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[Charles Monroe]

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NAME OF INFORMANT Charles Monroe

Mr. Monroe, a married man of about fifty years, looks very much like a perennially amused college professor. There is always a twinkle in his blue, intelligent eyes as if he knew a very fine joke about the world which no one else is likely to suspect. He wears a dark Van Dyke beard; he is tall and slender; his clothes, though always clean, are apt to be worn rather carelessly, but this extraneous characteristic fits very well with the calm inner light that shines from his personality.

Still living near the spot where he was born, in a small hill village with a population of about 500 people, he is now looked upon as one of the town's leading citizens, though he is not a person of wealth or education. His fine character and his practical sense have made him respected by everyone who knows him — rich men, poor men, and at least one thief who was caught robbing his house while he was away performing his duties as a government clerk on a mail train. Mr. Monroe belongs to that group of Yankees who cherish the traditions of the past yet accept with good grace and tolerance the innovations of the present. Most of his wisdom has been gained by watching sympathetically the actions of his fellow men and the phenomena of nature, though he also reads good books and listens to good radio programs. He is not a church member, nor a member of any ritualistic organizations and it is doubtful if he could be a “booster” for any cause.

The Monroes live in a house that is situated not far from the railroad tracks over which Mr. Monroe rides every day during his working week of 96 hours. The house is situated in a quiet, attractive part of the village. Other houses are near but not too near. Large maple trees border both sides of the unpaved street, which is backed by neat fields and orchards. Mr. Monroe's house does not have any architectural distinction, but it is a well-built, two-story wooden structure of medium size, painted white. A small apple orchard stands at one side of it, and beneath the trees are about half a dozen hives of bees. An ample space for a garden stretches behind the house.

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The interior of this house is, if possible, even whiter and neater than the exterior. All the inside walls are faultlessly, even elegantly plastered, and perhaps there are no pictures hung anywhere because the occupants prefer not to mar the smooth, clean [plaster?] surface. For it would almost be like driving nails into a China cup, to drive picture tacks into these walls. The living room has a polished hard wood floor with several small, unworn, homemade rag rugs placed upon it. Four or five chairs, a table, a writing desk, a radio and a settee comprise the furniture. Everything is so neat that the average visitor sitting in it is probably a little uncomfortable. Even the smoke and ashes of a cigarette would seem out of place here.

2

Evidently this display of fastidiousness is of Mrs. Monroe's doing, for Mr. Monroe does not quite fit into the picture. His beard, even though it is of the neat Van Dyke variety, is too disorderly; his clothes are too unpressed.

We sat in this house and talked of politics, art, and sociology.

"What do I think of our President?" he repeated my rather blunt query. "Well, that of course is a big question, and I doubt if I could answer it even to my own satisfaction. I saw him when he passed through this part of the country several years ago, while making brief public appearances from the platform of his special train. He looked very fine up there - very friendly, intelligent, and self-controlled, and right away I decided to vote for him. So if you or anyone else knows what a vote is really worth you might have a good answer to your question," and he stopped speaking while an enigmatic smile came over his face.

"Yes, so I would," I returned, "but tell me, is this a Democratic town?"

"No - just the opposite. The Republicans make a good majority and they are still riding Cal's colt as if their trousers were sewed tight to the saddles. And I wouldn't try to pull them off, but I do have a little fun sometimes by telling them that I've gone Democratic."

Library of Congress

“And what did you or what do you now think of Coolidge?”

3

“I think most intelligent people will now admit that he was about the luckiest president on record. It just happened that the economic balance of the country was good when he came into office, also he was just smart enough to leave it alone. But he wasn't smart enough to see that the whole situation was gradually building up to an awful let-down. You simply can't let a nation of this size go running wild like a train on the loose and not expect it to come to a dent in the track somewhere. The time is coming when the public will realize that some sort of large scale [planning?] is necessary to our national well-being.

“Coolidge was riding a run-away train and he was lucky enough to jump off before the crash came. Hoover, not knowing any more than Coolidge did about where we were going, experienced an awful shock when the crash came. And do you remember how Coolidge spoke when the [ok?] Tower was opened to the public down in Florida? He said something to the effect that now, since we Americans have accumulated plenty of wealth, there's no reason why it shouldn't be all right for us to ease off and spend a few pennies for utilitarian things which might be good for our souls. He made it sound as if we had no right to have anything to do with art until we first filled our stomachs. It seems to me that that was a terrible insult to artists, who, as I've discovered, often do not bother to eat even when they can afford to eat.

4

“Of course I'm only a mail clerk, not an artist. But if I were an artist with words, I'd take a pencil stub and draw a picture of Coolidge that would reveal him as one of the proudest masters of prose on record. dry as a small stick and dusty as an old puff-ball. Not by any twisting or turning was he a good composite example of an American, nor even a good New Englander! And that's what I think of Coolidge.”

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“Some people wouldn't agree with you there. But tell me, if you were to be elected president, would you have good plans all ready to [introduce?] to your expectant public?” I asked.

“I'd certainly have a few ready. We've heard a good deal [about?] 'back to the land' movements, haven't we? Well, for one thing, I'd try to start some sort of a 'go to the village' movement. To my knowledge such a scheme has not been presented before. I know it has been the fashion for novelists to picture American Village life as a very 'dead' form of existence. They have revealed its worst aspects very thoroughly. For a long time now it has been almost a national pastime to ridicule villages and I should like to try to put a stop to such thinking. Would you really like to hear what I think about villages?”

“Yes, I would like to.”

Mr. Monroe slid down into his chair and gazed up at the [spotless?] ceiling of the room for a moment. The fingers of one hand [carefully?] 5 stroked his pointed beard, but his other fingers drummed rapidly and lightly on the arm of his chair as if they were calling his thoughts to order.

“I think most of us would admit that city living as it is practised today is unsatisfactory. The average New Yorker, for example, is not quite sane. When I got to New York and see the way people act I'm either inclined to laugh or feel ashamed of humanity. Everyone is in everyone else's way. Every hope and aspiration of life seem to be caught in some sort of a traffic jam. [But?] to keep to the dollars and cents side of the matter, no city is self-sufficient, and that fact alone, looking from a scientific viewpoint, makes city living impracticable.

“The newspaper writers have been telling us right along that it wouldn't be fun to be caught in a big city in time of war or during an earthquake. These are the more outward bad

Library of Congress

features of the matter - the features that have been more or less publicized, and I'll not say much more about them. My own case against city living goes much deeper.

"The admitted fact is that we are social animals, - that's how cities got their start. [But?] look at social life in cities today! It is so anti-social that it would take a brave man to advocate that a 'good neighbor' policy should be practised there. We have heard many times that the loneliest people in the world are city people 6 who have no friends. And city people do not befriend one another any more - they compete with one another. Human life seems so cheap and common there that an ordinary person gets no more respect than a rotten fence post.

"But in a small village such as this, everyone gets at least a little sympathetic attention. I know there is plenty of gossip and hypocrisy here, but even the lowest man in town is given the rating of a human being. We are not satiated with people, and so we are much kinder and more considerate of one another. [?] Do you see my point? I mean that if our social [worl d?] world is to continue standing on its foundation of humanity, as the term is still defined in the dictionary, we have got to give more attention and consideration to individuals. We have got to be good neighbors, not only politically, but socially. Let me tell you about a few things that have happened here, and you may see what I'm driving at. First I'll tell you about something that happened to us right here in this house.

"Being away from home every other week as I am, makes it rather hard for my wife and daughters. That is the main drawback to this job of mine - although it's certainly nice to be able to stay at home for a full week at a time too, and rest up or do work about the place. Well, several years ago we discovered that a peeping tom was prowling about. Once my wife caught sight of him 7 peering through the window on a night when I was away. She was startled, but since nothing came of the incident, she soon stopped worrying about it.

"Several weeks later a passing neighbor caught sight of a man standing under that window there, and we soon realized that the fellow was making a regular practise of night peeking

Library of Congress

every week that I was away. We didn't know what to do about it. I asked friends to watch the house for me to try and find out who it was, and several times the man was chased. We didn't want to shoot at him. But my wife and daughters were getting more and more frightened.

“This went on for almost two years and my wife was near to a nervous breakdown. Then I thought of trying to trap the peeper by leaving a marked twenty-dollar bill on the [?] desk by the open window. The scheme worked. He took the bill and a few weeks later handed it in at the store, where I'd told the storekeeper to be on the watch for it. He turned out to be a young man who doesn't live far from here - a rather weak but by no means disrespected fellow. After talking the matter over with the judge I decided to send him to jail for a year.

“He came back from his sentence during a week when I was home. I met him walking on the street - he was across the road - and when he [?] saw me he was all smiles and waved his arm and called out, ‘Hello, Charley!’ as if I were one of his best friends. Of course I returned his greeting for I had no intention of holding a grudge against him.

“And that was the end of our trouble. There were no bad feelings anywhere so far as I could see. Our peeping Tom did not fall down in his social standing. He and his friends looked at the whole affair as if it were an interesting adventure, and no doubt some of the younger men looked at their returned crony as if he were a sort of a hero returned from successful parleys with famous jail-birds.

“You see, there's actually more tolerance among village people or country people simply because everyone is more or less acquainted with everyone else's personal affairs. Life in a village is like a game of cards in which everyone holds a hand. But instead of the [?] players playing against one another, the opposing forces to beat are more impersonal ones - like poverty, sickness, or even bad weather. All events tend to draw the individuals together. For an instance. let us suppose that two neighbors have had a little quarrel. For a while they are not on speaking terms. But on one day a child in one family takes sick and

Library of Congress

dies, and the importance of that event sweeps all pettiness away, and the two neighbors become friends again. Even a severe snowstorm, which people just have to talk about, is sufficient in a village to give the conversational ball a good push, and after all the world is operated by the countless levers of small talk.”

9

Suddenly Mr. Monroe became more animated and he sat up straight in his chair.

“What I am trying to say is this,” he went on. “Since man is a social animal, and since we have embraced, or at least accepted Christianity, our social integrity must prove itself by fulfilling not a ‘Good Neighbor Policy’ with a neighbor two thousand miles away, out one next door - really next door. Just being friendly to do with the good neighbor program I would advocate.

Yes,” he continued, “our country is suffering from a severe ‘size complex.’ Our worship of big things is causing no end of trouble. ‘Big business’ and big everything else first gives us illusions of grandeur, then we suffer from all sorts of related economic ailments. City people are so bombarded by events and objects of magnitude that it is nearly impossible for them to hang on to our standards of measurement. Sometimes it seems wonderful to we that an inch can remain an inch, that a pound is able to hold itself to a pound. By constantly watching one another, rather than the comparatively impersonal events which city people watch, village folk are able to hold to a pretty stable source of perspective. That’s my opinion. Of course because of cars and radios, a great part of our social life is gone, and we don’t look at one another nearly as much as we did twenty-five, or even ten years ago. I’m a radio fan myself - have been one ever since I bought my first set 10 back about nineteen twenty. Must have owned nearly a dozen sets altogether and I don’t know how many hours I’ve spent listening to them and tinkering with them.”

“What sort of things do you like to listen to?” I asked.

Library of Congress

Mr. Monroe's face broke into a very broad and lasting grin.

“Don't think that I'm trying to jibe you - but I like to listen to announcers while they are trying to sell something.”

“Just what do you mean by that?”

“I mean that for real drama I've never found anything that entertains me more. All the finest shades of human emotion are expressed in their voices. At first most of the selling talks were crudely presented, but now, selling by radio is almost an art. I'll admit that it's probably very hard to do a good job of radio-selling. A speaker must feel somewhat like a man on a tight-rope who is trying to perform half a dozen tricks at the same time. He must think of his sponsor, read his script carefully, keep at the proper distance from the microphone, and finish with a second or two of the allotted time period. But that is the easiest part of his job. To really succeed, he must keep under control every vibration of his voice. He must not sound nervous nor over-anxious to do well; he must [?] make absurdities sound reasonable; he must sound sincere even though he knows that the product he is advertising is a harmful drug or an actual poison - like Pebecco tooth-paste, for example.

11

Have you read ‘100,000,000 Guinea Pigs,’ the book that exposes many manufacturers of harmful drugs and foods?”

“Yes I've read it.”

“Well then, you must remember about the man who committed suicide by eating a tube of Pebecco tooth paste. That book gives good proof of what I was just speaking about - the misplaced faith that most Americans have in big things, successful things. I put my

Library of Congress

faith in [?] smaller things, and I don't expect to run to a national hook-up or to the Saturday Evening Post for any kind of consolation.”

“ [?] But what do you like in the way [?] of radio programs?” I asked.

“Good news commentators and musical programs, mainly. Kaltenborn is my favorite commentator at present, and as for music, I think I've got a fairly good musical education from listening to good concerts. I still listen to Walter [Damrosch's?] music appreciation hour, and I can identify most of the music he plays. Then there's Alfred [Wallenstein?] and his good concerts on station [?]. O. R. but perhaps the philharmonic concerts on Sunday afternoons please me as much as anything.”

“Is music your favorite form of art?”

“Possibly - yes, I suppose it is. And aside from the pure enjoyment I get listening to it, I'm very much interested in its social suggestions that, in spite of this era of nationalism and censorship are still allowed to go free. It seems to me that music is 12 far more revolutionary than words are, and I wouldn't be suprised surprised if the time comes when it will be censored as books are censored. of course in Germany the works of composers with Jewish blood have already been banned; but that isn't the kind of censorship I mean. I mean it may actually become unlawful for composers to write music that goes to emotional extremes.

“Do you remember the ‘Blue Monday’ song that came out in Europe - Austria, I think - a couple of years ago? Many people committed suicide, they were made so depressed by it. If one song can make people kill themselves, isn't it very likely that other songs often control many actions of men in their daily life? - turn normal citizens into tramps, philosophers, or non-voters? The fact is, any beautiful and perfect work of art makes our daily existence seem very drab by comparison. Do you see what I mean?”

Library of Congress

"I try to be a good citizen by performing certain public and personal duties which most of my friends would throw up their hands at if I suggested they perform along with me. In my opinion there's too much 'passing the buck' going on today. I don't like many of our laws - capital punishment, for instance - but since I'm a voter and a sustainer of our form of government, I of course automatically make myself as responsible as any other individual in the upholding of our laws. As a sort of an 'accessory to the fact' I once forced myself to attend an execution down in Sing Sing prison where my 13 brother-in-law holds a good job. It was an ugly business. One witness fainted and another vomited, and it was a big relief to get out of there. I felt like the executioner myself, as I was partly, for the fact that we do not press the button or cut the rope doesn't let any of us off.

"But if I can't convince you that I was a killer in that instance, you'll have to grant that I'm a killer of pigs and cattle, for I've often helped farmers butcher their live stock. I've done this to satisfy my own conscience, for I'm a meat eater, and being a meat-eater, why shouldn't I assist with the dirty work? You smile!"

"I'm only smiling my approval, Mr. Monroe. [?] Then, I take it, you must be well [?] acquainted with the country people about here?"

"Oh yes! I know all the farmers. It happens that I was planning to visit an old fellow living about five miles from here this very afternoon. Do you think you would care to go along with me? It's only two-thirty now, and I could stop at our home for old folks, and leave a few things there, too."

"I'd like very much to go along," I replied.

"Then we'd better start right away."

Library of Congress

So Mr. Monroe led me out of the back door of his house as the shortest way to [ghe?] garage. However, before we reached his car I stopped in my tracks in astonishment when I noticed that the short sidewalk on which we were walking consisted of old gravestones.

14

“Like my sidewalk?” asked Mr. Monroe laughingly. “Everybody is interested in it when they first see it. I got the stones from an old graveyard that had to be moved to make way for a new road. After the bodies were taken up and given new burial, it was discovered that there were too many stones for the number of graves. So I asked the road superintendent if I might have them, and he was glad to let me take them away. You see even a gravestone can serve a practical purpose. Of course the drawback here is that visitors always have to stop to read the inscriptions. Perhaps I should have planted them face down.”

As my host had mentioned, it was indeed a fine, mellow autumn day. The leaves of the trees had fallen, out there was still plenty of live color in the landscape. We started on a road that ran straight toward a distant mountain, but in a few minutes we turned off on a descending back road that took us to a secluded valley where a few farms reposed in their autumn ripeness. On one of these farms some of the town's homeless people were kept. It was not an unattractive place. A fine valley and mountain view could be seen from the large, well-shaped old house that, according to Mr. Monroe, at the present time housed four old men.

We found one quavering old fellow sitting on a bench in the sunshine playing or trying to play a harmonica. I would not say that he looked unhappy, but his face certainly lighted when he saw 15 “Charley,” as he called my companion. Mr. Monroe handed him a package of tobacco, then sat down to chat for a few minutes.

“Well, Fred, how have you been making out lately?”

Library of Congress

“Oh, my rheumatics be middlin' bad. Charley! I ain't gittin' much rest by no sight, that I ain't. An' this 'ere mouth organ is high worn out too! It's so lively bad no'he wnts t' hear my play it any more.”

“Yes, as I came up I noticed that it didn't sound just right. Here, let me see it! Is this the kind you like to play?”

“That shore be the kind, Charley, for a certain! But this 'n's night to seven year old an' it ain't even wuth a bent nickle! Jest let me show you.”

And the feeble old man took back the instrument and began to play “Old black Joe” on it. I thought that he tried to make it sound as bad as possible in order to convince us that what he said was true.

“Now ain't it a hellion, Charley? Doan't it sound like a bobcat 'ith thirteen bellyaches?”

“It does sound pretty bad, Fred. I tell you what - I'll try to bring you a new one the next time I come.”

“You will do so, Charley? I will be greatly beholden to you if you will do so! A new shiny one just like this 'n', you know! That will be right dandy!”

16

“Are you folks here getting plenty to eat these days?”

“Oh we be havin' plenty of potatoes and vittles! We ain't complainin', 'cept about the 'baccy. Mr. Whitely ain't a smoker hisself you know, an' he's wonderfully uncanny to understand how us pipe toters love our smokin's like we do. But mostly we contrive to hide a few [shots?] somewheres to puff on the sly when our main supply runs out - till Mr. Whitely fetches home some new from down street. Mr. Whitely is a-pickin' apples over in the orchard behind the hay-barn jest now it you allow t' see him.”

Library of Congress

"I won't stop today to see him, Fred. But I'll just step in the house and leave this package on the table, and you can say I brought it if you like."

We left the old man still sitting on his bench in the thin autumn sunlight, but he was holding and fondling the package of tobacco instead of his old harmonica when he passed from our sight.

"There you have seen a very successful home for old people," said Mr. Monroe as we drove into hillier country, "and it stands as another point in favor of small things. I have kept good track of what goes on there, and I'm certain that some of the inmates are happier then they have been before. Mr. Whitely never keeps more than six at a time, and everthing everything is really homelike. It's much better than a large state institution, even if the medical care may be better. But there is still one thing more important than 17 science in this world, and that is true sympathy and friendship - something rather rare in all big institutions, if I'm not mistaken."

The country was rapidly becoming more deserted and wild-looking as we went slowly over a road that obviously received but little attention from the town's road-workers. Details of a dark, shadowed mountain became more visible as we approached it, yet we had not traveled more than six miles from our starting point.

"You'll like Nathan [Jebbs?]. He's in the 'apple business' as he calls it, though I doubt he has ever sold five dollars' worth of apples. He came to me early last spring and asked if he might buy a swarm of my bees so that he could put them in his orchard to fertiliz [fertilize?] the blossoms. He had no money, so I told him he could take the bees and pay for them later - just to make it sound as if I took his apple farming seriously. There is his house just ahead. Nathan lives all alone and his nearest neighbor is more than a mile to the north. He has no way of getting around except by walking, and I think we'll find that he hasn't even any baskets or bags to put his apples in."

Library of Congress

We drove into the yard of an old, rickety, unpainted house, and the only bright and cheerful thing that could be seen was a large pile of bright red apples heaped on the grass in the dooryard. Then we saw Nathan [Jebbs?] himself a slight, weather-worn man of about sixty years, coming up from a small orchard behind the house to see 18 who his visitors were. His face lighted when he saw Mr. Monroe, and his first words were:

“I was jest hopin' you would come up and see my fine crop of apples. Those bees made love to my apple blossoms last spring and no mistake about it! Didn't I say they would? See that pile of apples, Charley? Ain't they as purty as any you ever see?”

“Yes they certainly are fine looking apples.”

“Here, jest sink your teeth into this one and see fer yourself if it ain't as juicy as a freshened jersey [co?] cow . I'm very sorry I have no money to pay you for these bees, but wouldn't you like to take home some apples? Let me jest put a bushel or two in your car.”

So to let the proud orchardist feel that he was glad to be compensated with apples for his swarm of bees, Mr. Monroe allowed several pails full to be dumped into his car in spite of the fact that he had more apples on his trees at home than he knew what to do with - as he told me later while we were returning to the village.

We walked down to inspect the orchard itself and the hive of bees, and Nathan led us here and there with the eagerness of a child whose toys were nothing but apples and apple trees. He had a story about almost every tree. He showed us where he had dug borers from their trunks; told us where he had got some old screens to protect their bark from rabbits; showed us his pruning methods.

19

For half an hour we talked of nothing but the production of apples, and it seemed that Nathan cared about little else. So nothing was said on either side about the possibilities

Library of Congress

of marketing them, and at last Mr. Monroe said that he would have to start for home, and added,

“Well, Nathan I can see that you are going to show the world how to raise apples. I'll try to come back within a few weeks and perhaps by that time I'll have found a few customers to buy some of your apples.”

“That will be very obliging of you, Charley.”

And we were driving back the way we came. The sun was now low and the air seemed suddenly [?] quite cool. Mountains in the distance were wrapped in beautiful folds of haze.

“There's a man who is an exact opposite of your average uneducated city man,” spoke Mr. Monroe after a thoughtful silence. “He is as poor as a church mouse, yet see how his interest in apples makes him sort of withdrawn king of simple men. He really doesn't want to sell his fruit. The apples are too beautiful. And there's a theme for you, since you're a writer. ‘The Man Who Loved Apples Better Than Gold.’ Think of all the social parables that could be woven into such an essay. O my! sometimes I've half a notion to give up my mail job and be a writer myself!