

Down

to

Earth



Alan Devoe

NOW IN

DECEMBER

IT HAS BEEN SAID a great many times that the best preservative for us human beings is to have some lasting interest outside ourselves. It has been said a great many times that life is brief, that we come from clay, and that we return thereto. It has been said a great many times that there are no pockets in shrouds, you can't take it with you, and the best things in life are free.

Put things this way, and they are platitudes. Dress them up in new words, re-present them sideways as coming from a new Pakistan philosopher, and they are good for a lecture tour of eighty-nine stops, including Manitowoc, Wis., and all the creamed chicken the philosopher can eat. Stand them on their heads to make paradoxes and they will pass for high cleverness. Extend them somewhat with allusions to Fifty-fifth Isaiah and Malachi Three, and there is no reason why they should not provide a long and honor-

able clerical career terminating as prebendary of the Cathedral. Say them over and over and over again, just as they are, and it is almost inescapable in time to become an Elder Statesman.

In short, there is no new wisdom. There is nothing but very old wisdom indeed, dating back to perhaps 10 A.M. of that magical First Day of Adam's which he is understood, by forgetting so promptly the evident truths vouchsafed to him, to have turned in a dreadful sense into something of a last day too. There is nothing new to be said, and there hasn't been since the invention of speech. Had we all remained dumb, we could just have spent our time looking thoughtfully at one another, nodding our heads in affirmation of the common truths we all know, shaking our heads gloomily in regret over our common and inveterate forgetting of these truths, and we could have uttered in these silent gestures everything of any

importance in all the groaning shelves-full of the volumes of philosophy. In a sense, every time a writer sits down at his typewriter to say something, he is made aware, unless he is a man of staggering simplicity and self-complacence, that all he is going to be able to write, really, are ditto marks.

This realization must afflict and somewhat tend to paralyze all writers; but it comes particularly to the writer who regularly writes a column, or the writer who regularly writes in one particular field of letters. Upon the writer laboring under both these terms, it can descend with such compelling force as almost to silence him.

Suppose you are a literary critic. You write your first book review, and then your tenth, and after a while your hundredth, and in time your thousandth and ten-thousandth. In your tenth review — very likely in your first one — you said certain sound things and laid out a certain schema of critical values. For your hundredth review, you realize, however different your words may be, what you are doing is saying the same things again and restating in a different way the same principles of criticism. This is likewise what you are doing in your thousandth review, and also in your ten-thousandth (by which time you are known as the Dean of American Critics, and your annual volume of Collected Criticisms falls from the

presses as dependably as the withering grapes from the autumn vine). All the while, review by review by review, there deepens your awareness that everything of any consequence in the critical field had already been unimprovably said anyway by the year 1608; and there deepens your sense that it is not only pointless but fatuous to be enunciating all over again, in new words, what is after all only a thinly disguised version of the fundamental philosophical insight perfectly expressed by Lao-tzu in the sixth century B.C.; and there seizes you a nearly overpowering desire never to see another book as long as you live and to become an itinerant cat's-meat vendor in Port Said. It comforts you none to look upon the long majestic row of your Works upon the shelf, for you see the whole row, with a dreadful insight, under its right title. Its title is *Ditto*.

IT is bad enough, thus, when you are a writer in one field of letters particularly. Still, you have one saving device. Though you must perforce repeat yourself — we *all* repeat ourselves, inescapably, over and over and over, in one collective racial murmur of repetition, from the morning of the world — you can to some extent hide this fact from yourself by virtue of scattering what you say through a broad variety of periodicals. If you review *Neo-Marxian Trends in Contem-*

porary Poetry for *Obliquity: A Journal of the New Spirit*, and then review *Murder in Step-ins* for *Bang!*, the digest's digest, you can hope to achieve at least a partial success in concealing both from your readers and yourself the fact that the two reviews are in a profound sense the same review, and that both of them in a profounder sense are the review you wrote of *Coolidge the Man* in 1924, and that in the profoundest sense of all there is no truth uttered in either review which was not already uttered, with definitive excellence, by some man who did tablet-chipping for Rameses the Third. You cannot entirely conceal this knowledge, but you can partially do so; and it is a comfort.

But suppose, now, that you not only do your writing mostly in one particular field — say, nature — but that you write regularly under a particular title — “Down to Earth,” it might be — in a particular magazine, bearing the name, for instance, *THE AMERICAN MERCURY*. Suppose that every thirty days for a year, and then for five years, and then for a decade, and then on into the next decade, under a succession of five editors, you must persuade yourself that you have something to say which you have not already said and which indeed was not already said superbly by someone else long before you were able to hold a rattle. You must so persuade yourself or stop writing. By a titanic gesture

of self-persuasion, once a month, you must manage to believe that what you propose to say is novel. You must persuade yourself that what you write this month — this biography of a chipmunk, this study of the natural history of swamps, this investigation of weasels, this ruminative piece of ecology — is worth doing, even though you can see with clarity that it is only, as all expression is, a re-presentation.

It is difficult. Every now and then, it is impossible. And it is impossible now.

THIS ISSUE of the *MERCURY* is to bear the date of the month of Christmas. This should mean, for the writer of “Down to Earth,” the composing of a “Christmas piece.” There rise to mind the ghosts of Christmases Past . . . an article on Christmas birds, an article on the natural history of Christmas as a festival, an article on how animals spend the Christmas season outdoors, an article on praise and gratitude as natural down-to-earth virtues which can make all seasons of the circling year a kind of Christmas time, an article . . . But enough. There are all sorts of Christmas pieces for a naturalist to write. Anything will furnish a foundation for one. Holly; mistletoe; evergreens; reindeer; snowflakes. There is nothing ever to stop the flow of The Christmas Article. Except one thing; and if this rises up in a fullness of

realization, as it has this year, it can do it. It is just this:

"Christmas" — the single word itself, naked, plain — has said everything there is to be said about itself.

It is not just that "writing about Christmas," now, would probably be only a change-ringing repetition of other writings about Christmas, other years. Repetition is the common lot of all of us. We can all say only old things in new ways or keep silence. This is something much more tremendous.

What sort of silly-pathetic effrontery would it be to write now, say, an article about the chickadees and juncos in the snow-whitened Christmas woods, composing this carefully to bring out the fact that there is a kind of holiness about the earth and that it is lit with wonder? The clear fact, short and vigorous as a blow, is that the one word "Christmas" has already said all this. Write the single word "Christmas" and you have expressed, in the two syllables, an entire religious view, an earth-view, a cosmology. You have commented on what juncos and chickadees and the balsam-scented air ought to mean to us, you have conjured a whole dramatic story about animals kneeling in a stable, you have said a bookful of that ecological wisdom (which ecologists reach only the long-way-around)

that holds that all created things have their "niches" in the architecture of the made world. What sort of preposterous pretension would it be to write an article, now, to say that even common earth has its glory? The one word "Christmas" already says, in one stupendous shout, that the whole essence and meaning of this season — whether as Christians we take the matter literally, or as non-Christians take it symbolically — is that this earth's common clay, its dust, its homely flesh, is divinely indwelt. What imaginable newness or pretense of newness could lie now in an article about how vegetations die down to a sleep in seeds and then wake to flowering, or how a woodchuck undergoes the little death of hibernation to reach the new life of next spring? The last drop of meaning-extract to be wrung from this is already caught in distillate in one word, Christmas.

THIS MONTH it is impossible to pretend to be saying any new thing, or to be able to say an old one in new words. The old thing is the unimprovably precious thing; the old words are the unimprovably briefest and best. I give them to you as the only writing worth writing this month:

Merry Christmas.

PAST AND PRESENT

George Jean Nathan & H. L. Mencken

Clinical Notes

Leafing through the pages of Mencken's MERCURY, you think: How long ago it seems! Prohibition, Comstockery, Babbitry, and the rest — all those old swineries — how dead they are! They are — and then they aren't. For the poor in spirit are always with us. The punches that Mencken and his gang let fly in the past still find a mark in the present. Many old MERCURY pieces cry for reprinting. Which is what this department will do.

Dead Cats

OF A PIECE with the absurd pedagogical demand for so-called constructive criticism is the doctrine that an iconoclast is a hollow and evil fellow unless he can prove his case. Why, indeed, should he prove it? Is he judge, jury, prosecuting officer, hangman? He proves enough, indeed, when he proves by his blasphemy that this or that idol is defectively convincing — that at least *one* visitor to the shrine is left full of doubts. The fact is enormously significant; it indicates that instinct has somehow risen superior to the shallowness of logic, the refuge of fools. The pedant and the priest have always been the most expert of logicians — and the most diligent

disseminators of nonsense and worse. The liberation of the human mind has never been furthered by such learned dunderheads; it has been furthered by gay fellows who heaved dead cats into sanctuaries and then went roistering down the highways of the world, proving to all men that doubt, after all, was safe — that the god in the sanctuary was finite in his power, and hence a fraud. One horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms. It is not only more effective; it is also vastly more intelligent. (January, 1924)

Story Without a Moral

A NUMBER of years ago, in my newspaper days, I received from what would now be called the Ku