

MR. MENCKEN THE MORALIZER

REPLY TO HIS ATTACK ON THE EASTERN SHORE

BY OSCAR HAMILTON HALE

Showell, Md.,

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Editor of The Democratic Messenger:

I have just been handed the scurrilous screed of Mr. H. L. Mencken in The Evening Sun of Baltimore, of December 7th, and I ask your indulgence that I may reply to it.

What a curious outpouring it was; what a mass of misinformation; what a mess of sieve-like argument, congenital caterwauling, and puling sentiment; what a sink of personal enmity, inevitable bias, raw prejudice, outcropping vanity, and ingrained bigotry; what savage shafts of ridicule, what biting sarcasm, what bitter irony, what subtle satire, what clever innuendo, what righteous indignation, what unrighteous thought, what delicately veined mockery, and what meticulous care to compass the whole gamut of our sins. If there is an institution, a custom, a trait, a shortcoming of the Eastern Shore that he did not take a shot at, it is because his memory failed him. And he gives us all this for only the price of one copy of The Evening Sun. What complete insight all this welter gives us into the Baltimore School of Criticism.

Mencken, you're a marvel! You out-Herod Herod. It is unfortunate that so many of your alleged facts are erroneous and your conclusions awry, for it leads to the suspicion that you do your thinking with your digestive organs. You even had to take your little fling at the Ku Klux Klan—an organization that I have not heard mentioned here on the Shore for years. And at that my guess is that on any count in the indictment the K.K.K. will compare favorably with the L. D. L. Verily, the Don Quixotes are not all dead, and they tilt at windmills in Baltimore today with the same courage and power and effect as in old Andalusia in days of yore.

Of course Mr. Mencken's article was intended to be read by residents of the Eastern Shore. That is why it is replete with words like "imbecilities," "prehensile," "disingenuous," "simian" "obscurity," "irredenta," "porcine, and the sesquipedalia verba which the author evidently discovered in a prolonged pilgrimage through the—to him—terra incognita of Webster's Unabridged. We accept the compliment. Had the writing been meant for home consumption it would have been written down to the requirements of the Baltimore intellect.

Mr. Mencken must feel better now that he has unloaded that awful burden of bile. After perusing his animadversions upon our clergy, our judges, our county officials, and our citizenry, I feel that I should commiserate rather than criticize the writer.

All his literary life Mr. Mencken the Moralizer has been known to the world as a carping, caviling, censorious critic; and now that he begins to realize in his fading days how little of real dignity and appreciation and genuine worth of results his puny efforts have brought him he finds the sweeter part of his nature embittered and the mellow juices of his spirit soured, the while he wallows in the cesspool of slander for the materials with which to bespatter the reputation of his superiors.

Think of the lamentable state of Mr. Mencken the Moralizer who rids himself of a long-standing mental vacuum by stuffing his mind with envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness! I am surprised by his vicious diatribe at the Methodist preachers of this region. No more sturdy defenders of the faith, no more assiduous and self-sacrificing pastors, no more blessed and successful herds of the flock can be found anywhere; certainly not in Baltimore, which is only kept from sinking into the uttermost degradation of bestiality by laws which prohibit certain practices and vocations on Sunday—most of which prohibitions I seriously doubt if Mr. Mencken the Moralizer himself observes.

Men easily credit what they wish to believe, and evidently every trifling action and attribute of the Eastern Shore citizen has been magnified by our writer into evil purpose and inherent wickedness. Despite his generous pointing out of so many of our non-existent mistakes we shall continue to till our farms, and ply our trades, and pay our bills, to educate our children and to bring them up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. We shall be friendly with our neighbors, strive to inculcate justice and morality, be sure to attend Divine

accomplished by the two columns of Mencken slush.

I denounce Mr. Mencken the Moralizer's assault on the "Bible Belt of the Shore." I throw back in his teeth his cowardly attack on our ministers, and I challenge him to present his own case—intellect, education, aims, achievements—against that of a venerable minister in my section of the Eastern Shore. Our people need no defense and no encomiums. Dissent from Mr. Mencken's principles, abstinence from Mr. Mencken's practices, and receipt of Mr. Mencken's violent criticisms are a garland of merit. Mr. Mencken stands in great need of acquaintance with the Eastern Shore and its inhabitants. Come down and live a while with us. We will replace your egregious egotism with charity, your vapid consoriums with sympathy, your cocksure and bigoted opinionativeness with tolerance, and your pronounced megalomania with modesty.

I am not willing to adopt Mr. Mencken's estimate of himself. I prefer to wait. Great men like the old Egyptian kings had all to be tried after death before they could be embalmed. I take little stock in these professional solvers of our civic problems. They are of the class Sydney Smith described as thinking "they are pious when they are only bilious."

Mr. Mencken had better watch out when he talks of organizing "a missionary crusade." Maybe that is what he was about when he fled to Germany during the war. However, let me notify him that the common run of people on the Eastern Shore are not so craven and effeminate, so lost to honor and the instincts of decency, so deficient in patriotism, and so close to traitorous cowardice that in its hour of need they will spurn the land that gave them protection and opportunity, and abscond to a land that was governed by one of the vilest wretches that ever disgraced the annals of civilization.

Not a word does Mr. Mencken say about the atrocious butchery of the innocent and helpless Davis family in Worcester County, nor the awful assassination of Mr. Elliott in Wicomico County; not a word about the Labor Defense League which projected itself gratuitously into the case of Yuel Lee—his silence here probably implying that its aims and actions were indefensible; not a word as to the Baltimore lawyer Ade's conduct in the case; not a word as to the Baltimore lady pulling a pistol on a worthy citizen of Snow Hill, who in a friendly manner was advising Mr. Ades to leave town before the angry citizens resented his presence and his activities; not a word regarding the Communistic organization in Baltimore that is attempting to override our courts. When the Labor Defense League gets a little larger membership, a little more money, and a little more power it will get in some fine legal work that will make these perfectionists faint, and any appeals and protestations, if Mr. Mencken whakes up and refuses longer to play the cat to the Communist monkey, and wonders what he has received for his chestnut pulling, he can console himself by reading over again his dissertation in The Evening Sun and exclaiming in the words of Juvenal Sat. III. 1; 230,

"And sure in any corner we can get
To call one lizard ours is something yet."

This experience may be needful, for just now Mr. Mencken the Moralizer is a cross between the goody-goody and the salt of the earth, a man who refers all things to himself, and so thrusts himself into the center of the world as if all lines should meet in him and his fortunes (Bacon).

Mr. Mencken cannot escape his share in the catastrophe. It is men of his stamp—who think, speak and write in the irresponsible strain that characterizes his work—who have given Baltimoreans a wrong idea as to the residents of the Eastern Shore. There are scores of his fellow citizens who in days ago have come to Maryland's great Ocean resort in our county to pass the summer months, many of whom have bought or built cottages at Ocean City, not alone because of the bracing air, the clean white sands, the glorious expanse of the grand old ocean, but because they have learned to like and love the God-fearing, manly men, the tender-hearted, obliging women of this vicinity.