hall</i>
THE <i>APPEAL TO REASON</i>	<i>George Milburn</i>
THE PROGENITOR OF PROHIBITION	<i>Dane Yorke</i>

Reviews of the New Books and Music

ALFRED · A · KNOPF · PUBLISHER

·50¢ for one copy

By the year \$5.00

NEAR A FLAG

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

DAILY to display the Republic's flag, upon a very tall white pole beside the gateway, is the custom of that Virginian Summer resort which nowadays is best known to my inattentiveness. Since Cayford Cottage stands perched a noticeable distance higher than the other buildings at Mountain Lake, it follows that when I sit upon the porch, about my writing, then the flag and I are uplifted to a shared preëminence; and through the leisured daylight hours of seven Summers we have thus kept each other company, alone together in mid-air, at a large remove from the human affairs of earth.

It is a most favorable station in which to play with a portable typewriter and fantasies. No obligations intrude, nor do any practical affairs ever climb thus high, like sombre sheriffs, to arrest me at the suit of common-sense. To the left hand one may see only an ever-busy and robustious American flag and, some way beyond this, the long straight ridge of a mountain which walls off the eastern horizon with architectural neatness. I am aware of a far-off, very lazy jangling of cow-bells at times, or my consciousness perhaps records, without real conviction, the muffled chugging of a motor-car as it doggedly ascends the mountain upon which the flag and I are enthroned. Now and then I hear the blurred voices of men and women who are amusing themselves (as unintelligent persons, the philosophic will have noted, quite frequently do) by taking a brisk long

walk, at a reassuring distance away from and beneath me. But of human affairs there is no visible sign anywhere in that high and bright isolation which I divide in mid-air with the flag of my country.

I imagine that the near-by heavens can regard neither of us as an æsthetic success. If I speak without firm conviction it is merely because of one party to this Summer-long tête-à-tête I am nowadays an inadequate judge. I have shaved his appearance far too often to appraise it with any interest: but I regard the flag without bias and with relative susceptibility. I regard it perforce whensoever I glance eastward: and this flag flutters intermittently through my thinking.

I note that those seven red stripes and those six white stripes are so alternated as to suggest the uniform of a convict; and this appears to me an illogical arrangement for the flag of a country which began as a partly penal settlement in his British Majesty's Colony of Virginia. I cannot understand why patriotism should thus flaunt to heaven, and proclaim as it were from the housetops, a fact which patriotism must necessarily hush up upon earth. That blue canton I know to contain some and forty stars; but for seven whole years I have tried without any success to count them, on that ever-moving flag, and thus to discover just how many States there are in the Republic which has now and again honored me with an appointment to Federal jury service.

I observe that if the red and white stripes seem a little indiscreet, the blue canton may well reek with irreligion, in that it boldly attempts to improve upon the celestial plan by arranging its own stars in six parallel rows. The effect is more workmanlike perhaps; yet as a communicant of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, I am visited by doubts if this re-arrangement be not in rebellion against Article XIV of our faith, which would seem in plain terms to forbid any such supreme work of supererogation as arrogant and impious. I decide to bring up this question whensoever the Bishops, the Clergy, and the Laity may next be assembled in Convention. I then decide not to. I recollect, in the nick of time, that those some and forty white pentangles were borrowed from the Washington coat-of-arms, in which they did not represent stars but the rowels of spurs, so that, when the design is properly understood, no taint of impiety corrupts this flag.

Then I lament in the design of this flag a bleak banishment of the imaginative. The entire affair is mechanical: all is made rigidly, as if with the neat rule of a schoolmaster. This, to be sure, is the trend of all modern flags—to become variously colored problems in plane geometry,—yet I fall to wondering over these new-fangled attempts to compel men to thrill with loyalty toward one or another combination of straight lines and angles. Euclid did not discover patriotism, but only the *pons asinorum*: I prefer to think the two are not exactly synonymous.

This modern habit allows, for one matter, a variousness so narrow as to lead now and then to mere topsy-turvydom. In the event of further hostilities between Belgium and Germany, it occurs to me, each army nowadays would be mustered

under the same three black and red and yellow stripes arrayed in a different order. Equally, should war befall between France and the Netherlands, all able-bodied freemen upon both sides would perforce rally, under the stimulus of patriotism and the draft laws, to support the same flag: whether it were most holy or most abominable, would depend solely upon whether this edge or the other were attached to the flagstaff. The apt corollary, that any virtue may become vicious in a horizontal position, could hardly be esteemed a good axiom for the nubile young: nor would matters be reasonably clarified should Yugoslavia become involved and enter into battle to assert the superiority of the same red and white and blue mixture when flown with the blue stripe topmost.

With the symbols of right and wrong thus plainly interchangeable, it seems possible that even the Bishops, the Clergy, and the Laity aforementioned, might be smitten with occasional dim doubts as to the righteousness of corporate arson and homicide *en masse*. . . . But at this point I desist, before the fidgetings of my innate piety, from that poor palliative of so much very slatternly writing which is known, they tell me, as the *monologue intérieur*, or as “the stream of consciousness method.”

I desist also because I grant such reflections to be merely rational. They are but such little truths as may frolic piddlingly, as gnats might dance, about yonder large embodiment of a wild and noble fiction. A flag, after all, does very grandly fly in the face of logic to symbolize the honor of a nation. None can define that inconceivable compost of land, and of tradition, and of forests, and of buildings, and of cultural limitations, and of mutually repugnant human beings, and of pandemic prejudice, and of insane legal

fictions, and of yet other unrelated odds and ends, which combine to form a "nation." Most of us will encounter somewhat Falstaffian difficulties should we set about any definition of "honor." It follows that if the average man were a creature so abject as to submit to being bullied by his intelligence, he would dismiss these really incomprehensible notions as non-existent: but as it is, he does much better. He reveres and he serves—here as in a great many other instances—an abstraction which his faculties cannot pretend to grasp, and into the high habitations of which no sort of logic may intrude, after the fashion of a census taker, with blunt questionings.

He elects for this indefensible course: and the flag of his native land, like the weight of his given word and the chastity of his womankind, is kept sacred by his irrational faith. For the patriot everywhere, it may be observed, remains always exceedingly careful lest his country's banner become besmirched by any touch of that bloody sponge which is his brain. He very much prefers to find in his heart a deep and awful understanding that whether this or the other stripe be topmost in the flag which a man dies under is, somehow, as important as whether God or the Devil be topmost in the world he is bound for. The flag of every land is thus made a masterwork of romance: and my point is but that it should in its appearance honor duly its creator.

Here the Chinese Empire, for example, displayed a reasonableness which the Chinese Republic did not preserve when the latter dispossessed from the Chinese flag a dragon from out of a fairy tale in favor of a sunrise out of the day's weather report. A sunrise is real; it is even useful: it has no least kinship with any sort of patriotic sentiment. A flag may

very properly be emblazoned with a dragon—or with a tarask, or with a phœnix, or with a salamander, or with any other flamingly irrational monster which, like that wild magnanimity the flag typifies, has existed only in human faith. Yet I do not insist that every national flag should burgeon with just such prodigies. I would merely remark, in confidence, to my fellow patriots, that through our ever-present need to cherish reverently six white stripes and seven red stripes and the tip ends of forty-some spurs, we are being subjected to a considerable strain.

I reflect upon the handsome insignia beneath which more lucky generations have been assessed and butchered: and for any one of these heroic standards a liquescent barber's pole seems a poor substitute. I reflect likewise that we have all seen red and white striped peppermint candy so often as to regard a representation of it, upon howsoever liberal a scale, with comparative calm. It is a spectacle which, in itself, connotes rather less of high-mindedness than of an over-cloying and sticky saccharinity; and I imagine that in this aspect it may rhetorically mislead a great many patriotic orators. I wish, in fine, that both the flag and I were somewhat different looking.

II

For good or ill, though, this especial flag in the while that I write remains my ever-present companion and the sole chaperon of my adventures in phrase-shaping. Beyond the flag, as I have said, appears only the unbroken line of one long forest-covered mountain like a large green wall. Every tilted acre of this, when I sit down to my writing in June, is steeped with sunlight. The trees are, to my unlearned eyes, indistinguishable in species the one from

another at this distance, except that I note the darker green of the hemlocks growing about the foot of the mountain, and I can see also the first chestnut blooms heave and glitter there, like a tremulous Milky Way of more numerous pointed white stars. Above the flag are the wide heavens, of a less Prussianized blue than is that reorganized firmament in the canton of the flag; and about these heavens, now that Spring is ending, move unbelievably large clouds, like the ghosts of dead mountains in a repentant search of Mahomet.

The flag moves also, but more variously. In the brisk thin atmosphere it appears outrageously alive. Billows scutter across it convulsively from the pole to the outer end and are flipped rattlingly into the air. The flag collapses and lolls futilely, now to one side, now another. Then, rampant, it snaps and splutters as if in extreme moral indignation. It strains furiously to the north. It whips about, with new vigor, eastward. It jumps and yelps and fawns about the pole like an excited spaniel. It curls like the shavings under a carpenter's plane, it curvets like a restive horse, and it plays at being a triangular pennant, all in the same moment. It is irrational and garish and undignified—and indomitable. This flag in brief stirs up a quite creditable commotion which says, if it says anything: "Look at me! look at me!"

I remark that as the flag moves thus restlessly above the unseen persons whose talking I hear every now and then, so do the heavens move inexorably in their old order above its demented flutterings. No cloud (so far as I have observed) is controlled in its journey by any interstate commerce law; rain, snow and lightning descend in frank disregard of all possible tariff duties; the sun does not pause for an American passport, nor do the stars enter into this flag's domain in a quota

properly determined by Congress. It is almost as though the Kingdom of Heaven had not yet formally recognized the United States of America.

I become for a little while depressed by nature's continued failure to honor my nation, or for that matter the human race, with any least attention. I remember that these so large and impassive skies have seen over-many flags and far too many writers. With all those ancient national standards which but recently marched through my mind, and with some thousands of other national standards, now forever evicted from human reverence into oblivion's scrap-pile and a pedant's occasional mention, I wonder that my friend Mr. Atkins, the night watchman, should think it worth his while to be hoisting this doomed bit of bunting every morning and to be lowering it at sunset precisely. With all those English classics gathering dust upon library shelves, I wonder why anybody should think it worth his while to be writing, as I set about unpacking the portable typewriter. That fellow Shakespeare, for example, has his following of besotted admirers who will say in any case that the man's work is now and then as good as, or even better than, the masterpieces I may tap out this Summer. The writings of Milton also will be ranked above mine by many persons who have never read a line of either of our writings: and Chaucer will retain his immunity from all fair comparisons, in the impregnability of his Middle English, for months after my next book is out.

The flag too has touched a moment of weariness. The flag now droops to the further side of the white pole limply. You would say that a swollen, brightly striped leech with a dark head had toiled to the top of this pole and were clinging there, tired and sated.

Then I begin to write. The flag quivers and it contorts itself, as yet indecisively. I observe that the long mountain is pock-marked here and there with that twilight which the taller trees retain within their foliage. As the June day grows toward noon, these rounded shadows become elongated into horizontal smudges, and I wonder without any deep interest what causes this. The flag lifts sidewise once or twice, very uncertainly, moving as though with pulses of senile desire. It droops without attaining erection. I continue to write.

Now and again one of those large wandering clouds, only a little way above us, oppresses some leagues of the mountain with a scudding continent of darkness, and such parts of the mountain as stay unobscured are tinged with a thin wash of gold. Upon these tranquil and clear July mornings (for we have somehow got into July) the green mountain has everywhere a metallic gleaming, which nods and tosses and heaves in the sunlight with a large indolence that I discover to be infectious. At times, when the wind rises, the whole mountain ripples with a multitudinous gray-green flowing, where the under sides of the leaves are exposed. Billows cross the flag convulsively from the pole to the outer end, and they are deported thence with vicious jerks of unmistakably official incivility. I write on and on, with somewhat the staidness of a certified accountant. As July passes (to the tapping and lightly tinkling and bumping noise of my typewriter), then the white chestnut blossoms ascend the mountain dispersedly, and they darken to creamy yellow and thence to bronze, and after that the chestnut-trees melt into the prevailing greenness indistinguishably. I continue to write.

The flag becomes fretful: it collapses

and it lolls futilely, now to one side, now another. It of a sudden unfurls with violence. It ramps. It snaps and splutters as if in extreme moral indignation. Otherwise there is no change save that with the coming of August, now that I am laboriously recopying all my first drafts, the air has become faintly hazed, as though the mountain were viewed through soiled glass. The flag strains furiously to the north. It whips about, with new vigor, eastward, now that the flag and I are visited in our shared isolation by turkey buzzards. These circle and slant and glide about us, and they otherwise disport their obscene bodies with an incredible gracefulness such as would have mightily uplifted the heart of Charles Baudelaire. I pause in my writing when one of them drifts by upon a level with me, so near than I can see the glint of his small, round, and singularly cold eye. His beak is a triangular gleaming, and his relaxed feet gleam also. The sunlight shines through his extended motionless wings so that they appear pearl-colored and luminous and such as a seraph might use on work-days. He decides that I am not yet food for him and departs with light indolence. I continue to write.

The flag jumps and yelps and fawns about the pole like an excited spaniel. Meanwhile I write in half-drugged absorption, and the same air which sustains the flag with continuous liveliness moves the paper in my typewriter so that it also flaps and crackles.

The chestnut-trees are once more discernible, for a blight has attacked them. This begins, as did the blooming, with the chestnut-trees rooted about the foot of the mountain. One by one these ailing trees emerge from the staid verdancy of the forest as flamboyant lemon-yellow splotches, which, as the leaves die, deepen into

brown splotches: then the chestnut-trees just above them on the mountain side are altered in the same way, and the contagion spreads thus visibly to their yet higher kindred. A vagrant and vivid changing in this manner ascends the broad mountain side, dispersedly, all through the latter part of August. I moralize, in an appropriate purpureal prose passage, thus to observe discolored and tattered death going tortuously through the Summer woods without ever swerving from the path by which beauty and new life ascended but a month ago when the chestnut-trees were about their blooming. The flag is not interested by my rhetoric. The flag curls like the shavings under a carpenter's plane, it curvets like a restive horse, and it plays at being a triangular pennant.

Meanwhile I write, and recopy everything for the third time. Twilight comes earlier now, a good hour earlier than when I began with my writing. My working day is shortened, the air smells of burning brushwood, and it will soon be time to be closing Cayford Cottage for the Winter. The bull bat now hunts by day, and the starlings have given up home life: they pass everywhither about the mountains in volatile and disputatious mobs. Otherwise the calm of Indian Summer prevails, and the flag droops to the farther side of the white pole. You would say that a swollen, brightly striped leech with a dark head had toiled to the top of this pole and were clinging there, tired and sated.

III

So is it that throughout the Summer I observe very few and quite unimportant happenings going on eastward, to my left hand, where the flag supervises every sentence of my writing. So is it too that I

do not often look eastward. When I set about that daily diversion which for euphony's sake I describe as my work, I turn well toward the west, where the vista is otherwise. Westward all the mountain beneath me, to which the northern corner of Cayford Cottage is more or less firmly attached, sinks away with an abruptness so decisive that the cottage porches jut from the mountain side very much as shelves project from a wall. Westward I look across my typewriter keys downward, and always downward, and yet further downward, through naked air. If my privacy be considerable as concerns the east, then occidentally it attains completeness inasmuch as the eye can rest upon nothing whatever within the next ten miles westward from the porch railing.

Your gaze reaches, by-and-by, the summit of ancient woods and can then detect, to the remoter side of a broad carpet of moving tree-tops, a worldwide, very far-away country which appears to be woven of blue smokes and of green mists. It seems a familiar country. Yonder, I notice, are the forests lying like dark flung-by scarves upon the paler green of cleared fields: yonder are the rivers like narrow shinings; and under the full fall of sunlight a national highway peeps out here and there like the rigid little line of mercury inside a thermometer. Yet further westward all melts bafflingly into a pearl-colored sky without any assured bounds set anywhere between the ends of earth and the beginnings of heaven. The entire vista, in short, is very much as it was when Florian de Puyange gazed down from the high place in Acaire. Yonder, I am now and then persuaded, stands Poictesme, just as the province existed in the mid-Summer of 1723.

Yet I prefer to remain unhidebound topographically. For upon other days the

west turns clearer, and out of it lift many flat-topped mountains like a herd of gigantic crocodiles all couched across the west and facing north. About these saurian-shaped mountains move somewhat uncanny clouds, like walls and crags and huge drifting curtains and tall icebergs, like marble cliffs and like complete citadels, because from Cayford Cottage these clouds are seen sidewise, and their astonishing height is thus revealed in a fashion not to be guessed at when you look up at their flat under side from some lower altitude. To the south-west I observe the two hills which have the shape of a sleeping woman with her hair outspread, just such a pair of hills as Gerald Musgrave saw when he came jauntily to Mispec Moor, and looked down (from the plain comforts of a cottage in many ways not unlike Cayford Cottage) upon the unvisited uplands of Gerald Musgrave's appointed kingdom. Yonder, only a little way to the west, I am now and then persuaded, stands his all-glorious goal just as the realm of Antan existed in the mid-Summer of 1805.

The landmarks are all blended so confusingly that one may not say, with any real conviction, from out of just which century this vista survives, nor whether this faraway broad land may be Antan or Poictesme or some yet other magic country. It suggests, for example, Broceliande; it has many points in common with the Forest of Arden; it resembles Avalon; yet there is an assured whiff of El Dorado about it mingled with an undeniable hint of the Hesperides. I in any event regard this dubious and remote place with exceeding contentment during the pauses of my writing; and it is westward that I look in pursuit of every elusive word or of the smoother turn for a refractory sentence. Meanwhile, the flag strains and flaps unseen, but forever near to me.

Now this flag's fleet, unflagging, flippity-flop flapping speaks always of sturdy and reputable concerns. It reminds me that I am in point of fact looking down upon the Commonwealths of Virginia and West Virginia and Kentucky and Tennessee. It recalls the varied industries which thrive there. It speaks of no futile faëry kingdom but of practical affairs—reminding me of the stone-crushing plant and of the new railway bridge which have smartened up Bellegarde, of the excellent filling station where Jurgen formerly lived, and of the electric power plant and the fine steam laundry now operated upon the late site of the Master Philologist's House of Judgment. It speaks of "the American scene," and it urges me (in its more highflown moments) to be "autochthonous."

It twits too. It reminds me of unused knowledge as to the coal mines and the mountaineers down yonder which I have not ever prinked into fiction. It points out that the sincere and ponderable novelist will depict the life in which he has shared, since with this life alone is he familiar; and it adds too a friendly suggestion that such books with no nonsense about them sell a great deal better.

It reminds me that the supreme duty of the American writer, as of each foreign notability upon his first visit to our country, is to express a comprehensive and not over flattering opinion as to the present polity and culture of the United States of America. It says, in brief, "Look at me! look at me!" somewhat as I can recall my small son when at long last he had conquered the art of hopping on his left leg to have cried out over and over again, just as pertinaciously, "Look at me! look at me!"

But I, in the while that I write, am not guided by the flag's long-headed and sound advice. I disregard the flag to an extent

which I would not care to discuss with the patriotic daughters of any of our wars: and I look westward when I am writing, toward a land in very little resembling a confluence of four Middle Atlantic States, or any other part of America.

Another sort of flag protects those forests and uplands and wild heaths which are the haunts of all magics. No wonder is strange to it. The refugees from every collapsed mythology have found under the flag of this land a grateful haven: and all those superb bright monsters of which I was thinking just now, as the most fit symbols for patriotism and the other nobler human virtues, have entered into this flag's protection like high-minded expatriates offended by the materialism of scientific research.

It follows that (amid a vegetation which happily blends the very best features of all zones) the fauna of this westward country has become pleasingly various. There one may yet find, I am told, the horned Indian ants which are as large as leopards; there the mantichora (which, it will be recalled, has aspiringly combined the head of an elderly man with the horns of an ox and the feet of a dragon and the stings of four scorpions) consorts with yet other fine zoölogical medleys from out of the Book of Revelation; and there the desert-roving unicorn continues faithfully to worship the Dog Star with sneezes until some virgin or another virgin shall have betrayed him into captivity as lightly as though the monster were just the husband whom she preferred. Upon such commonplace creatures as the chimera, the wyvern, the hydra, the cockatrice, the centaur, and the hippogriffin here is no need to dwell, I imagine, inasmuch as one must accept them as a matter of course in a land wherein they appear to be no rarer than mares or hunting dogs.

IV

The people who live under this flag are to me a far more grave concern. I may not certainly divine how the inhabitants of a long dead era which labors under the yet further disadvantage of not ever having existed can still retain in this western land an undiminished vitality: but I do know that somehow this has been brought about, through one or another inexplicable outwitting of death and of piety and of common-sense: and whensoever during the last seven Summers I have looked westward a few of these people have docilely trooped forth to sit for their portraits.

Kings, princesses and swineherds; abbots, pawnbrokers and wizards; armed champions and tattered beggars and irremediable poets and innumerable witches according to their degrees—all these, along with sundry proconsuls and gods and saints and dukes and a platoon or so of evil or beneficent spirits—all these have come to me from out of that topsy-turvy west, at one time or another, with an aspect at once wooing and derisive, and seeming very glorious in all the finer colors of sunset. They have rendered me each a frank account of his own improbable doings. They have brought with them love, heroism, wit, loyalty, some humane follies, and a tonic skepticism; they have evoked an interest such as I have not yet invested in my contemporaries nor even in every one of the members of my own family circle; and all these faintly smiling, not wholly human creatures have teased me, now for some seven Summers, to bring about their immigration from out of this multi-colored province into the black and white pages of my books.

They smiled, as I now know, because of my assured inability to manage this:

and yet they have not scowled over the one or the other sad parody which I have made of their loveliness whensoever I attempted to obey them. Instead they have returned smilingly, quite as though my books did not matter, into their more comely and satisfying everyday life yonder. They have gone back into that unique land desired by all poets in which one may live with more competence; in which every least action is very nobly rounded off with the right gesture and with wholly adequate talking; and into which no one of our terrene shortcomings, in the way of timid vice or of stinted virtue, may ever intrude any shabbiness. They have forgotten me and my tinkling typewriter, in brief, very lightly, without fretting over the caricatures which I have made of their elfin splendors so laboriously: and I too have put these elusive shining people out of mind, for my own comfort's sake, now

that another book about "men as they ought to be" has been botched through in one way or another to its last bungled paragraph.

It is all a rather heartbreaking business; that half-revealed land remains tauntingly unattainable: yet I continue to prefer these not wholly human people to my contemporaries. So does it come about that at Cayford Cottage I sit with my back turned to the ever-busy flag of my own native Republic, and that I look westward whensoever I write, toward the unique land which these people inhabit. I then believe (at least temporarily) that all which my heart desires happens instantly in this lovely land; I believe that my bankrupt dreams all prosper in this faraway country radiantly; and I believe too that upon the national flag which waves over all its unseen towns and fortresses one would discover ramping a silver stallion.