THE LITERARY SPOTLIGHT

XXIV: *HEYWOOD BROUN*

With a Caricature by William Gropper

THIS assignment to lift the veil and let the readers of THE BOOKMAN see something of "The True Heywood Broun" is, if I may filch a phrase from the *opera* of Dorothy Parker, like being asked to carry gilded lilies to Newcastle. There is no one — not Calvin Coolidge or Peggy Joyce nor any other celebrity — who dwells more continuously or more openly in the public eye. Any reader of the New York "World" knows something of Broun's age, weight, income, and dimensions, knows whether he has bought a new suit and what fortune his amorous adventures have had and in what condition are such inner possessions as his pride, his faith, his parental emotions, his courage, and his hope of immortality. Such a reader must be an exceedingly hasty one who cannot tell offhand how Broun is feeling this week about Mayor Hylan, God, Jack Dempsey, and Ruth Hale.

Philip Moeller tells the tale of some tourists arriving so late at Oberammergau during the season of the Passion Play that they were in desperate straits for sleeping quarters but finally persuaded one pious shopkeeper of that hamlet to put them up for the night. It was not until next morning, when they awoke to find a group of interested villagers and pilgrims gazing at them from the sunlit sidewalk, that they realized he had turned an honest mark by renting his shop window as a bedroom. Their predicament would strike most of us as a chapter out of some familiar but dreadful nightmare. I do not see how it could have ruffled the calm of that singularly expansive New Yorker, Heywood Campbell Broun.

Not long ago one of the more handsome and more roguish matrons in the rapidly aging younger set asked Alexander Woollcott if he thought she would derive a compensatory enjoyment from an affair with Broun.

"My dear," replied that sagacious critic, "I know no other way in which a struggling young girl can get so much free publicity."

Among Broun's friends — and while he is close to none of them, his acquaintances, with a few negligible exceptions, all like him enormously — this candor of his is not only a byword but an endless source of surprise and entertainment. Not one of them would think of telling him anything that was not to be repeated. Not one of them but has heard him open a conversation somewhat in this wise:

"Hullo, I've just heard something I've promised never to tell. I'll tell you, however, if you'll tell me a secret in return."

"But," you may answer, cannily, "I don't happen to know any secrets today."

"Well, then," Broun will resume with a thwarted look, "I'll tell you anyhow."

Heywood Broun

And the tale begins. Now all such talk comes from him not in malice or in vanity or from any of the motives which set most tongues a-wagging. It comes, some say, from a sheer inability to retain information. Or rather it comes from a natural response to his own favorite motto, "Sieve and let sieve" (not, as one might legitimately imagine, by any means the worst of his puns). More exactly, I believe, it comes from his lack of respect for the conventional standard of privacy — one of many standards such as those of dignity, modesty, self sacrifice, reverence for grey hairs and the like, of which his exploring mind long since challenged the validity. To a person thus released, conversation is an emptying of the mind. In speech and in writing, Broun turns *his* inside out, as a woman dumps her purse, himself genuinely curious as to its contents. Certainly Broun will tell things to his own discredit and embarrassment quite as freely as he will tell those which discomfort others. Conceivably he might steal a thousand dollars from you if you left it lying around, but the next time he saw you, he wouldn't be able to resist saying, "I took that thousand dollars from you."

He was engaged some time ago to speak in Rochester. Absurdly enough the local agent had booked him incongruously at a basket party, to follow after a long minstrel show full of local talent. No one could have been good in such an emergency, not even Broun, who is a capital speaker. He was a flop. He had made notes on the train which he planned to consult from time to time in the opportunities created by the laughter at his sallies.

There was no laughter and he soon vanished ingloriously from the platform. Now most of us, thus trapped to our discomfiture, would have buried the episode deep in memory and said nothing about it on returning home. But Broun, on arriving next noon at the Round Table at the Algonquin in New York, began by saying that he had been lecturing in Rochester the night before. The question as to how it had gone came automatically from several directions.

"It went very well", said Broun in an offhand manner and then, after the briefest of pauses, he added, "That was a lie. It didn't go well at all. I was rotten." And out poured the whole story.

And if it had not been for him, no one would have heard the diverting tale of his venture into high society last spring. It was before his recent conversion in the matter of style and tidiness. Now, on an impulse imparted by I know not what force, he has suddenly emerged as a well dressed man. He is well groomed, well tailored, slim. His ancient resemblance to the Barrymores has come back in full force and girls who had laughed at him tolerantly in other years have been caught recently in the act of trembling at his approach.

But last spring a thousand anecdotes about his hopeless externals enlivened the town. They were all justified. He weighed 240 pounds, wore slovenly and spotted clothes, let his hair grow like the lawn of a deserted house, and scuffled along the street without a vestige of polish on his No. 13 shoes. "He always looks", said the most acid of actors, "as if he had taken the coal out of the bathtub and then decided at the last moment *not* to take a bath after all."

It was such an object that rolled up to the front door of one of the finest houses on Fifth Avenue last spring in response to an invitation to play

bridge. The page looked at him in cold surprise and suggested that he go to the rear door. He mumbled something about being expected. The door was closed as a precaution but in a moment the head footman opened it a crack and inspected the visitor. "Go away," he said, "and come some other time. Madam has company this afternoon." "But," said the visitor, "I'm part of the company. You go tell her Heywood Broun is out here on the door step." This sounded so authoritative that, after a wavering instant of indecision, the footman again closed the door and disappeared into what probably, for the purposes of this story, ought to be called "the mansion". When he came back it was to open the door wide, stare incredulously at Broun for a moment and then say grudgingly: "You are to come in."

Everyone told this story, but no one told it so well as Broun told it. And the point of its relation here is that no one would have told it at all if he had not told it first. What we have as the protagonist of this anecdote is the only primitive wandering free among the sophisticates. He is the only simple person in the lot but I believe we could prove, if we put all the stories together, that it is a recaptured simplicity — the simplicity of a man who, after a shy and intimidated and conventional youth, has grown freer year by year as, year by year, he realized how meaningless were the taboos which held most folk in thrall. Yet, in trying to prove this, I should be wrecked by a thousand contradictions.

He is simple about money, yearning for the possession of it in actual shining currency. If, in payment for a piece of work, he were to be offered his choice between a heavily guaranteed six months' note for ten thousand dollars and a neat pile of five thousand-dollar bills, he would, I am seriously certain, choose the latter. In poker he is merciless, caring only to win and seeing no sense at all in the conventional rule among sportsmen that a loser should smile. This loser never does anything so artificial. On the contrary, when thus bereft, Broun's face darkens and he slouches off into the dawning day, refusing even to walk up the street with a lot of yapping winners. Yet I have known him to go to New Haven to lecture for fifteen dollars, have known him to make secret gifts of prodigal dimensions. And he is more totally oblivious to what becomes of the money he does gather in than anyone I know.

He is kind, with unfailingly gentle manners, but I cannot imagine his planning a good time for someone else.

He is almost universally liked and so enormously gregarious that he cannot endure solitude. Yet there is just a faint film covering him like a capsule, so shutting him off that he has reached his thirty-sixth year without winning a nickname, except for a brief time in France when his calamitous efforts to order eggs won for him among the other correspondents the *nom de guerre* of "Oofs" Broun.

He is timorous and will cower at the very thought of an embarrassing interview and yet, when he was passing a street corner meeting and heard a silly and cowardly thing said about Michael Collins, he walked up to the speaker and threw two pennies in his face, a reckless thing to do, as was afterward intimated by the five Irishmen who followed him up the street and blacked his eye for him. He is honest, and in all matters of any importance will say what he believes in his column though the world scoff and

the "World" wince. Yet having agreed solemnly to speak at a certain dinner on Wednesday night, he will, when the hour comes, heave himself up from the poker table and leave it only long enough to telephone to the committee and in an astoundingly croupy voice explain that he has been struck down with laryngitis and cannot get out of bed.

As you see, there are entirely too many contradictions here to permit this large person to be squeezed into the straitjacket of a formula. If ordered to find such a formula or be shot at sunrise, I should probably try to write of Broun as one who, like primitive man or any Newfoundland dog, lives only in the current moment and, in matters of courage, honesty, kindness, and possession, forgets yesterday and has never heard of tomorrow. Yet I should know that that formula left a lot of pieces of him strewn about. After all, it is as silly to try to sum up so abundant, miscellaneous, and accidental a being as Heywood Broun in a few words as it would be to reduce Charles Dickens or the Mississippi River to an epigram.

I hereby abandon the attempt and will wind up by telling the most characteristic anecdote of them all. George Kaufman tells the tale of how Broun was idling in Woollcott's office at the "Times" one midweek afternoon when in bustled Annie Nathan Meyer, bent on getting publicity for a benefit in which she was represented by a one act play. She ingenuously brought along some photographs of the cast for publication on Sunday. Woollcott, whom the superficial always regard as rude, explained to her bluntly that with limited space there never was room to celebrate a negligible and fleeting performance and that therefore it would be a waste for her to leave the photographs. They wouldn't be printed.

A fortnight later, Broun was relating the incident to some friends.

"Woollcott was terribly gruff and rude to poor Mrs. Meyer", he said. "I had to come to her rescue."

"And what did you do?"

"Why, I told her I should be glad to take the photographs and have them printed in the 'Tribune' the next Sunday. She went away happy."

"And where are the pictures now?"

"Oh, I forget. No, wait a minute. Here they are in my pocket. I forgot to throw them away."