

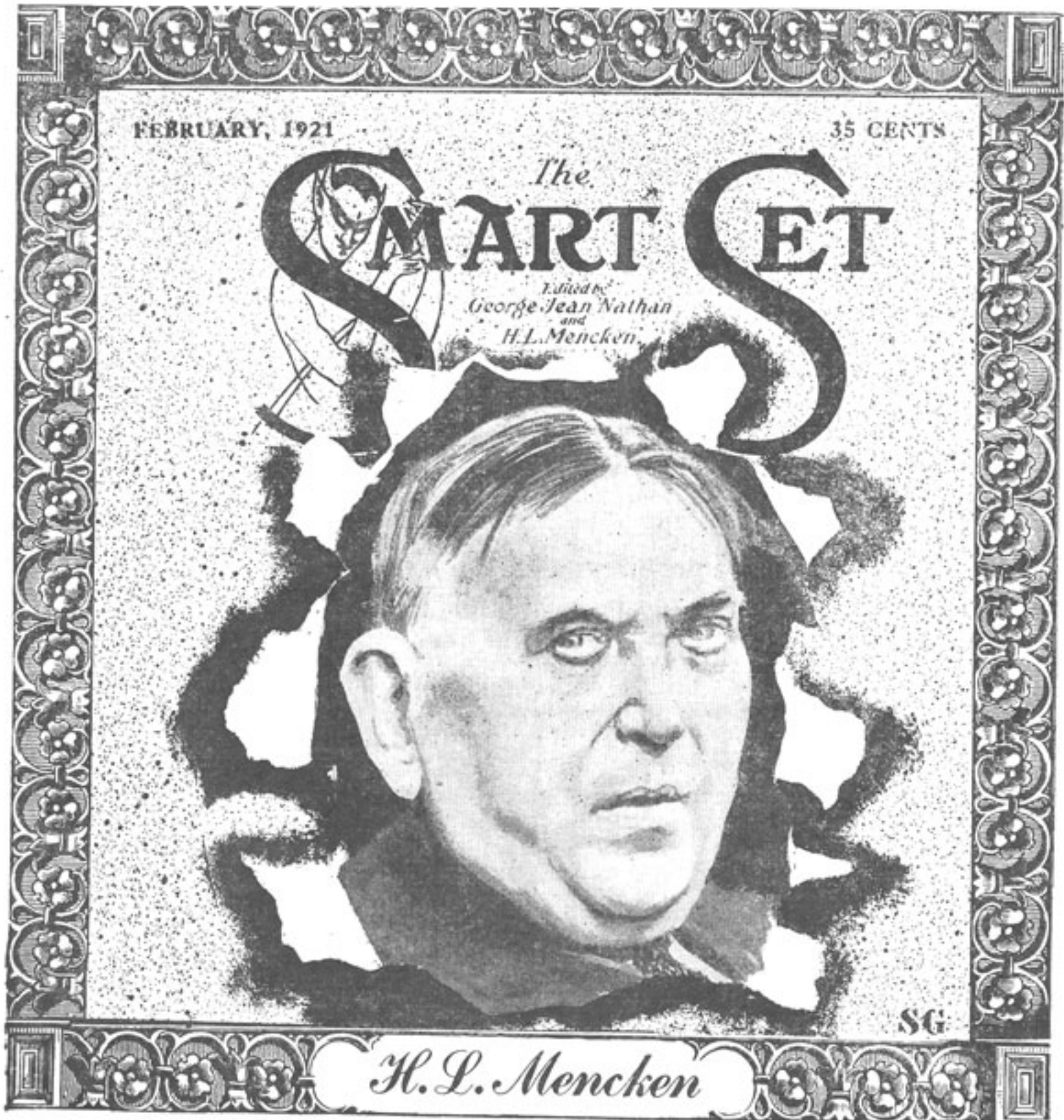
CHINA IN THE UNITED NATIONS? — BY EDGAR SNOW

THE *Nation*

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20¢

Birthday Bouquets for H. L. Mencken by James Branch Cabell,
William Manchester, H. L. Davis, Ruth Suckow, and Others



ican, when he introduced a bill in the Eightieth Congress to permit the George Power Company to build a power house at the Clark Hill dam on the Savannah River. This would have amounted to surrender of more than \$2,000,000 a year in net power revenues. Not even the Eightieth Congress was willing to report such a bill out of committee; but times have changed.

In claiming that the new policy will stimulate local responsibility, meaning activity by private power companies, the Administration has overlooked an im-

portant fact. Most of the large, integrated utility systems are not controlled locally, and are owned locally only to a limited degree. Control is in the great financial centers, mostly of the East.

Few newspapers took seriously the declaration of support for comprehensive river-basin development. Few believed the statement meant what it said when it asserted: "The Department [of the Interior] will particularly emphasize those multi-purpose projects with hydroelectric developments which, because of size or complexity, are beyond the means

of local, public, or private enterprises. . . . The responsibility of the department is to give leadership and assistance in the conservation and wise use of natural resources." Just what "leadership and assistance in the conservation of natural resources" can mean in connection with the Republican "give-away" program in many fields is hard to figure. Perhaps semantic experts of the Administration should coin new definitions for old words and phrases. The word "local" might come in time to mean just one locality—Wall Street.

BOUQUETS FOR MENCKEN

IT IS not often that The Nation, preoccupied with the unmitigated morbidity of world affairs, takes time off to prepare a birthday bouquet. But Saturday September 12, the date of this issue, happens to be the birthday of H. L. Mencken, who honored The Nation by serving as contributing editor from 1921 to 1932. The coincidence of the dates—a birthday for Mencken, another issue for us—was discovered more or less by accident. On an excessively muggy Saturday morning this past summer I was

contemplating a stack of manuscripts on my desk, and wondering for the hundredth time how Mencken, who used to read more manuscripts in a week than I read in a month, had been able to dispose of them—yes or no, never maybe—with such incredible dispatch. For a moment I was tempted to write and ask him for the formula, but remembering his long illness, I canceled the notion and made a note to send him a birthday greeting. Reflecting further on the date, I pushed aside the

basket of manuscripts and began to dash off letters to a number of writers who had had the opportunity, as I had, to know and admire Mencken as an editor. Doubtless there are many more who would have been eager to pay him tribute, but a selection had to be made. Here, then, Mr. Mencken, is a birthday remembrance which goes to you with the best wishes of those of us, your former contributors, who will always think of you as the incomparable editor.

CAREY MC WILLIAMS

WILLIAM MANCHESTER

Author of "Disturber of the Peace," a biography of H. L. Mencken

HE HAS finished cementing the opening notes of the Fifth Symphony under the tiny concrete bust of Beethoven set in his back-yard wall, and if you peer over the old pony shed—it stands where it stood in "Happy Days"—you can see him resting under a lattice, savoring his favorite summer drink of gin, ginger beer, and lime. It is September 12, a twin anniversary in Baltimore—Defenders' Day, honoring the Battle of North Point, where the British were turned back in the War of 1812, and Henry Louis Mencken's seventy-third birthday. In past years, when the chunky old man under the trellis was well and active, the memory of the Defenders was honored with torchlight parades, and he delighted in telling visiting

friends the processions were in his honor.

The yard is worth examining, for it is as hallowed, to bibliophiles, as North Point is to patriots. Here Dreiser paced as Mencken edited vast chunks from "The Genius." Here councils of war were held over the suppression of Cabell's "Jurgen" and the Watch and Ward Society's banning of the *American Mercury*. Here, for a quarter-century, established writers made pilgrimages and the unestablished sent hopeful parcels. Above the lattice is the window where a younger Mencken, pondering the early manuscripts of Joyce, peered out through a cloud of cigar smoke; downstairs, in the quiet drawing-room, is the high, old-fashioned secretary where a still younger Mencken discovered his father's new copy of "Huckleberry Finn" and passed his first enthusiastic critical judgment.

How long ago it must seem to him! And how much has happened since! The battered old portable in the upstairs study, now retired, clattered out lexicography, dogma, and memoirs for nearly two decades after criticism and editing had been put aside, and an aging generation knows him only as a nostalgic pundit. Since his retirement from the *Mercury* eighteen years ago he has done no magazine editing, and his interest in literature dissolved in the great depression. In his library is an author's copy of "Tender Is the Night," with a pathetic note from Fitzgerald begging him to read it and support him against the howling critics. The pages are still uncut.

The moving hand shifted direction, and wrote on. But it could not strike out what had been once set down, and the files of the *Mercury* and the older *Smart Set* clearly testify to the elo-

quence and persistence of Mencken's call for freedom from the old restraints at a crucial moment in the history of American literature. It was a call not always understood; in the war for literary independence sides became confused; Mencken was wrongly identified with the avant-garde, for he was merely a staunch Old Guardsman who loved liberty more than he admired Henry Cabot Lodge, who hated cant more than free verse. But hypocrisy and suppression were the enemies of all honest artists then, and in the struggle against them he performed heroic service. In the critical hour he became, as young Edmund Wilson, Jr., wrote in the *New Republic*, the conscience of America.

He became more. To the rising generation which found its ultimate spokesman in Wilson, he was the established editor vitally interested in publishing young writers of competence, whatever their credos. It was Mencken's great editorial accomplishment that despite the rigidity of his own mind he always respected ability and nearly always recognized it. The recognition of talent is itself no small gift. In 1908, when he assumed the part-time post of literary critic of the *Smart Set*, "with the rank and pay of a sergeant of artillery," it was almost unique. In retrospect, the accuracy and range of those monthly analyses, reviewing upward of fifty books a month, is extraordinary. An unknown Virginian wrote "Cords of Vanity": James Branch Cabell was plucked from that month's horde. An expatriate published his first book: Ezra Pound's poetry was acclaimed. A huge batch of first novels arrived from the detective cult: Mary Roberts Rinehart alone was marked for survival. Dreiser at last found a champion, and the banners of realism, furled since the 1890's, flapped angrily again.

The Menckonian touch was extended throughout the magazine in 1914, when he and George Jean Nathan, the dramatic critic, became co-editors. It is doubtful that any critic has influenced his followers more profoundly than Mencken did in the period that followed. He searched their talents, chose a direction for them, and bade them follow it. And they did; there is a letter from Sinclair Lewis, written while "Babbitt" was in preparation, attributing the entire design

of the book to a suggestion in Mencken's review of "Main Street." It was in these years that the Mencken-Nathan partnership contributed enduringly to American letters, that Fitzgerald, Eu-



gene O'Neill, and Ruth Suckow were discovered, and that the *Smart Set* became a rallying point for young writers. The editors' knack for identifying genuine achievement among prospective contributors was uncanny—sometimes, as in Maugham's "Miss Thompson," it was found where every other magazine editor in New York and the very author himself had seen nothing—and their consideration of authors is unmatched to this day.

After the establishment of the *Mercury* and the withdrawal of Nathan, Mencken's interests turned from literary to social criticism, but that consideration remained to the end. Ruthless toward all society he might seem to readers of his thundering *Mercury* editorials, and ruthless he was, but no author who dealt with him can testify he was arbitrary. Rejected manuscripts were sent back in the return mail; if he thought a piece eligible for more profitable markets, however much he wanted it, it was returned to the author with a note explaining that richer editors were looking for just this sort of thing, and that if they wouldn't take it, he would.

Articles were copyrighted at the *Mercury's* expense and the copyright sent to the author, and if Mencken wished to make changes in the manuscript, as he often did, the writer always had the opportunity to strike them out in proof. Queries and inquiries were answered the morning they were received. In the briefest note there was always a sparkle of Menckonian wit; he could not write a formal letter if he tried. It is a tribute to the very special relationship he had with all his authors

that when Princeton's Julian Boyd set about collecting these notes from Mencken's correspondents twenty years later, he had little trouble; nearly everyone had saved his.

But his greatest kindness to authors lay in his recognition that an editor's first responsibility is toward his readers and in his shrewdness in identifying writers those readers ought to meet. A sensitive awareness of the public pulse permitted him to join in happy marriage authors and admirers who otherwise might never have met, and because he recognized talent and exalted it above all else, his lesser convictions never prevented him from presiding at the ceremony.

Between the pages of his copy of Mike Gold's "Jews Without Money," which he had serialized and praised in the *Mercury*, is a curious letter from Gold. It asks, quite simply, why Mencken bothered, and runs the gamut of possible answers, ending on a note of confusion and uncertain gratitude; the author suspects he has been the butt of an obscure joke. Gold, the militant Communist, could not understand why Mencken, the card-carrying reactionary, was intent upon introducing his talent to the public. It was not easy to understand. In a time of bitter partisanship it was a complex phenomenon. But it deserved applause. And after a quarter-century of Defenders' Days and deepening partisanship it is still, perhaps, worth a torch or two.

HARVEY FERGUSON

*Author of "Grant of Kingdom"
and other books*

ONE day in the fall of 1919 I was sitting in the lobby of a Baltimore hotel waiting for a man named H. L. Mencken. Although we had never met he was well known to me by reputation, but I was wholly unknown to him. I was working for the Frederic J. Haskin syndicate in Washington. Haskin, who had known Mencken for years, had sent me to get a story about Mencken's discovery of the American language.

Presently there entered the lobby a short stocky man wearing a blue serge suit, a very high white collar, a blue necktie, and a dark slouch hat. He carried in his right hand a heavy black walking stick, and his teeth were

clenched on a pale-yellow domestic cigar. His face was wide and red, his nose short and tilted, and his eyes a peculiarly bright blue. I did not recognize this figure as the great Mencken, but he spotted me promptly, introduced himself, and took me to lunch. He gave me information for my story with the speed and precision of a veteran journalist, then took his cigar out of his mouth, fixed upon me his china-



blue regard, and said: "Now what are you writing besides this newspaper stuff?"

Amazed and delighted, I confessed I was writing a novel.

"When you finish," said Mencken, "send it to me."

His hunch that I was trying to produce literature seemed to border on telepathy, and his willingness to read the result was certainly philanthropy. I sent him the novel a few months later. He wrote me shortly that it was good and that he would take it to Alfred Knopf. When I met him again he pointed out that the novel was not quite finished, and made some excellent suggestions for carrying the story farther. He also observed that the part I had sent him could be cut to make a novelette which he would be glad to run in the *Smart Set*. In due course I completed the novel somewhat as he had suggested and also cobbled out the novelette, which gave me a literary debut in a journal then widely read. So Mencken had launched another writer.

He is famous as a critic who achieved a unique leadership in American literature at a crucial period in its history, but I think only the many writers he

helped, giving of his time and energy and hospitality, know how personal and human his conception of that leadership was.

STEWART H. HOLBROOK

Author of "Far Corner" and the forthcoming "The Age of the Moguls"

THOUGH he rejected more articles of mine than he bought, he never asked me to do any rewriting. He often cut my stuff, always improving it. He invariably concocted a new title, and his titles were perfect. . . . Once when the highly volatile *Mercury* readers were tearing me to shreds, he wrote a comforting and humorous letter, informing me that the controversy had sent circulation "soaring, well above the *Christian Herald*," and promised me my fill "of sound malt liquor next time you come to Hollins Street." . . . The stickers he sometimes appended to his envelopes were amusing. One showed a tremendously bearded rabbi and a caption in Hebrew characters. One was for an anti-cigarette drive. Another concerned the sale of bonds to free old Ireland from her British fetters. Once, when he rejected a piece, he inclosed with his note a handsome if antique perfumed card proclaiming the virtues of Paine's Celery Compound. . . . His great good-humor was one of many reasons that kept us young and indigent writers working for the miserable *Mercury* checks, which, in my case at least, were for the oddest amounts—\$70, \$85, \$90; and once, when a check for \$105 floored me, and I accused him of conspicuous waste, he replied promptly that it was due to a clerical error and that I should "keep the matter confidential." . . . Henry Mencken is the most wonderful guy I ever worked with.

H. L. DAVIS

Author of the Pulitzer Prize novel "Honey in the Horn"

WHAT impressed me most about Mencken in the years when he was editing the *American Mercury* was his anxiety to bring out in every contribution what the writer had to say, and to keep and strengthen him in his own way of saying it. It is a constant temptation, in writing for any magazine, to let one's

material trail in the wake of the editor's opinions and verbal characteristics instead of making it work out a track of its own. This was especially so in writing for an editor like Mencken. I did it in a few places when I was beginning to send him stories. He always caught every place, and always either revised it himself or sent it back to be changed into what I should have written instead of what he would have written if he had been doing it.

He always wanted writers to write like themselves. When it came to writing like Mencken, he could do that better than all of us put together.

GEORGE MILBURN

Short-story writer

WHEN my name is called on the gaudy roll of writers discovered by H. L. Mencken, it strikes me as a mistake, because for years I have labored—and rested somewhat—under a fixed idea that it was I who discovered H. L. Mencken. Briefly, the revelation was granted me, aged twelve, on an ash heap in the alley back of Seltzer's Pharmacy, Coweta, Oklahoma, circa 1918. A batch of magazines which had failed to elicit cash from the local newsstand clientele the month before was smoldering there. When I picked up a charred and spark-spangled *Smart Set*, it fell open on an early *Prejudice*. Thus I discovered Mencken with all the fervor of a supralapsarian discovering God.

After several years of prayer and meditation, I began dispatching stories to Mr. Mencken's newly founded *American Mercury*. These were addressed discreetly, in keeping with the best professorial advice: "To the Editor." Each came back with vertiginous expedition and a printed rejection slip. Almost four years passed before I began entertaining doubts as to whether H. L. Mencken was getting a chance to read my contributions. So I appealed to a poet who had befriended me in New Orleans, the night editor of the *Times-Picayune*, whom I knew to be high in Mencken's esteem. Soon after that I received the following letter, written on a ragged typewriter ribbon and with elliptic alignment: "John McClure was kind enough to let me read three of your stories. These strike me as capital

stuff and will go into print at once. Would you care to let me have a look at anything else you have on hand?"

Needless to say, the signature on that letter meant more to me than Andy Mellon's on a million-dollar check. Thus began one of the happiest associations of my life, and H. L. Mencken always managed to convey the impression that he was glad I had found him, too.

GERALD W. JOHNSON

*Author of "Pattern for Liberty"
and other books*

H. L. MENCKEN would be a rich man today if he had worked for himself half as hard as he worked for countless young hopefuls—many of whom were in fact hopeless—whose only claim upon him was that each had exhibited what seemed to be a flash of intelligence. But to him this was the strongest of all possible claims. In a world in which the ability to think is a rarity, any man so endowed was his brother, regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude; and any youth whom he suspected of being so endowed was his godson, for whose intellectual advancement he felt responsible to the race. If much of his time, energy, and enthusiasm was squandered upon unprofitable projects, is that not true of some donations of every philanthropist? What the world remembers is that some of his gifts of aid and encouragement were not squandered but yielded returns that were handsome additions to the intellectual assets of the country. Even when some protégé for whom he labored proved to be an ass, still there was honor in the effort. Mencken did prodigious execution among the frauds and shams of his day; but now that he has retired, his wars and excursions seem less important than his fine demonstration that a free spirit owes to every other free spirit aid and comfort in the common war "against every form of tyranny over the mind of man."

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

Author of "Jurgen"

IMPRIMIS, in well-nigh everything which H. L. Mencken has published during the last forty-five years I have delighted. In private one might make

bold to esteem him both as a literary and social critic more than often wrong—or childish even, or it might be just slightly pig-headed—in his estimate of this or of the other affair or person. But the magnificent verve and gusto with which always the man presented his chosen point of view, no matter what might be his theme, resulted almost always in a work of dramatic art that you savored with enjoyment.

Think what you might, whether before or after the performance, there at the moment was no denying this H. L. Mencken was putting on a rousing good show. So that temporarily his aesthetic or political or social rightness or wrongness did not seem, to me at least, to be of weight; and I no more wanted to pause and argue about them than I would care to interrupt a fine performance of "Hamlet" by rising to protest that I did not believe in ghosts.

There in brief has been, and I think there can be, but one Mencken. He in American letters has had no predecessor; and to my partial eyes a befitting heir is not visible among the several somewhat younger men who stand more than willing to succeed him as the monarch of a literary era.

Yes, and a monarch so thrifty that throughout his now semi-fabulous reign he elected to dispense with a court jester; and himself furnished for all his vassals a glut of fun continuously and off-hand. I am proud to have served under His Majesty.

RUTH SUCKOW

*Author of "Some Others and Myself"
and other books*

I AM glad for this chance to say a word about H. L. Mencken as editor—a truly great editor, and for me personally the most valued I have known. Independent in judgment, saltily humorous, outspoken, generous, human and approachable, genuine in all his dealings, always better than his word and his word was always good—these are a few of the characterizations that spring to mind. But I cannot adequately express my sense of gratitude. He was at the same time the most warmly encouraging, the most critically candid, and the least dictatorial of editors. He himself spoke and acted as an individual, and he treated his authors as individuals—gave them

credit for knowing what they were doing, and accepted or rejected what they sent. I never knew Mencken to indulge in small editorial caprices, or to want a story made over to suit either his personal viewpoint or the supposed tastes and demands of his writers. I can recall only two practical suggestions that he made, and they were minor, but good.

The term "Menckonian," which grew up around Mencken's own writings, did not apply to the material that Mencken and Nathan selected as editors, which was of the widest variety, as an actual reading of old numbers of the *Smart Set* and the *American Mercury* will show. Validity was what Mencken was after, and what he looked for with extraordinary zest. His interest in the people whose work he published—and even in many whose writing he rejected—had a personal quality, while his ways as an editor were large, bold, and free.

MICHAEL GOLD

Author of "Jews Without Money"

MENCKEN was very creative as an editor. He typed on his own machine hundreds of letters each month to authors young and old. He made his rejections and acceptances promptly, which is all an author ever asks. He handed out checks and literary and personal counsel generously.

As one of the young authors whom Mencken published and helped with counsel I can only add my testimony to his great and unusual kindness.

It seemed a strange contradiction in his character, for he preached an individualistic Nietzscheanism. He taught his disciples they were élite, the supermen, and others were the mob, the "booboisie."

But this alleged "booboisie" was the American people, no less. If one despised them, what remained but to exploit them? Mencken's disciples developed a dangerous cynicism, and sold their minds to the great corporations. Only when the crash came did they learn they were as insecure as the ditch diggers and machinists. Menckanism proved its inadequacy during the depression.

Mencken had gusto and life. He inspired a whole generation of writers to

explore their own American environment instead of going off to Paris to be self-pitying and rootless exiles. The good that Mencken did, however, was balanced by the anti-social elements of his philosophy. He seemed like a leader against Coolidgism but was really an altar boy in the cathedral of prosperity.

The historical function Mencken performed was to fight the provincialism and rural morals of the McKinley America. It was part of the campaign to prepare America for its imperialist role. Henry Luce and his bland imperialists are the heirs of Menckenism, I believe.

I am sorry it is true. Mencken, if he had had another philosophy and a touch of Walt Whitman in his heart, would have been a great Rabelaisian liberator in our history. Let me add again, he was kind, despite his Nietzschean-plus-beer philosophy.

THYRA SAMTER WINSLOW

*Author of "Think Yourself Thin"
and many short stories*

AS H. L. MENCKEN has always been just one step—and not a very deep step—below God for me, it is pretty hard for me to get any opinions of him down in a limited number of words.

I was raised on the old *Smart Set*. I felt it was a New Note in Literature, just opposite to the dull stuff that was thrust into my unresponsive brain at the University of Missouri, where, after being raised on a small town newspaper from the age of fourteen, I was trying to believe that the academic nonsense taught by people who had never been on a newspaper and had never published a line constituted a School of Journalism. I escaped to Chicago, and after a brief chorus experience, managed to get on the *Chicago Tribune*.

I felt that some day I'd get a Great Idea. In the meantime, I decided to try to write a short story. Incidentally, I'm still waiting for the Great Idea. The short story, was, of course, written for the *Smart Set*. It never even occurred to me to try to write for any other publication. I suppose I'm the only writer in the world who never had a struggle. Mencken-and-Nathan—I thought of them as one word—wrote practically immediately, said wonderful things about

the story—and sent me a check for \$30. I've been happier only one other time in my whole life. They took all the stories I wrote, using two and sometimes three in each issue of the *Smart Set*, under all the *Smart Set* pseudonyms.

So of course I came to New York. And met the Lesser Gods face to face.



I heard, later, that they were quite formal with me—they put their coats on for my visit. I didn't know their office—with its beer posters and posters of old melodramas—was unusual, for I had never been in an editorial office before.

They took me to luncheon at the Algonquin—I got to New York at the end of the Round Table period and never was invited to sit there, except in the stories of people writing about the Algonquin. Hergesheimer was their guest, too.

"Be careful!" one of them said to me, "He's a leg pincher!" Of course they saw that I sat next to him! There I sat, scared to death! What should I do? Of course Hergesheimer was far too busy eating, with too few or too many teeth, I never could decide, to bother about leg pinching, even if he ever did have that idea in mind. I never even guessed, until years later, that it was Mencken-and-Nathan's way of showing me an interesting time.

The dear old *Smart Set* was on its last legs. Mencken-and-Nathan kept on buying my stories, the darlings. One day they sent for me and one of them said, "We've decided it is time you had a book published." And handed me a list of some of my stories. "These are the stories for the book. Knopf will publish it." And Nathan, as he has been good enough to do ever since, named the

book. The title was "Picture Frames." It never occurred to me to question the idea, the contents, or the publisher. The Lesser Gods had spoken. What else? You don't criticize Lesser Gods.

I've just kept on worshipping. That there could be no modern literature without their influence seems too obvious to need comment. Of course I'd never have been a writer, if I am a writer, without them. Which may be important only to me, anyhow. If I don't pray to them any more, I do pray for them. God bless 'em!

IDWAL JONES

*Author of "Eye of the Storm"
and other books*

BEING a white-headed child of fortune I have met on this planet sundry immortals. In infancy I was rewarded with a sixpenny-bit by Lloyd George, which I squandered on gum-drops. In Westminster Abbey I was lifted up by Li Hung Chang, to the approbative smiles of the royal family.

President Taft and Bwana Tumbo I have gazed upon with acknowledged waves. In the cool cave of his crockery shop in Schenectady, New York, I had when young shaken hands with Colonel James, founder of the Knights of Pythias. At the Steuben House in Manhattan I clinked steins with an old friend of my father, Oswald Garrison Villard, long the good angel of *The Nation*.

But let me be remembered as one who knew Henry Louis Mencken. I read him in the old *Smart Set* days, with the fond couple waltzing on the pale lavender cover, its tales in French and the *bonfuries* of Pistols for Two. We met in Baltimore, in Manhattan, in my home in San Francisco, in the days beyond compare.

A man entrapped by beauty, Heinie Mencken. How he could play Brahms! The innumerable letters I received from him when I was writing for his monthly earthquake bound in Paris green, the *American Mercury*! He shattered the complacency of the age. The Sacred Cows of America he pole-axed by the herd. But to his contributors he was immeasurably kind.

On his birthday a toast to him! *Prosit!* Also in the tongue of Dante, *Ancora in cento anni!*