

A MENCKEN REMINISCENCE

By A. E. ZUCKER

I did not know Mencken very well, having seen him perhaps only a dozen times in thirty years. But I should like to record a few items that illustrate some of the characteristics of his vivid personality as many of us members of the Historical Society or the Germania Club may likewise recall them.

There was his innate kindness. On the occasion of a luncheon of the Germania Club in the early thirties a group was standing all about Mencken, before we had sat down to table, listening to his earnestly propounded nonsense about the need of this country for a Kaiser. Father Hacker who, because of his small stature and great modesty, was readily overlooked, was suddenly noticed by Mencken alone outside the circle. He then moved quickly toward the little priest, drew him into the crowd, and said, "When that time comes, Father, we'll make you an Arch-bishop."

Yet Mencken was not one to be imposed upon. One evening he had invited me to meet him at Schellhase's restaurant to discuss a project that was later on efficiently realized in the publication of Dr. Dieter Cunz' *The Maryland Germans*. It was about nine o'clock and the dining room almost empty; Mencken had his special beer *Seidel* and before me stood one which he had in unobtrusive hospitality provided with a legend engraved on the lid "Dead Head." A young man came strolling up to our table, evidently a lion hunter who wished to bask in the presence of the famous author, and said with great self-assurance, "You are Mr. Mencken. May I sit down to join you?" Without raising his voice, but with very chilling effect, Mencken put the brash intruder in his place and we continued our discussion.

It is notorious that noted authors frequently affect the unusual in their personal appearance or their dress. Mencken, as all who knew him remarked frequently, was utterly free of any such pose. His iconoclastic writing evidently imparted to some of his readers a different notion. One Bostonian gave expression to this feeling in a parody of Keat's famous sonnet, *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* which seems to me worth reprinting. The Watch and Ward Society had succeeded in securing a court order forbidding the sale of Mencken's *Mercury* in Boston because of the alleged immorality of the "Hatrack" story. Thereupon Mencken courageously himself sold a copy on the Boston streets, was duly arrested but acquitted in court, the judge ruling that the high literary quality of the *Mercury* removed it definitely from the classification "pornography." The writer's witty imputation to the editor of the *Mercury* of all the philistine qualities of "Babbitt" is something which I am sure Mencken enjoyed heartily if he ever came across this bit of verse:

ON FIRST SEEING A CUT OF H. L. MENCKEN

Much have I heard about that bitter scribe
Who dips his pen in cyanide to pan us,
And dashes off a wild, ebullient jibe
Anent the nincompoop Americanus.
Oft have I visualized his piercing eye
And heard his savage canines snap together,
When in an inauspicious moment I
Would pull bromides about the torrid weather.
In watches of the night his gaze intense
Among the wind-blown draperies I saw;
And though, of course, it was coincidence,
At times he looked a bit like G. B. Shaw.
But this Rotarian—how can it be?
He seems a booster of the Zenith plains;
How in that pate of shameless normalcy
Can there be lodged iconoclastic brains?
You look as though you taught a Sunday-school,
And owned a Ford, and had the movie habit,
And took hot beverages to make you cool—
My God, H. L., you like G. F. Babbitt!

(H. F. MANCHESTER, in the *Boston Globe*)

BOOKS BY H. L. MENCKEN INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

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| 1903: <i>Ventures in Verse</i> | 1922: <i>Prejudices: Third Series</i> |
| 1905: <i>George Bernard Shaw, His Plays</i> | 1923: <i>The American Language, Third Edition</i> |
| 1908: <i>The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche</i> | 1924: <i>Prejudices: Fourth Series</i> |
| 1909: <i>The Players—Ibsen</i> | 1926: <i>Notes on Democracy</i> |
| 1916: <i>A Little Book in C Major</i> | <i>Prejudices: Fifth Series</i> |
| <i>A Book of Burlesques</i> | 1927: <i>Selected Prejudices</i> |
| 1917: <i>A Book of Prefaces</i> | 1934: <i>The American Language, Fourth Edition</i> |
| 1918: <i>Damn! A Book of Calumny</i> | 1940: <i>Happy Days</i> |
| <i>In Defense of Women</i> | 1941: <i>Newspaper Days</i> |
| 1919: <i>The American Language</i> | 1942: <i>A New Dictionary of Quotations</i> |
| <i>Prejudices: First Series</i> | 1945: <i>Heathen Days</i> |
| 1920: <i>Prejudices: Second Series</i> | <i>The American Language, Supplement I</i> |
| 1921: <i>The American Language, Revised Edition</i> | 1946: <i>Christmas Story</i> |
| | 1948: <i>The American Language, Supplement II</i> |
| | 1949: <i>A Mencken Chrestomathy</i> |