

THE ROVING EYE

Dunes Poet Was Real Eccentric

By ROBERT TAYLOR

The passing of Harry Kemp, Provincetown's blithe spirit and one of the roundest pegs that ever nestled comfortably in the square holes of convention, must surely upset, however momentarily, the gayety of nations. With Lord Timothy Dexter of Newburyport, and Victoria Woodhull, who ran for the office of president of the United States against Grant (her platform advocated free love; but she was not elected), Harry belonged to a select breed — the genuine American eccentric.

Our country has not been prolific in turning out notable eccentrics. Compared to England, where eccentricity is regarded as a national treasure, where biographies are lovingly constructed about slightly potty characters, where the fey and the moon-struck have a tradition, ours is meager soil. To read a 19th century Russian novel, indeed, is to get the impression the entire populace comprises nothing else.

We do best, perhaps, in such mass movements as those of the beatniks, who substitute their brand of conformity for another. The Poet of the Dunes could hardly be classified as a beatnik, though he figured in a number of youthful goatish escapades which have, mercifully, faded into the crumbling must of antique newspaper clippings.

One-Man Band

No beatnik, for instance, would serve as energetically in community affairs. Harry Kemp was Provincetown's one-man Chamber of Commerce. He was a letter writer to newspapers. He crusaded for a national holiday for washerwomen. He churned out hundreds of sonnets, strove mightily for the ideals of literature as he saw them. That he was no Eugene O'Neill is beside the point: they shared a common conviction. Harry was an individualist, a real and rare eccentric.



P-TOWN'S BLITHE SPIRIT

We encountered the Dunes Poet only once, but he left a graphic impression. He was the only man we ever saw embroiled in a typical cloak-room mix-up—over a toga and laurel wreath.

The occasion was the world premiere, some years ago, of a film called "Plymouth Adventure," based on the trials of the Pilgrim Fathers and opening appropriately in Plymouth around Thanksgiving Day. For the occasion the town officials and the movie moguls had arranged a ritual starting with a New England-style luncheon and ending with the screening of the movie.

Outside the clapboard auditorium, the mise-en-scene had been arranged as carefully as a Hollywood snowfall with granulated cornflakes. There was a tiny replica of the "Mayflower" cradled on a perch; models in Pilgrim costume; a town crier. From time to time one of the Pilgrim lassies would pose for photographs with her arm about the bowsprit of the "Mayflower," and press agents in Tattersall vests and a cynical air of omniscience would provoke the town crier into swinging his bell.

Pickets Premiere

Suddenly into this contrived ballet burst a line of pickets. The Dunes Poet, a wiry, white-thatched septuagenarian, was in the middle, carrying a placard that shrieked. Provincetown was the actual landing place of the Pilgrims. He was shoeless, as usual, and clad in a flowing white toga and a gilt wreath that kept sloping askew as he marched resolutely down the street. Two pretty girls, in togas also, flanked the determined bard.

It was Harry's intention to move the premiere, lock, stock and barrel, to P-Town, but failing to persuade, he did the next best thing: stayed for lunch. We remember him across the table, benign, lean and acquiline, reciting a few stanzas of his verse; and we remember being introduced to one of his female attendants who bore a lyre. She was Clio, The Muse of History, Harry said.

Reclaims Wreath

Most particularly, we remember Harry punctuating his argument with an admonitory turkey leg as he addressed one of the visiting film tycoons. The poet's audience was a man of considerable girth, who had patently never looked upon Shelley plain, and who was sucking a mammoth cigar. His eye rolled fran-

tically in search of escape, but there was none. Harry gave him a detailed lecture on the dangers of historical anachronism. "I'll put our research department onto it, Harry-boy," the stout man promised.

Somehow at the close, there was a stampede around the single cloak room, and we found ourselves beside the Dunes Poet. He was reclaiming his gilded wreath and the Inverness caep that kept the chill off his toga. Unfortunately, the attendant couldn't seem to com-

prehend that Harry Kemp, though the only noble Roman in sight, belonged to the wreath. She insisted on offering him first a wool cap, then a fedora, and another soft hat.

The poet rejected these with an infinitely patient and courteous carriage, pointing all the while at the wreath lying in a clutter of garments. Finally, he was left standing with his check while the crowd thinned. The attendant at last understood. Harry placed the gilt circlet firmly on his brow. It fitted just fine.

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LEISURE'S WEALTH

(Response to Friends who told me I had "wasted" many days in my shack in the Dunes)



I cannot count, as servitors do, a fee,
The recompense those mornings brought to me,
When the sun, using wave-tops as a floor,
Suffused the dunes, and walked in at my door,
With casual riches which he gave away,
Bringing to me the priceless gifts of day!
This Prodigal taught me how fools hoard their gold
To keep till of no use, themselves too old;
The moon, too, with her dancing skirts of cloud,
The wisdom of the morning sun avowed.
Let Business keep to strict and dusty rule—
I would live like a child let out from school.
Next to the Golden Rule for Poets' use
Is Leisure, and the gifts its hours produce!

Harry Kemp

Harry Kemp emerging from a mid-winter swim which he enjoyed regardless of temperature until about a year ago.