

PISTOLS FOR TWO

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Pistols for two by Owen Hatteras

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OWEN HATTERAS

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FOR TWO**

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BY
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ALFRED · A · KNOFF

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PISTOLS FOR TWO

I

BIOGRAPHY fails, like psychology, because it so often mistakes complexity for illumination. Its aim is to present a complete picture of a man; its effect is usually to make an impenetrable mystery of him. The cause of this, it seems to me, lies in the fact that the biographer always tries to explain him utterly, to account for him in every detail, to give an unbroken coherence to all his acts and ideas. The result is a wax dummy, as smooth as glass but as unalive as a dill pickle.

It is by no such process of exhaustion that we get our notions of the people we really know. We see them, not as complete images, but as processions of flashing points. Their personalities, so to speak, are not revealed brilliantly and in the altogether, but as shy things that peep out, now and then, from inscrutable swathings, giving us a hint, a suggestion, a moment of understanding. Does a man really know what is going on in his wife's mind? Not if she *has* a mind. What he knows is only that infinitesimal part which she reveals, sometimes deliberately and even truculently, but more often naïvely, surreptitiously, accidentally. He judges her as a human being, not by anything approaching entire knowledge of her, but by bold and scattered inferences. He sees her soul, in so far as he sees it at all, in the way she buttons her boots, in the way she intrigues for a kiss, in the way she snaps her eye at him when he has been naughty —

he interprets her ego in terms of her taste in ribbons, the scent of her hair, her quarrels with her sisters, her fashion of eating artichokes, her skill at home millinery, the débris on her dressing table, her preferences in the theater, her care of her teeth.

Thus, by slow degrees, he accumulates an image of her — an image changing incessantly, and never more than half sensed. After long years, perhaps, he begins to know her after a fashion. That is, he knows how many shredded wheat biscuits she likes for breakfast, how much of his business she understands, how long she can read a first-class novel without napping, what she thinks of woolen underwear, the New Irish Movement, the family doctor, soft-boiled eggs, and God. . . .

I enter upon these considerations because I have been employed by a committee of *aluminados*, heeled well enough to pay my honorarium, to conjure up recognizable images of MM. George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken, that their scattered partisans and the public generally may see them more clearly. The job has its difficulties, for save in their joint editorial concern with *The Smart Set* magazine and their common antipathy to certain prevailing sophistries, they are no more alike than a hawk and a handsaw. But in one other thing, at least, they also coalesce, and that is in the paucity of news about them. Most other magazine editors are constantly in the papers — discoursing on the literary art, agitating for this or that, getting themselves interviewed. These twain, however, pursue a more *pianissimo* course, and so not much is known about them, even inaccurately. . . .

II

The job invites. One reads regularly what magazine editors think of their contributors, but who ever reads what magazine contributors — of whom I, Hatteras, am

one — think of their editors? A vast and adventurous field here enrolls itself, believe me. I know, more or less intimately, most of the editors of the great American periodicals, and I am constantly amused by the inaccuracy of the prevailing notions about them — notions diligently fostered, in many cases, by their own more or less subtle chicane. Consider, for example, the dean of the order, M. George Harvey, of the *North American Review*. His portrait shows a thoughtful old gentleman reading a book, his forefinger pressed affectionately against his right frontal sinus. Recalling the high mental pressure of his daily concerns, one concludes at once that he is struggling through Talboys Wheeler's epitome of the Maha-Bhārata, or Locke's "Conduct of the Understanding." But I have it from the Colonel himself — a confidence quite spontaneous and apparently sincere — that at the precise moment the photographer squeezed the bird he was thinking — what? Simply this: how much prettier Mlle. Mary Pickford would be if her lower limbs were less richly developed laterally. The book was the *Photoplay Magazine*.

Again, there is M. Robert H. Davis, editor of the Munsey publications. The official views of M. Davis depict him as a man of the great outdoors, a stalker of the superior carnivora, a dead shot, a fisher of tarpons and sharks, a rover of the primeval forests. He is dressed up like a cover of *Field and Stream*, a doggyish pipe in his mouth, his tropics formidably encircled by cartridges and fish worms. But what are the facts? The facts are that Davis does all his fishing in the Fulton Market, and that the bear-skin which in his pictures he is seen holding triumphantly at arm's length actually graces his library floor and was bought at Revillon Frères. He is a God-fearing, mild-mannered, and respectable man, an admirer of Elihu Root, a Prohibitionist, a member of the Red Cross and the S. P. C. A. The only actual

hunting he ever does is to hunt for someone to agree with him that M. Irvin Cobb is a greater man than Mark Twain or Dostoevski. And when it comes to fishing, he has said all he has to say when he brings up a couple of sardellen out of the mayonnaise.

Yet again, there are such fellows as Doty, of the *Century*; Towne, of *McClure's*; Bok, of the *Ladies' Home Journal*; Siddall, of the *American*; and Fox, of the *Police Gazette*. Doty prints Edith Wharton and Rabindranath Tagore — and reads, by choice, H. C. Witwer and Selma Lagerlöf. Fox collects Chinese jades and Sheraton chairs, and is a member of the Lake Mohonk Conference. Siddall used to be a hoochie-coochie side-show ballyhoo with Ringling's Circus. Towne, throwing off the editorial mask of moral indignation, writes tender triolets in the privacy of his chambers. Bok, viewed popularly as a muff — the wags of the National Press Club once put him down as one of the ladies entertained by them — is a rough, wild creature, a huge, knobby Hollander, with a voice like an auctioneer's. And Eastman of the *Masses*, the prophet of revolt, the savior of the oppressed — what of Eastman? Eastman, *au naturel*, gives no more damns for the oppressed than you or I. His aim in life, the last time I met him in society, was to find a chauffeur who was not a drunkard and had no flair for debauching the parlor-maids. On this theme he pumped up ten times the eloquence he has ever emitted over Unearned Increments and Wage Slaves.

III

In a similar way are the MM. George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken misviewed. And it is because I see here an opportunity to experiment with my private theory of biography that I enter with some enjoyment the enterprise, thus thrown on me, of exhibiting the facts. To this end, I herewith present a list of the things I

happen to know about the two gentlemen in question, leaving whoever cares for the job to go through it and construct for himself a definite and symmetrical effigy. So:

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

He was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, February 14 and 15 (the stunning event occurred precisely at 12 midnight) 1882.

His boyhood ambition was to be an African explorer in a pith helmet, with plenty of room on the chest ribbon for medals that would be bestowed upon him by the beautiful Crown Princess of Luxembourg.

He was educated at Cornell University and the University of Bologna, in Italy.

He is a man of middle height, straight, slim, dark, with eyes like the middle of August, black hair which he brushes back *à la française*, and a rather sullen mouth.

He smokes from the moment his man turns off the matutinal showerbath until his man turns it on again at bedtime.

He rarely eats meat.

He lives in a bachelor apartment, nearly one-third of which is occupied by an ice-box containing refreshing beverages. On the walls of his apartment are the pictures of numerous toothsome creatures. He is at the present time occupied in writing a book describing his sentimental adventures among them.

He has published the following books: "Europe After 8:15," in collaboration with Mencken and Mr. Willard Huntington Wright; "Another Book on the Theater," "Bottoms Up," and "Mr. George Jean Nathan Presents."

He has written for almost every magazine in America, except *Good Housekeeping* and *The Nation*.

He dresses like the late Ward McAllister and wears daily a boutonnière of blue corn flowers.