

SWEET ARE THE USES OF EXAGGERATION

(Written for "The Listener" by A.M.)

THE other day a writer in *The Listener* quoted the encyclopædic, and unfortunately late, Mr. Van Loon, as saying this about New Zealand: "We have behaved with the indecent greed of passengers on a New Zealand train who know that they will only have 10 minutes for the three-course dinner to be served at the next halting place." This reference to our habits was accepted.

I have found myself thinking quite a lot about it. This is, of course, an arresting little picture to put in a popular book about mankind. It hits you in the eye. It calls up a scene reminiscent, perhaps, of that on the Mississippi steamer in *Martin Chuzzlewit* when the bell rang for dinner and the passengers ran for the cabin, and Mr. Elijah Pogram's umbrella jammed in the doorway. "For a minute or so this accident created a perfect rebellion among the hungry passengers behind, who, seeing the dishes, and hearing the knives and forks at work, well knew what would happen unless they got there instantly, and were nearly mad; while several virtuous citizens at the table were in deadly peril of choking themselves in their unnatural efforts to get rid of all the meat before these others came." Possibly numbers of persons in various lands will remember Van Loon's passage. "New Zealand? Oh, yes, that's the country where they expect you to eat a meal in 10 minutes! Must be a lot of hogs!"

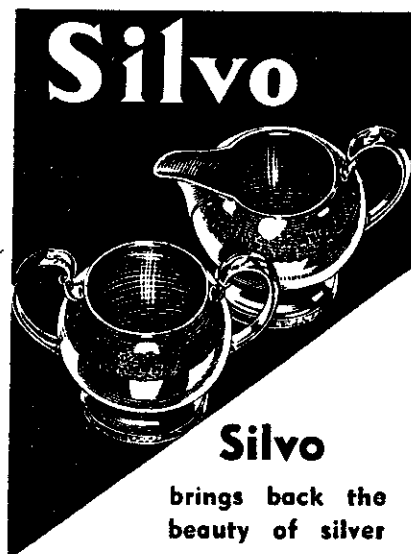
An Important Difference

Unfortunately for Mr. Van Loon, but fortunately for us, it isn't true. No railway restaurant in New Zealand expects you to eat a meal in 10 minutes. What it does is to offer you 10 minutes, or less, for a snack—and even then you can take your tea and food into the carriage and swallow them at your leisure as the train goes on—and 20 minutes or more (never less) for a full meal. Now this difference strikes me as somewhat important. Did Mr. Van Loon take any trouble to get this fact right? Did he just use facts confused in his mind and make a "good story" of them. Obviously to say that railway restaurants give you only 20 minutes for a three-course meal is not a telling statement, though the reader may think the time hardly sufficient for leisurely eating. And to say that only 10 minutes is allowed for a snack is quite a commonplace time. But if you combine the two and say that the traveller is expected to eat soup, meat and sweets in 10 minutes, you get somewhere, even if it is a jump away from the truth.

There is a moral to this. Most of us are tempted to embroider stories, especially our own experiences. It is a pity, we think, that a story should fall flat for lack of a little point, so we sharpen it up. Generally, little harm is done, though Truth, at the bottom of her well, must frown a little. And of course overstatement is a well-known artistic and polemical device. When Mr. Shaw says that "Nine out of every 10 clergymen have no religious convictions," he is up to his long trick of deliberately exaggerating for the sake of effect. When Lord Birkenhead, as F. E. Smith, declared that the Welsh Dis-establishment Bill

"shocked the conscience of every Christian community in Europe," he did not need Chesterton to tell him (as Chesterton did in one of the finest of our poems of rebuke) that Breton fishermen and Russian peasants had not really been in his mind. Each to his own device. Though I think exaggeration has its moral as well as its artistic dangers, I must admit that the path of the literalist is narrow and rocky. But when you are dealing with facts, and ascertainable facts, not estimates and opinions, is there not an obligation to stick strictly to the truth?

Another thing worries me about a statement like Van Loon's. He is not the only visitor who has reported incorrectly about our conditions. Another American, an accepted authority on certain other lands, spent nine days here a few years ago, and in a book made some strange statements about us. Lest it should be thought I have a set against Americans, let me add that an English book of reference gives the province of Auckland an imposing list of products, including copper, but does not mention butter. Now what I want to know is this: if we find such authorities in error about things in our own country, with which we are familiar, how shall we be sure they are correct about things in other countries?



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