

# THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

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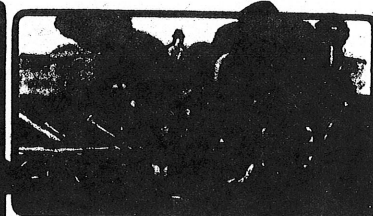
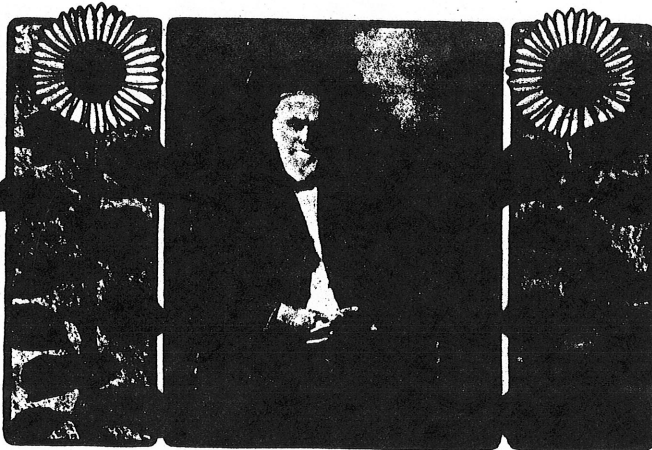
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## MAJOR BENSON A SUNFLOWER STATESMAN



SENATOR BENSON, of Kansas—called variously Major Benson and Judge Benson at home, according to the Ottawa taste of what gentleman addresses him—is the more recent of Sunflower Senators. In the last month of last session Major Benson came to Washington by appointment from Governor Hoch.

The resignation of his predecessor, Senator Burton, had created a vacancy. Not that Senator Burton abandoned the Senate as something too mean for him; but the public called him to another and a different service. After he had held his Senate place for a space, his countrymen discovered that they preferred to have him in jail. Thereupon, realizing that he was not capable, like Sir Boyle Roche's bird, "of being in two places at once," Senator Burton sent in his resignation to the Governor, who, without protest, accepted it.

Recently, I had the honor to be at dinner with Major Benson. The object of the meeting was not wholly prandial; I was present for the purpose of this article.

The Major himself was aware of my commission, and began by a reference thereunto. "This being written up is new to me," he said. "Would it be improper if I asked what sort of article you are to write?"

"No impropriety," said I. "My instructions are to look at and listen to you, and write what I see and hear."

"Well," he remarked judicially, "no one in my position can object to that."

"No," I responded; "it would be preposterous to suppose that any one can come to the Senate and keep it a secret."

This bit of conversation came in with the clams. I purposed waiting until fish before I put any serious question. During the era of soup I would confine investigation to the eye.

This plan was but wisdom. Major Benson, throughout the arduous afternoon, had been listening to the Rate-Bill eloquence of his colleague, Long, the senior Sunflower Senator, elucidating that measure in divers pipe-line particulars, and he was not only hungry but weary. He is a bad interviewer, and misunderstands his art, who pulls the inquiring corkscrew on folk tired and unfed. If he be wise in his journalistic generation he will postpone curiosity until the victim be at least partially filled. Naturalists have never explained the phenomenon, yet it is none the less a truth that gentlemen unbuckled, and at after-dinner ease, speak freely of matters reference to which in surly, undined moments they lock fast behind their undisclosed lips. We shall see how this philosophy worked out in the communicative instance of Major Benson.

While waiting for that frankness which should come with fish, a brief picture of Major Benson might be tolerated, together with a scrap or two of biographical kind. The Major is on the sundown side of sixty. There is no thought of baldness; his hair, grown gray in service, has stuck loyally by its post. His beard, shot with gray, knows no mowing touch of razor, but is kept in orderly reserve by subduing shears. His eye is kindly, and something human and fetching gleams therein.

In person small, with no suggestion of adipose, the one big thing about Major Benson is his honesty. Ah, that honesty! It fences him about, envelops him like an atmosphere, embellishes him like a jewel! It is the first thing one notices, the last thing one forgets. It is indubitable, impregnable, not to be scaled, is that honesty; and convinces that here will be no raw material for the muck-rakes.

Speaking of muck-rakes, let me step aside from the trail of this story to certain views and feelings which I entertain on that John Bunyan point. Since President Roosevelt brought up the business, I have striven—confining myself to Senate and Senators—to recall any grave deed of muck-rake injustice that has occurred in my time. I must say, as the result of such effort, that if in my narrow hour there has been a case of Senatorial innocence assailed, it got by me in the night. Assuredly I can lay the finger of memory on none. I am obliged to repeat, what I recently printed in another page than this: "I was once young—as a muck-raker—and am now old; but I have never seen the righteous official forsaken, nor the upright Senator raked as muck."

Macaulay had a weakness for taking up one subject and writing about another, in which literary trick the gifted Scotchman recalled the grazing habits of Josh Billings' famous mule. The philosopher, when he wanted to put the mule into a pasture, used to turn him into the one next to it, and let him jump the fence. I shall seize on those honorable precedents of Macaulay and the mule, and follow for the moment their examples.

Congress has adjourned; the Senate in its reverend membership has dispersed to its ninety homes. With no purpose of its frequent and favored target of rock-throwers in newspapers and magazines.

The Senate, whether it knows it or no, is vastly the author of its own griefs. It should take a good hard corrective look at itself in the glass. It is at once the least respected and most unpopular wheel of government; and, for that double unpopularity, it has no one save itself to thank.

From cradlehood it has nursed a manner of snub and insult toward the world at large. It mistook a snorting, nose-tossing uppishness for the mark of greatness, and, in trying to be dignified, succeeded only in becoming insolent.

The first Senate that ever sat locked its doors in the faces of mankind. Its sessions were too sacred for the common vulgar eye and ear. A parcel of pagan priests, about the working of their pretended wonders, could not have been more haughtily exclusive.

It was Aaron Burr who fought open the Senate doors, so that the public might look on its own business. On that issue of "Open Senate" he defeated his predecessor, General Schuyler, against all that money, backed by the intriguing genius of Hamilton; and the expressed preference of Washington, could do. Since that hour the Senate has not locked its doors; but it saved the point, and clung to what "dignity" lies latent in bolts and bars, by "executive sessions."

At impressive intervals, say three times a day, some togaed personage arises and remarks: "Move the Senate go into executive session!"

Thereupon the bells ring, the onlookers are hustled clatteringly from the galleries, and the doors are closed.

There is a world of affectation in this. Not more than once in a session does any Senator say aught that the public should not hear; and then it is something which the Senator himself ought not to say. It is this door-slamming, blind-drawing, keyhole-stuffing secrecy which, among other matters, invites the muck-raker. He cannot understand that such airs of exclusion and seclusion have no source other than just the cheap vanity of the Senate itself.

The muck-raker is excessively human. What he knows is that he was driven from his gallery perch—where he had come on his own business, and to observe his servants in the Senate below transact, not their affairs but his—and he makes the natural deduction. He realizes that, properly counted, there should be but two keys to go with government—one to the treasury, one to the jail—and he cannot avoid the conclusion, when the Senate thus gratuitously and improperly adds a third key to the list, that it is about some enterprise which it is afraid or ashamed to throw open to the light of day. People engaged upon good works need no locks; those whose works are evil cannot do without them. The Senate, conducting its labors in the dark, should not feel amazement when a barred-out public concludes that oaths are being violated, honest interests being slaughtered, and, generally speaking, ebon villainy is afoot.

When his architect asked the noble Drusus how he would have his house built, he answered:

"So that every Roman may witness the least act of my life."

The recommendation will be thrown away, and yet I cannot avoid suggesting that the Senate might profit by the Consul's example. Assuredly, if it did so, and, instead of hiding and skulking and scowling and prowling, and carrying the public's destinies off into those secret corners of executive sessions, pretending to mend them while making them worse, there would be not only a deal less muck-raking, but a deal less muck to rake.

By Alfred Henry Lewis

And the Senate does other foolish things, which have for their first and sure effect the drawing of the public's horns its way. It will quarrel with a proposal to appropriate \$25,000 for the White House, and then spend, exclusive of its personal salary of \$495,000, an annual \$900,000 upon itself. While it buys itself manure sets at six dollars and chateleine bags at eleven dollars each, and so through a wondrous list which, beginning with the "Anniston Hot Blast"—whatever that may be—for Senator Morgan at five dollars, goes on and on and on and on through "toothache wax" and "corkscrew knives" until it rounds out those \$900,000 with "Senator Bailey: For commutation of allowance for stationery and newspapers for the fiscal year, \$57.04," and "\$90.60" to Senator Tillman on a similar commutation-stationery argument, it should not permit itself to be too deeply shocked by the disbursements of other departments. Folk who swallow camels must not strain at gnats. Also they should go to the Scriptures concerning motes and beams and eyes. Those that prate of economy ought to practice economy, and Senators who annually vote through such items as "One month's extra pay to officers, clerks, etc., \$62,300.70" excite suspicion as hypocrites when thundering against the expenses of a White House where, to say least, no one works twelve months in twenty-four and gets paid for twenty-six. Possibly such experienced explanationists as Senators Bailey and Tillman can make clear that "One month's extra pay" in its innocuousness, as well as the pure propriety in their personal instances of those respective items for "\$57.04" and "\$90.60." For myself, however, as a blinded muck-raker, I confess that they baffle me to a standstill. I cannot dodge the feeling that, whether for much or for little, they are the merest registrations of muck.

The late Mr. Blaine alluded to the late Mr. Conkling as possessing a "turkey-gobbler strut." If he had drawn that tail-spreading picture of the Senate as a whole he would have been as happy. The Senate is perennially the gobbler. It struts in its attitude toward the White House, the House of Representatives, and every other department of government. It struts toward you and me. Get into a Senate elevator, and, if a Senator be aboard with a wish to go to a floor above or a floor below the one on which you have fastened your desires, you will be whisked by your own destination without apology or explanation. Should another Senator come aboard, you may be whisked by again. This condition of whisk, too high or too low, may persist indefinitely, contingent on the getting on and off of reverend Senators.

#### A Prophet with Honor

I MIGHT give a score of further instances; but soup is half through, and I must hurry back to Major Benson, and be ready for that verbosity which I am confident will come with fish. As man and citizen, too much may not be said in favor of Major Benson. Like most Kansans of years and eminence, he was born beyond the borders of that commonwealth. He had New York emanation, and went from Jamestown, that State, to Kansas in 1860. Horace Greeley was crying—as one crying in the wilderness—"Go West, young man, go West!" and our young emigrant found his Kansas inspiration in the wood-chopper of Chappaqua. He went, opened a law office in Ottawa, and has been there ever since.

Having seen the new land, and knowing it to be good, Major Benson, following a two-years' residence, returned briefly but importantly to the Jamestown theatre of his youth. Importantly, because it was for a wife that he turned back; briefly, since he no sooner found himself a married man than, with Madam Benson on his arm, he set proudly forth again for far-off Ottawa.

It is easy to understand why Kansas, upon the advent of Major Benson, should quickly grant him foothold in both her confidence and her heart. More than most regions, the Kansas of that hour rocked and heaved with the ground-swells of late war. And Major Benson had been a soldier—a true soldier; for he went in a private to emerge major of his regiment. No braver, no better, followed Sherman to Savannah, and that march through Georgia was enough of itself to rebuild a Sunflower popularity.

To show that Major Benson was popular there exists multiplied proof. In those early days, Kansas, when a man lapsed into the unpopular, either lynched him or "ran him out." If, on the other hand, he waxed popular, it elevated him to office. Major Benson has not only remained in Ottawa—his first camp—for more than the third of a century, but he has been variously mayor, legislator and judge. Wherefore, one is at liberty to argue that he must have been—and must be—loved of the public.

If I were asked to lay out in natural procession what attributes are dominant in Major Benson, I would begin—as I did above—by naming his honesty. That honesty is the cornerstone of the man. He stands on it, like a statue on its pedestal. More than any other trait, it lifts him above the heads of the press. It is that fashion of honesty which makes safe the dower of the widow, the inheritance of the orphan, and is never so actively jealous

as when watching over the fortunes of the defenseless and the weak. It is not the honesty which heaps up dollars for its owner, and a man of the world would be more apt to ask Major Benson to be his executor than his partner.

If there were naught to Major Benson but his honesty, he might look for Senate failure. Admirable of itself, there be enterprises, such as bridge whist and lawmaking, wherein mere honesty cannot be called a complete equipment. But the story of our new Sunflower statesman does not end with his honesty. Somewhere beneath his bland, kindly, unassertive exterior must hide the iron of inflexible purpose. Indubitably he is brave; for otherwise, in an army of brave men, on a march that would have tried a Xenophon, he could never have exchanged his musket for a sword, nor adorned the blouse of a private with the epaulettes of a major.

For all that, the bravery which wins military promotion may be of the flashing, blazing, dashing, sudden, short-lived kind, like a fire builded of straw. The courage of Major Benson is plainly of a deeper and more urgent root. In a State ridden hard of railroads, no one than himself is more warmly loathed by railroads. His successor will be elected and, bar the unforeseen and unforeseeable, come to Washington in early January. Besides Major Benson there are a round half-dozen who will be presented for the place. Such names as Curtis, and Coburn, and Campbell, and Calderhead, and Bristow, and Stubbs are to be offered. And among all who will be heard of, the name of "Benson" will taste most bitter in the railroad mouth. It is by this sign I know the latter for a courage as stubborn and endless as an oak.

#### Not Loved by the Railroads

HOW often, as judge or mayor or State legislator at Topeka, must he have opposed himself in the paths of railroad purpose—as obdurate as any stone post—before he earned the praise which is the sober inference of unstinted railroad hatred! If, on the principle announced by the oratorical Bragg, of Wisconsin, we are to love folk for the enemies they make, there is not a railroad-ridden man in railroad-ridden Kansas who should not love Major Benson.

Fish appears—the moment of frankness, promised of philosophy, has arrived.

It now becomes my disagreeable duty to record that Major Benson would not talk. I sidled question after question at him, slid them gently so as to minimize suspicion and alarm. Wise, kindly, genial, he beamed throughout the moderate cannonading of my curiosity, but retorted not in words. Or if now and then an answer came, it was monosyllabic, and in response to a query which was as nothing.

In the end I was somewhat driven to bay; I began to wonder a trifle at all this taciturnity. Could it be that Major Benson was without conversation? His plain, unemphasized exterior inclined me for the moment to this thought. Better reflection, however, taught me the fallacy of such assumption. A quiet outward husk promises no loss of voice. Some of the ugliest folk—ladies—I've ever beheld were woundly conversationalists. The dull eggs of the nightingale inclose the melodies of the moon. I put away the notion that Major Benson couldn't talk. I was no better off at that; since it came to be no more than just substituting "wouldn't" for "couldn't," with a net result of naught.

The last is not wholly true. Collecting all Major Benson's answers and combining them, I am able to report the following discoveries, which, while wanting perhaps in any element of thrill, are good so far as they go. Major Benson will be a candidate before the coming legislature at Topeka. He is modestly hopeful of victory. Defeat will not break his heart. His opponents—as saith Mark Antony—are all, all honorable men. There will be no acrimony in that seven-sided war. The campaign will go as sweetly smooth and smoothly sweet as the rocking of an infant's cradle. As to his policies, why then rebates must be stricken down. The railroads must not be allowed to slip their collars as servants of the public, to become tyrants of the public.

In railroad reform—to coin a phrase—Major Benson is inclined to follow the banners of Mr. Roosevelt. In his three weeks of Senate life he voted with the White House on Beef, on Canal, on Railroads, on the \$25,000 appropriation to cover a Presidential excursiveness. Concerning the last, Major Benson was splendidly, abundantly clear. If it be publicly well to send committees of Congress hither and yon on junkets of discovery, how much more prudent will it be to send on similar journeys a President, whose veto as a force of legislation equals a Congressional two-thirds.

Major Benson laid stress on this: The great question in Kansas is the question of railroads. In the one devastating element of rebate pillage they are a hundredfold worse than an Indian uprising. A remedy must be found. They must be Congressionally subdued, and put back on those reservations of justice and impartiality toward shippers originally prescribed for them in the law.

These were but glittering generalities. Major Benson had said nothing to startle a world in its midsummer nap. Thinking to strike a vein of interesting bitterness, I asked how, upon his coming to Washington, his fellow-Senators had received him. I was not without hopes; for in the past one would have fared better if cast away on some savage island than sent new to our rock-bound, sullen Senate shores.

Again I encountered disappointment. The grim oldsters had met Major Benson with open arms. If he had been a sick kitten and they a hot brick, the instant rapport—I think that is what the French call it—could not have been more complete.

It is unbecoming to lecture one's senior. It is more unbecoming when one's senior is a stranger and a Senator. Still, what was I to do? There were an entrée, a bird and a salad to hear from, to say naught of coffee, Camembert and toasted crackers. Major Benson and I couldn't be left staring at one another like a couple of inimical cats. Wherefore, since he sat silent, I resolved to do some talking myself. Perchance one of my flinty utterances might strike a responsive spark from the steel of his taciturnity, and conversation blaze unexpectedly up.

Thus reflecting I spake as follows: I began by craving to know if he meditated the introduction of any bills.

He did not. Like Brer Rabbit, he purposed—Senately speaking—lying low.

Then I asked if he believed in an income tax.

He responded—guarding himself the while against unexpected thrusts—that it was an honest scheme of taxation, one freighted of justice.

"Why, then," I inquired, "do you not offer a bill providing for an income tax? You could do it in December when Congress reconvenes."

In response he pointed to the decision of the Supreme Court. If an income tax is unconstitutional, the first step should be an amendment to that time-stained parchment. Such amendments are not creatures to be dealt with and disposed of in a day. December would be too short for such an enterprise. And, after all, he might not be returned.

#### Senatorial Modesty and States' Rights

"BUT," I urged, "it would be—a pending bill of that character—a reason for returning you. Besides, I shouldn't, were I adorning a seat in the Senate, bother with the Constitution. It would inevitably excite Senator Bailey, which, as far as possible, should be avoided."

Major Benson listened, smiled said naught. Being crowded, he submitted that, as a new Senator, his should be the pose modest.

Here I delivered a second oration, aimed against Senate modesty. There could be, properly speaking, no such thing as modesty in an agent. Senators, new as well as old, too much carried themselves on the backs of their own regards. They looked in the mirror when they ought to have looked at a map, and forgot that it was their States, not themselves, that had come to the Senate. Kansas was as much a member of the union of States, of standing as full, as Maine or New York or Texas or Georgia. It was not a question of modesty, but of right. It was a Senator's first duty to forget himself, and remember only his principal—his State. And he ought never to talk of modesty, or humility, or deference in presenting her claims. She was the equal of any; he abandoned his duty, and permitted her to fall below her rightful station, who as Senator sat mute on a no better plea than that it would appear personally immodest were he to loudly speak out. I recalled another Kansas day, when her seats in the Senate held a Plumb and an Ingalls. The former cared no more for convention than a cow for a cobweb; he followed a Kansas interest wherever it led him, though he knocked down half the Senate in his wanderings. The latter—all beak and talon—an shrill falcon of debate—from his seat swooped at either Senator or subject, as he saw Kansas reason so to do. There was no Plumb humility, no Ingalls modesty, but, instead, a world of Senate respect for everything that wore the Kansas brand.

After final coffee and cigars—albeit I did the smoking—Major Benson and I separated. He was still unmoved, still determined to sit Senately mute and modest.

And there, if anywhere, will be found the loose screw in the Senate case of Major Benson. There is no doubt of his brains, none of his courage, none of his honesty. He will in no wise add to the muck that is raked. But he lacks in the affirmative; the aggressive, in those quills which make even the lowly porcupine important, and teach bears and panthers, once his hedgepigship has wrapped himself about a proposition, to give him his uninterfered-with way. Major Benson will follow, not lead; only his leader must be honest, and lead toward right. Above all things he will be modest; and it is that modesty which may be counted upon to get between the heels of his potentialities and trip them up. Modesty is in all places beautiful, but in the Senate ineffective. Also it is in the Senate thrown away—as though one pelted a pig with pearls.