

The Eastern Shore and Mencken

By E. CLARKE FONTAINE

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Chestertown, Md.—After sober reflection and many hours of earnest prayer on the subject, it seems to me that we of the Eastern Shore are somewhat silly to have worked ourselves, as we have apparently done, into a spumy lather over the denunciations of Dr. Mencken. We have reacted to his fulminations in a way to lead the world to judge that the Shore really cares what Dr. Mencken thinks of us. We have fired back with a gusto of rage, much as if he has singled out the Shore for his choice maledictions and castigations. In so doing we have failed to take into consideration that the Doctor has for years been "cussing" almost everybody and everything, from American democracy to jazz, from Woodrow Wilson to Hoover, from Rotary International to the Anti-Saloon League.

It is very difficult to discover from his writings anything that he likes. The publisher of his book characterizes him as "the most uncompromising and devastating of all critics of American democracy." He's just a natural-born hater and derives his sustenance, (spiritual and, incidentally, material) from perpetually and perennially laying about him with a heavy and ruthless bludgeon, cracking and splitting whatever heads may happen in his path. We of the Shore shouldn't think for a minute that we have been uniquely put on the target for the Doctor's darts. The Shore, though "the world's garden spot," is, we'll have to admit, only a small part of America. Read what Dr. Mencken says about the American people as a whole: "The American people, true enough, are sheep. Worse, they are donkeys. Yet worse, to borrow from their own dialect, they ar goats." (Notes on Democracy, page 78). He thinks little more of women, at least in their political sphere. "Giving women the ballot, as everyone knows, has brought in none of the great reforms promised by the suffragists. It has substituted adultery for drunkenness at political conventions, but it has accomplished little else." (Ibid., page 83).

There are other sections of the country that he thinks as little of as he does of the Eastern Shore. Thus on page 89 of the same work from which we have quoted above, he speaks contemptuously of Nevada and Delaware as "small and measly States," and on page 130 he says that "no Senator of any genuine dignity and ability could come out of the Georgia of today, and none could come out of the Vermont." Again, the Shoreman might indignantly conclude that Dr. Mencken does not entertain a very good opinion of our Representative in the Lower House, the Hon. T. Alan Goldsborough, and singles him out maliciously for sarcastic innuendoes. But we're wrong again, for on page 124 of this same pleasant and edifying book we have it straight from the shoulder that "the House of Representatives in intelligence, information, integrity, is comparable to bootleggers." Nor can he

mire the Shore's representative in the Upper House, the Hon. Phillips Lee Goldsborough, but we shouldn't get sore at that, for on page 127 he pillories the entire United States Senate in the categorical statement that "the average Senator . . . is simply a party hack, without ideas and without anything rationally describable as self-respect."

It naturally stirs some resentment and ire on the Shore to read that it has "no apparent intelligence on the bench," that the Shore must depend for its ideas on "clowns in the pulpit, clowns on the stump and clowns in the editorial chair." It doesn't improve our disposition to read that our duly elected District Attorneys are just so many Dogberrys, but Dr. Mencken has often said things just as harsh concerning the entire American judicial system. Thus on page 112 of the same sweet tome from which I have been quoting we read: "The judiciary, under the American system, sinks quite as low. Save when by some miscarriage of politics, a Brandies or a Holmes is elevated to the bench, it carries on its dull and preposterous duties quite outside the stream of civilized thought." And again, on pages 113 and 114: "The average American judge, in his days at the bar, was not a leader but a trailer. The judicial office is not attractive, as a rule, for the better sort of lawyer. . . . Thus the bench tends to be filled with duffers, and many of them are also scoundrels."

The irrepressible and incorrigible Doctor has much to say about "mobs." In fact, the hardpressed reader is finally led to conclude that at least in the Doctor's sober judgment, the entire American public can be divided into two classes. On one side, "the eternal mob"; on the other, Henry Louis Mencken. The Shore should relish what he says about "the city mob" (the black letters mine) on page 44 of his "Notes on Democracy": "When the city mob fights it is not for liberty, but for ham and cabbage. When it wins, its first act is to destroy every form of freedom that is not directed wholly to that end." The obvious implication here is that though a mob of yokels may fight at times for honor, for liberty, for the protection of their homes, or to avenge a dastardly crime, the typical city mob fights only because it rages to get hold of something that the other fellow owns—it lashes itself into a fury only because it is envious and greedy. In short, the city mob, according to Mencken, is made up of anarchists, communists and bolsheviks—a sort of revolutionary Paris rabble, as it were.

Sufficient has been said, I trust, to suggest the possibility that Dr. Mencken not only has a contempt for the Shore, but rather in his vituperations takes in all America and practically everything American. It has already been hinted that he takes no shine to American Presidents. In The Evening Sun of November 12, 1923, he makes the statement that "dates, Dr. Wilson were both charlatans" and that "Wilson was as Hughes,"