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ROCKWELL KENT

ON BEING FAMOUS

— not, I hasten to say—for these are autobiographical reflections—famous like Greta Garbo, Bernard Shaw, or Haile Selassie, but on having your name more or less familiar to the stranger that you run across, having it conjure up something or other however indefinite to his mind, having a name that he has seen or heard. More strictly: “On Having Your Name in the Papers”—for that, it seems, is fame to the tens of millions whose names have never been there. It is their question—put I am sure to every bearer of a printed name they meet—the question “What does it feel like to be famous?” that I want to answer. Yet let me make my meaning still more clear—clear up, I mean, what being famous is: It is *not* being famous to have people ask one of my name, and they do all the time, if I am any relation to Atwater Kent. It is being famous to have a charming debutante gush to Mr. Atwater Kent, as I am told one did, “Oh, Mr. Kent! I think your mountain pictures are so wonderful!”

My wife goes into a department store—and I don’t mean necessarily one of those University Extension stores for Junior League field-workers, but just a common ordinary store. “Send all this,” she says when she has picked out what she wanted, “C.O.D. to Mrs. Rockwell Kent —.” The sales girl starts, looks up, her face is radiant. “Are you,” she stammers, “really Mrs. Rockwell Kent? Is your husband the famous —.” “Yes,” murmurs my wife with mingled modesty and pride. And the enraptured sales girl goes on to tell her how she just adores my covers on *The Post*.



Mr. Norman Rockwell, who makes *The Saturday Evening Post* covers, is a distinguished artist; he can paint newsboys, schoolboys, old men, characters out of American life, like nobody's business. I take my hat off to him; and so do ninety-nine out of a hundred of the people east, west, north and south, and all around the world, who tell me that they love my work. This kind of recognition of my fame has come to be so common an experience to me that I can tell what's coming before the flatterer can get the first word out. He finds me ready. Do I renounce his praise, disclaim those famous covers, tell the truth? I gave the truth up years ago. It hurt me to hurt people's pride by truthfully demolishing their cultural pretensions. I let myself be Norman, take his praise, show modest satisfaction, murmur "Thanks," and hurry on to talk of other things.

But this policy, considerate as it is of the feelings of others, lands me occasionally in situations that in the interests of Norman Rockwell—and I bear his interests constantly in mind—tax my wits and fortitude to near the breaking point. Recently in Nome, Alaska, in a smoke-filled hang-out of old timers I'd just finished my customary modest acknowledgment of the customary glowing tributes to my covers, when in walked what might have been a delegation of the Nome lodge of the "Pioneers of Alaska." "Boys," said my host, beaming with pride at the pleasure that he was about to bestow, "meet Rockwell Kent! You know his covers on *The Post*." And did they! Too late to extricate myself, I listened for a full half hour to their praise. To how one liked *this* cover best, another *that*. How in cabins in the remoter fastnesses of the Alaskan wilderness these covers, torn off, saved and pasted on the walls, were the delight of everyone on winter nights. There in that littered smoke-filled dimly lighted harness maker's workshop was, if there ever was, a Norman Rockwell scene. Old red-nosed, bearded, home-spun characters, a ring of them, all pouring out their pent-up love for lovely, sentimental, old-time, homely things—on me! I wept a little, bowed my head; I murmured thanks. I think—one can't be sure—that every one of them now knows you, Norman Rockwell, as one swell and



modest guy. Yesterday there came a letter from one of that circle. He gives me an idea for a cover. It's a grand idea and, though *The Post* will never buy the picture, I am going to make it. But more than that, he writes to me of how on the day that I (you) sailed away (by air) from Nome he

*looked up and gave you the Pioneer's salute, a wave of the hand as one musher salutes another passing on the trail. And I said so long, Rockwell Kent (Norman Rockwell), I hope that you have a safe and speedy passage Home to your dear ones. I watched her (the plane). And just as she was dropping out of sight behind the Cape reminded me of these lines:*

*'Ships that pass in the night  
And speak each other in passing  
Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness  
So on the Ocean of Life we speak and pass one another  
Only a look and a voice and then darkness again  
And a silence'*

And, because he, Jack Starr, was an old sailor, he drew this picture:



This is damn sweet sentiment, Norman Rockwell. It *must* be great to be famous.

One time, it was in 1933, the farmers up here in the Adirondacks were trying—hopelessly, of course—to throw out the unprincipled gang of political grafters (Republican) that is their government. I was electioneering in a stone quarry; and just as I was finishing my



\$1.95 line of talk (the "ring" out-bid my talk with \$2.00 bills) there drove up in a smart car a swell city guy.

"The Boss!" murmured my prospective constituents.

"Come over here," called the foreman as I was making my way out; "Come over and meet Mr. Granitart."

"Mr. Kent," said Mr. Granitart, clasping my hand in both of his, "I'm sure glad to meet you. You know, my wife and I cut out and save every one of those covers from *The Post*."

Now all of my constituents (?) had sort of stopped their work and were listening. Now was the time by being you to clinch their votes.

"Gee, I'm glad to hear you say that, Mr. Granitart," I said, "You know it means a lot to me to have my simple portrayals of the homely but sterling characters in American life really find a place in the hearts of the American public. To dignify toil, to present the sterling blessings of poverty, to reveal to everyone that the hearts that beat in the bosoms of the most lowly are not gran—, I mean, steel hearts, but hearts of gold. That, Mr. Granitart, is what I live for, dream about, and work to realize."

Gee, Norman, it was swell—your speech!

"Mr. Kent," said Granitart, "my wife and I read a very interesting story about that — a — you know, that cover of yours —"

"Oh, yes. That one." I said.

"You know, there was a little boy —"

"I know."

"A little boy sitting at a school desk."

"Oh, yes. That one," I said, and mopped my brow.

"Well, in this article it told how you had hunted all over the country to find exactly the right kind of old-fashioned desk. How it had to be the *right* desk. And you had to have it right in front of you. Tell me—is that really so?"

Well, I'd done a lot of yes-yessing. Mr. Granitart's last speech had been a long one, and it had to be properly answered.

"Mr. Granitart," I said, looking him square in the eyes, "most of that stuff you read in the newspapers is just the bunk. I didn't have

a desk like that in front of me when I drew the picture, and I didn't try to find one. I drew it all from my memory—that I'll never lose—of the little old desk that I sat at in the little old red school-house where I went to school.”

Believe me, Norman Rockwell, that if it hadn't been for the \$2.00 bills that got handed around on election day, you and the farmers and the granite workers would have won.

Still –it is a great and satisfying thing to be famous. For whom?

