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 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!

Nowadays, if by chance I run across an interesting man, I cannot even read in a book of someone whom I have 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.

Repartee and epigrammatic humor are becoming so rare that they who practice those arts are looked up to as suspicious but pleasing magnates. Such is the stupidity of social evolution (I almost used the meaningless word "progress"). Ironical 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, 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 Valima 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 informally minded. (I have just seen an announcement in my own Ex Libris Carissima,* 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.

*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
Time-Democrat.

1938
Mary Inez Davis, '32 arts-sc., Tulsa, has been awarded a sociology scholarship to Smith
college, in the school of social work, North-
ampton, 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 guide-
ance.

J. 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
been assigned to the Shawnee Times-Record, weekly
and official Pottawatomie county newspaper.

RAMBLING NOTES WHILE TALK-
ing TO MYSELF

(continued from page 354)

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 Andrew—he
lights his pipe on every page. . . . . . . . . .
I cannot light up in a wind. It is too precious a rite
to be consumed 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
draw more than you think. I've
seen already a few of them behind trees
and bushes. I wonder if they are tea-talking this min-
ute?!

A. Edward Newton! It is without
the slightest difficulty that I adhere to
and change the subject. I first came
to admiration when I loved A. E. N.
through a series of his essays in the At-
lantic Monthly, since collected into a
volume called A Tourist in Spite of Him-
self. One of these essays, "In Standard-
land," 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 real for reform we
have destroyed it. . . . and, in the interest of
efficient, 'dine' standing up in a drug
store with a pot-rim behind us out of
place. In happier days men socially
enjoyed 'a large cold bottle and a small hot
bird,' with conversation; now we have con-
versation out of a can, with canned food and
burned 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 book-
shelf. These two books boil over the
pot-rim with no end of the most fasci-
nating anecdotes and facts pertaining to
worthy books and authors, with atten-
tion 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 in-
itiation 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 screw-
driver 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 af-
fec tion to call him by his initials in my
thoughts. Let him be J. N. H. hence-
forth. Like Stevenson, Hall is a volun-
tary exile to the South Seas. From
his idyllic home in Tahiti, he has writ-
ten to his publishers, The Atlantic
Monthly Co., the following self-revela-
tory dispatch:

I 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, 'mormitians,' in-
dividual magnates—all such vicious characters
are barred from us. As for myself, I have one acre of ground around
my house at Auré. It produces coconuts, bread-
fruit, mangoes, bananas, alligator pears, and
various other fruits whose names would be
familiar to you—and, best of all much con-
tentment and peace of mind. But the best of
my garden is the roof at night; the fronds of the
cocnut 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
July, to think "The Art of Loafing,"
to 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 cer-
tainly 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 Nor-
man Hall as far back as 1926 (which
is the dim and dusty past for me!) to
take a week-end out of college to high-
way it a few miles to visit Coffax, Iowa,
where Hall had been reared. I was
then in my only year at Grinnell col-
lege, 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
luster 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 langor of
peace, I think he would have gone there
had therebeen 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 postmast-

ters 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
(soon to be 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 po-

titical economy, or just plain, dry eco-
nomics to us, in McGill university for
thirty years. But he doesn't let that
disourage 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, when I add to this that I had already visited a Damn.) Only two pages this time, and I am not deep and profound. 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 one. 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 hardships 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 hardship 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 holy, than they otherwise 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 undertaken 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