

WHEN FUTURE HISTORIAN COMES TO 1910

WE are living, we are moving, in a grand and awful time!" chanted the Office Radical, in an irrepressible outburst of song, consequent upon the completion of a tough job on which he had been silently employed for the last hour. He rose and kicked over the waste basket and stretched himself, to show how thoroughly he was at peace with the world. Then he sang the line again.

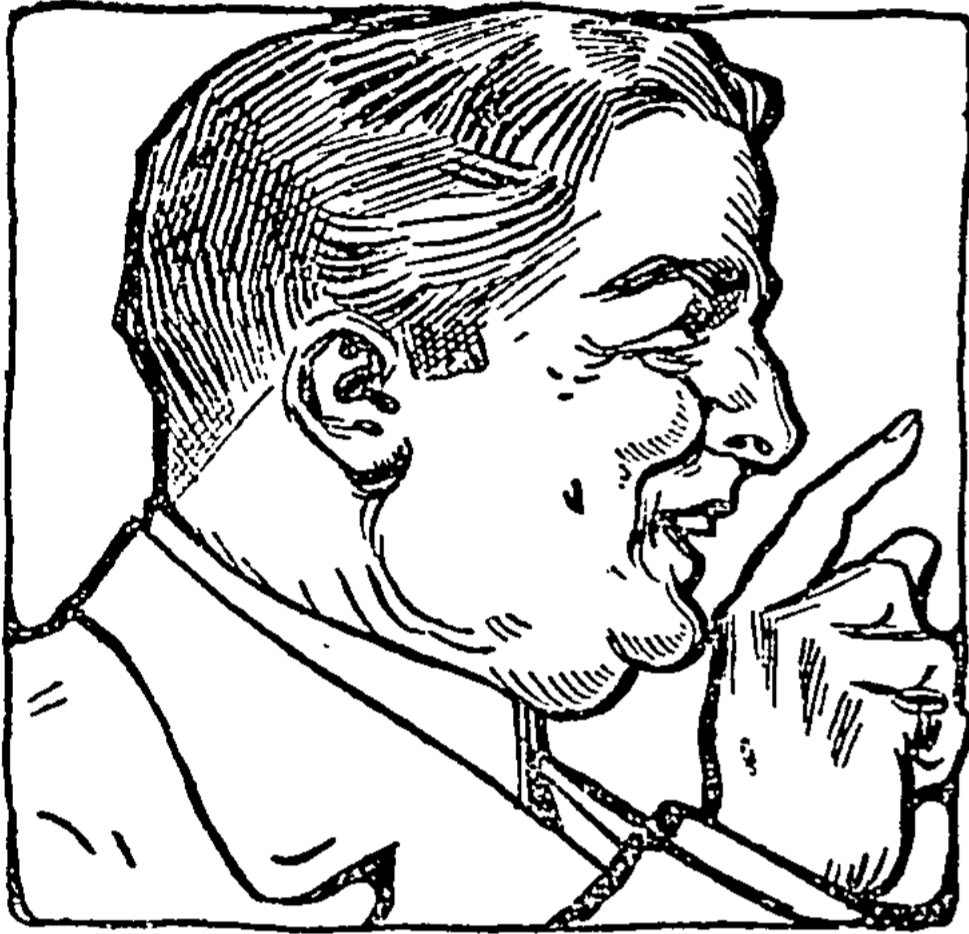
"What makes you think so?" asked the Office Philosopher, absentmindedly.

"Think what?" said the Radical, checked as he was about to sing it a third time. "Oh—you mean the song. Well—to begin with, this is the age of automobiles—"

"I haven't any," said the philosopher.

"And aeroplanes—"

"I've never seen one yet," said the Philosopher. "Everybody seen one but me."



I always happen to have left just before the aeroplane comes in sight. I don't believe there is any such thing as an aeroplane." He spoke bitterly.

"And polar discoveries—"

"Oh, if you are going to be nasty about it—" said the Philosopher, with increasing bitterness. He had been one of the innocents who had believed in Dr. Cook.

"And stirring changes in politics—"

"I knew you'd come to that," said the Philosopher. "I can tell what you're going to say next. You are going to say that there is an era of unrest; that we are trembling on the verge of some great change; that party lines are changing and a political revolution is impending; that—"

"I know I am," said the Radical, cheerfully. "We are in the midst of an era of unrest. We are trembling on the verge of some—"

"Oh, tell it to Beveridge," said the Philosopher, with abysmal contempt.

"Don't you care to hear my ideas?" inquired the Radical, with dangerous politeness.

"They're not your ideas; they're William Allen White's," returned the Philosopher.

"That's an objection," said the Radical, "but not necessarily a fatal one. The fact that Bill thinks it's so doesn't prevent it from being so."

"No," replied the Philosopher, "but it isn't. There has never been a time when everybody living in it wasn't firmly convinced that it was a wonderful epoch. No matter how small the issue that was uppermost, both sides were sure it was a mammoth."

"In the dead days of thirty years ago, when there was nothing to talk about but civil service reform, the advocates of that respectable and excellent measure

Will He Look Us Up with Interest, or Pass Us by with a Grunt?

talked about themselves as the descendants of the Abolitionists and spoke of their reform as on the same plane with that which broke the Nation in two. They believed it. But the Pendleton act looks pretty small beside the Emancipation Proclamation in the perspective of 1910.

"And so to-day Senator Bristow is comparing the insurgent movement with the fuss before the war. He believes it; it's a good thing that he and everybody else should believe it.

"If everybody thought the momentary issue they're discussing at any given time didn't amount to a hill of beans, nobody'd take any interest in it. We wouldn't have had civil service reform if George William Curtis and Carl Schurz hadn't believed they were in the same class with Martin Luther. If they had known that history would locate their reform nearer to that of Mrs. Isaac L. Rice we would never have had that admirable measure of theirs."

"I have no doubt," said the Radical, "that in 1859 there was some respectable old codger of your general intellectual equipment and probably of similar personal appearance, sitting back in a swivel chair in the precise attitude you're assuming now, wearing a supercilious smile that was the immediate paternal ancestor of the one you've got on at this moment, and addressing to some bored Radical of that day the identical twaddle that you're emitting now."

"You don't think, then," said the Philosopher, agreeably, "that men of my type can recognize a crisis when they see one?"

"No," returned the Radical. "You always catch up with the procession a few years later. Never shows the Choice momentous till the judgment hath passed by—that is, to Philosophers. It's only Radicals who know it when they see it."

"And they're always seeing it," said the Philosopher. "The now impending crisis always impends. When Artemus Ward cried out to his fellow-passengers, 'If any gentleman in this car has a Crisis concealed on his person, I call upon him to produce it!' nobody produced. The Crisis is still unproduced. It impends. It always will."

"Be an infidel about crises if you want to," said the Radical, "but at least you believe in interesting periods of history, don't you? You've got that much faith, haven't you? Unbeliever and skeptic as you are, you are human enough to admit that one year, decade or century is more interesting than another, aren't you?"

The Philosopher contemplated this problem cautiously for a moment to see if his admission would bind him to anything dangerous, and grudgingly answered in the affirmative.

"Well," said the Radical, in a satisfied tone, "this is one of the times."

"If that's the case," said the Philosopher, satirically, "I ought to be happy to live in it. But I don't feel any particular glee."

"You ought to, though," said the Radical. "Haven't you ever felt a longing to have lived in some of the times when things were really doing in the world? Wouldn't you rather have lived in the year of Bunker Hill than in Tyler's administration?"

"But if you're too philosophic to feel any of these infantile longings of the ordinary man, the rest of us aren't. I often wish I'd lived in the time of the anti-slavery agitation."

"I probably wouldn't have had anything to do with the agitation. But there would have been something worth talking about, something interesting and worth looking back on."

"Instead of that, I lived in the time of the McKinley tariff. And who cares to think about those heroic days?"

"There aren't many such times for a man to live in," said the Philosopher. "For instance, nothing has happened in this country since the civil war."

"No, but something's beginning to happen now," said the Radical. "Some future historian will be ransacking the newspaper files and official records of 1910 the same way our present-day historians are ransacking those of, say, 1859 or 1770."

"I'll bet you 10 to 6 he doesn't look at them for anything but Peary and the airships," said the Philosopher, heatedly.

"Those were the odds on Jeffries," retorted the Radical.

The Philosopher thought for some time but nothing in the way of an effective retort occurred to him. He therefore turned to his desk and resumed his work. But the Radical was in no mood for silence.

"It's worth something to live in a time when things are happening," he resumed after a while, "even in politics. You were right when you said that nothing had happened since the civil war. That is, you were right in the main."

"If you don't think things are happening, look back at the dead level of Cleveland's first administration. What was going on then? What did they discuss?"

"You know what we're talking about now; we're all of us getting hot under the collar over various phases of a question which, when you get down to it, is at bottom the problem of the distribution of wealth. To solve that problem would mean an event in history that would size up fairly well with the fall of the Roman Empire."

"I don't mean to say we're set, right now, on solving it. But we've tackled some of the edges of it; and that is a cross-road in history in itself. And in history there are only a few real cross-roads."

"But what did they talk about in Cleveland's first administration?"

The Philosopher laid down his pen, lay back and tried to think. He is a conscientious man. He also has a good memory.

"In 1855," he finally answered, "they discussed the application of civil service reform to the Post Offices of the first and second classes. In 1856 they discussed the power of the Executive to remove officials without charges, and got some het up about Attorney General Garland's ownership of telephone stock."

"In 1857 there was nothing to talk about on this side of the water, so they discussed Queen Victoria's fifty-year jubilee until, in December, President Cleveland recommended the reduction of the tariff. In 1858 they discussed the Presidential election. But what of it?"

"It was a dead level," said the Radical, "that's all. Happy is the nation that



has no history; we had none in Cleveland's first administration. What happened in Harrison's?"

"The Constitutional Centennial," said the Philosopher, "the McKinley tariff, the row with Chile, the—but I'm not going to spend the afternoon imitating an encyclopedia. I'll admit that this is the most interesting period since the civil war, with one exception. What of it?"

"What was the exception?" asked the Radical.

"Johnson's administration," replied the Philosopher, readily, "in which party passions rose to such height that the impeachment of—"

"But that was a part of the civil war," said the Radical, imperturbably. "You've already excluded the civil war from your admission."

"Johnson's impeachment was part of the civil war?" repeated the Philosopher, incredulously.

"That's what I said," responded the Radical calmly.

The Philosopher meditated. "So it was," he said finally. "But," irritably, "what are you driving at?"

"Simply," responded the Radical, "that there are only a dozen or so interesting periods in history."

"That's true," said the Philosopher, slowly, "but what—"

"And that this is one of them," finished the Radical.

The Philosopher looked at him silently for over ten seconds. Then he growled. Then he returned to work. So did the Radical; and two pens scratched busily and silently for the rest of the afternoon.