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THE PHI GAMMA DELTA

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An Evening with Rockwell Kent

Famed Artist Unexpectedly Joins Occidental Alumni
for Steak, Wine and a Burst of Harmony

By WARD RITCHIE (Occidental '28, Sewanee '28)

IT was an exceptional winter in California. We had lived through quake and fire before that Gargantuan dry wash, the meek Los Angeles River, gathered in the whole heavens' water, on New Year's eve, and bulged nearly from the Fiji house at Occidental to U. C. L. A. But it was before this, hardly more than fall, though cold enough withal, and we were quietly settled around a log fire waiting for big Jim Groenewegen (Occidental '28, Stanford '28) to finish sizzling the last steak before we'd fall to.

Down the middle of the room we'd laid long planks upon the venerable sawhorses which ordinarily supported the fundamentals of the daily pack gathered out in Gordon Newell's (Occidental '28) stone yard, intent upon Sculptor Newell at work. But tonight they made a long banquet board, with great celery stalks pitched high from a Mexican jug and a vermeil bowl piled with apples and oranges and the vestiges of the vineyard's crop of new grapes. Jack Schurch (Occidental '32) had been out in the valley during the afternoon wheedling pre-unprohibition Chianti from the Italian growers. Now he was

pouring it into blue glasses and we were upon a Fiji song as Larry Powell (Occidental '28) bonged it on the piano — for it was just five years before, after another of the clashes between Occidental and Pomona, that we'd done the same.

BOTH HEARTY AND HEALTHY

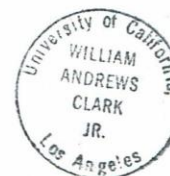
A pound at the door futilely tried to interrupt us.

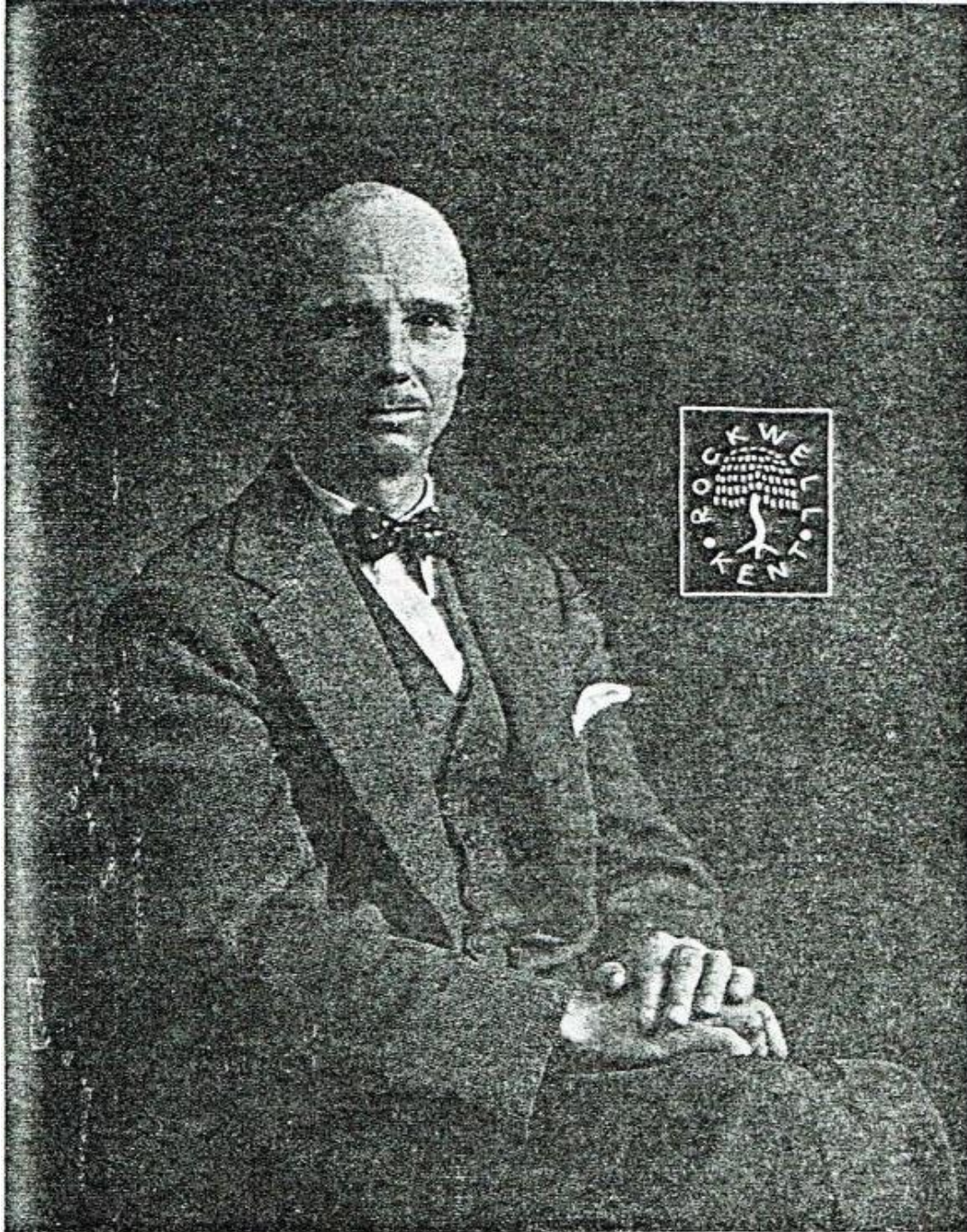
We sang loudly, "For she's hearty and she's healthy," while the door opened and Mr. Jake Zeitlin, Los Angeles' amiable art patron and book dealer, entered with a stranger. The stranger, oddly enough, took up our song with enthusiasm and we drained the red wine to Phi Gamma Delta, wondering who had ventured into our midst.

"May I introduce Rockwell Kent?" said our friend, Jake Zeitlin, and thus a very noble Fiji joined our party that night.

We poured out more wine, while Jim rushed to pare down the steaks to care for the two new arrivals and garner their plates with squash and the tender greenness of the string beans.

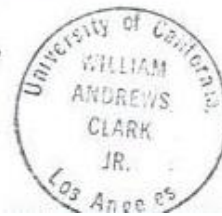
"That was a good song. I haven't





ROCKWELL KENT

Sang loudly: "For she's hearty and she's healthy"



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sung it for years," were Kent's opening words, "Let's drink another one down." But dinner was started.

TELLS COLLEGE PRANK

Here we were, after dinner, sitting around the fire, with Rockwell Kent telling more Fiji tales than any of us, and recalling, with renewed gusto one after another, the old pranks and incidents which were part of his fraternity days at Columbia.

"I remember one night," he was saying. The moon was shining rather frostily down through the big studio windows, but we were warm inside and, in the darkened room merely shadows, on the white walls, to the fire which sputtered and was pungent from the eucalyptus logs which it consumed. "I remember," he was saying, "one night, late, when we were eating in a small café near school. The proprietor was anxious to get rid of us and close up, but we came often and were lingering on to tantalize him when, to his disgust, a dignified gentleman walked in and sat at one of the tables. The girls had all gone, so I winked at the boss, grabbed a napkin and stepped over to serve the newcomer.

"Stentoriously, I said, 'Good evening, sir, and what could I serve you this evening?'

"'I've missed dinner,' he said, 'Could I have a menu.'

"After scanning it, he said, 'The roast beef dinner.'

"'I'm sorry, sir, there is no roast beef remaining.'

"'Well, some leg of lamb, then.'

"'I'm sorry, sir, there is no leg of lamb remaining.' And so on down to chicken-a-la-king.

"In the kitchen the proprietor was between agitation and mirth. 'But we

really haven't any chicken-a-la-king,' he said.

"'It's all right,' I replied, and shuffling through the icebox brought him a sorry looking mess to warm and spread over a hunk of stale crust I'd found.

"While he was preparing it, I took in a bowl of soup, nearly spilling it all over the table, and as he started to eat I affected to notice a short leg on the table and was immediately down on my knees, tugging and pulling at the leg to the soup's great distress and to the accompaniment of the angry expostulations of the unhappy diner."

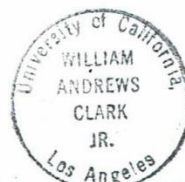
ILLUSTRATES HIS STORY

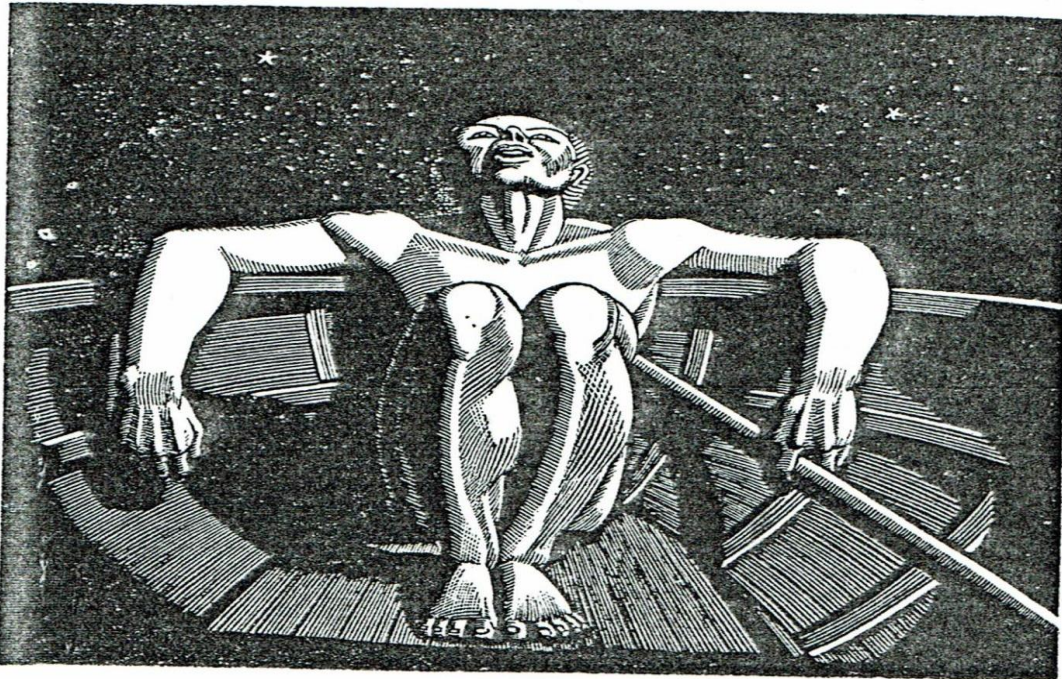
Here Brother Kent, who had been very dramatic during the whole recital, was demonstrating on the leg of our table. The room was roaring with laughter as uncontrolled as sin. We were all bent double and were writhing in our fits.

The meal, as it was told to us, was just such a comic tragedy throughout, and after presenting an exorbitant bill which the periously angry patron refused to pay in full, Kent meekly held out his hand, saying, "And nothing for my services, sir?"

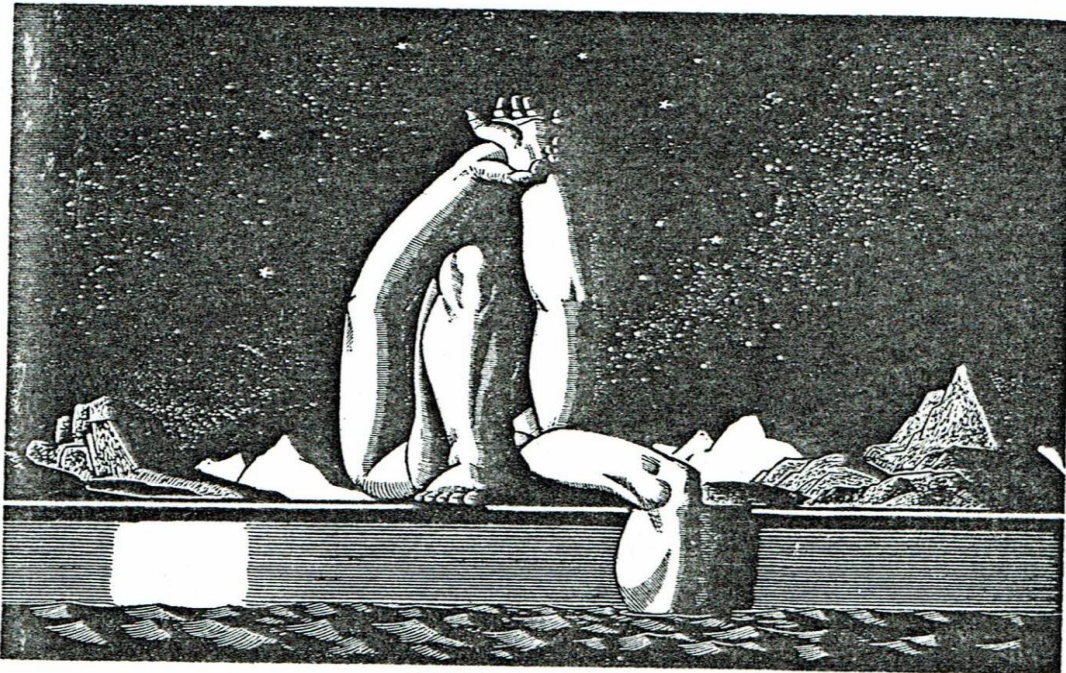
The man went into a frenzy of rage and called his would-be waiter a vocabulary of names ending with "You mad scoundrel." Whereupon Kent let a crazy gleam come into his eyes, and grimacing and shaking with his arm raised on high, he began to shout, "You must apologize. I am sane, I am sane. They said I was cured. You must apologize."

Fear overcame anger in the man's demeanor and he humbly apologized, hastening to escape. Kent caught him at the door, however, pulling him back to graciously help him on with his over-



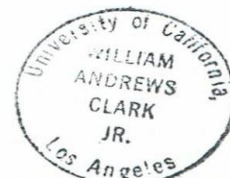


"DRIFTER"
(wood engraving)



"STARLIGHT"
(wood engraving)

From Rockwellkentiana by permission



coat. The man fled, as the laugh-denied onlookers burst joyfully like New Year's glee.

This, then, was the younger Rockwell Kent, great with imagination and playing at other men's lives. Kent was planning to become an architect, but the artist and the adventurer was too strong in him to let him be led into a profession. His yearning for the sea took him to a small island off the coast of Maine where he spent the cold winter months learning to work as a laborer at \$2 a day. Then as a carpenter he built his own house, and would rise before dawn on the freezing mornings to go fishing with the lobster-men.

When asked if he liked cold and hardships, he answered, "By nature, I suppose, I am lazy and soft, but seeing those men battling on that Maine island when I first came to it stimulated me. Hard work became an obsession with me. It was real joy to be warm in a house you had built, with a fire from logs that you had cut. I began to get up early in the morning because I really wanted to stay in bed, work because I'd rather sit. I found incentive in conquering myself."

He told us more, about the hopeless fight against the cold, barren country and the people in Newfoundland. That was during the early part of the Great

War, and as people saw him about the country making sketches they came to suspect him as a German spy (or was it because he loved his German nurse?). At any rate, being no one to let suspicions remain idle he placed a large German eagle over his door and a sign "Spy Station." As each succeeding rumor reached his ears he'd add a new sign—"Bomb Depot," "Insidious Propaganda Headquarters," etc. His activity there came to a sudden halt when he was deported to the United States.

Then he went to Alaska, and his book *Wilderness* tells about the lonely adventures and the friendships that he and his young son built up there. But hearing that Tierra del Fuego was a worse place he got the worst boat in the

world and ventured there. *Voyaging* was the book he wrote about the journey. And *N by E* is the story of his trip to Greenland, a land that he really loves.

"That's a place for a fraternity chapter," he said. "You'll find real men on that island, and as beautiful spots as ever man has trodden, or not trodden. Someday I'll make my home there."

PAINTS AS HE WISHES
Later on when we were looking through his collection of pictures recently published in *Rockwellkentiana*

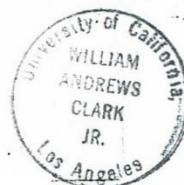


The Retort Certain

A certain prominent New York advertising firm sought to have Rockwell Kent give permission to use his name as the author of an article purporting to show the modern architectural trend along the Avenue but actually boosting a proposed new Face Cream Building.

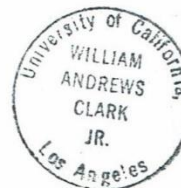
Brother Kent's reply is a masterpiece:

*Dear Sir:
Unfortunately for my participation in the game of advertising, I am hampered by certain principles which I hold to be essential not only to the artist but to honest men in general. I would no sooner sign my name to an article I had not written, than I would to steal another man's design or pick his pocket. That you could expect to find anyone to do this kind of thing is incredible to me.
Yours truly . . . etc.*





"NORTH WIND".
(oil painting)
From Rockwellkentiana by permission



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we came to realize how much the stark beauty and the cold dramatic possibilities of the northern lands had moulded his art.

"Do the mountains really appear that chaste and beautiful?" asked Newell.

"Sometimes I paint them as they wish they were," Kent replied. "Art is the byproduct of my enthusiasm for these things, and it is because I am alone so much on my wanderings that I have to talk about them on paper. That is why I am an artist, and why another set of circumstances makes another man something else."

The clock had turned many cycles of this talk before the wine was consumed and our unexpected guest remembered that he had had an appointment with Charlie Chaplin for that evening.

But talk still simmered on, while Larry Powell beat softly on the piano.

"Larry's University of Dijon (France) doctorate thesis on Robinson

Jeffers was a fine work," someone remarked.

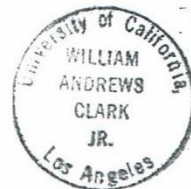
A copy was pulled down from the bookshelves and perused. We spoke of the strength in Jeffers' poetry and of the wild, pure country around his home in Carmel, it seemed as if it were nearly Kentian country in its beauty and austerity.

"It should be reprinted in this country," Groenewegen commented.

Kent's imagination was ripe again. Perhaps he was thinking of the grandeur of Jeffers, perhaps of this little group which had brought back memories of his college fraternity.

After a moment he said, "Let's make a Fiji book. Powell has written it, I'll illustrate it and Ritchie can design and print it." There was no more wine to toast to our success then, but we later did when the plan was actually to be realized.

And Kent said, "Why don't we sing another song?"

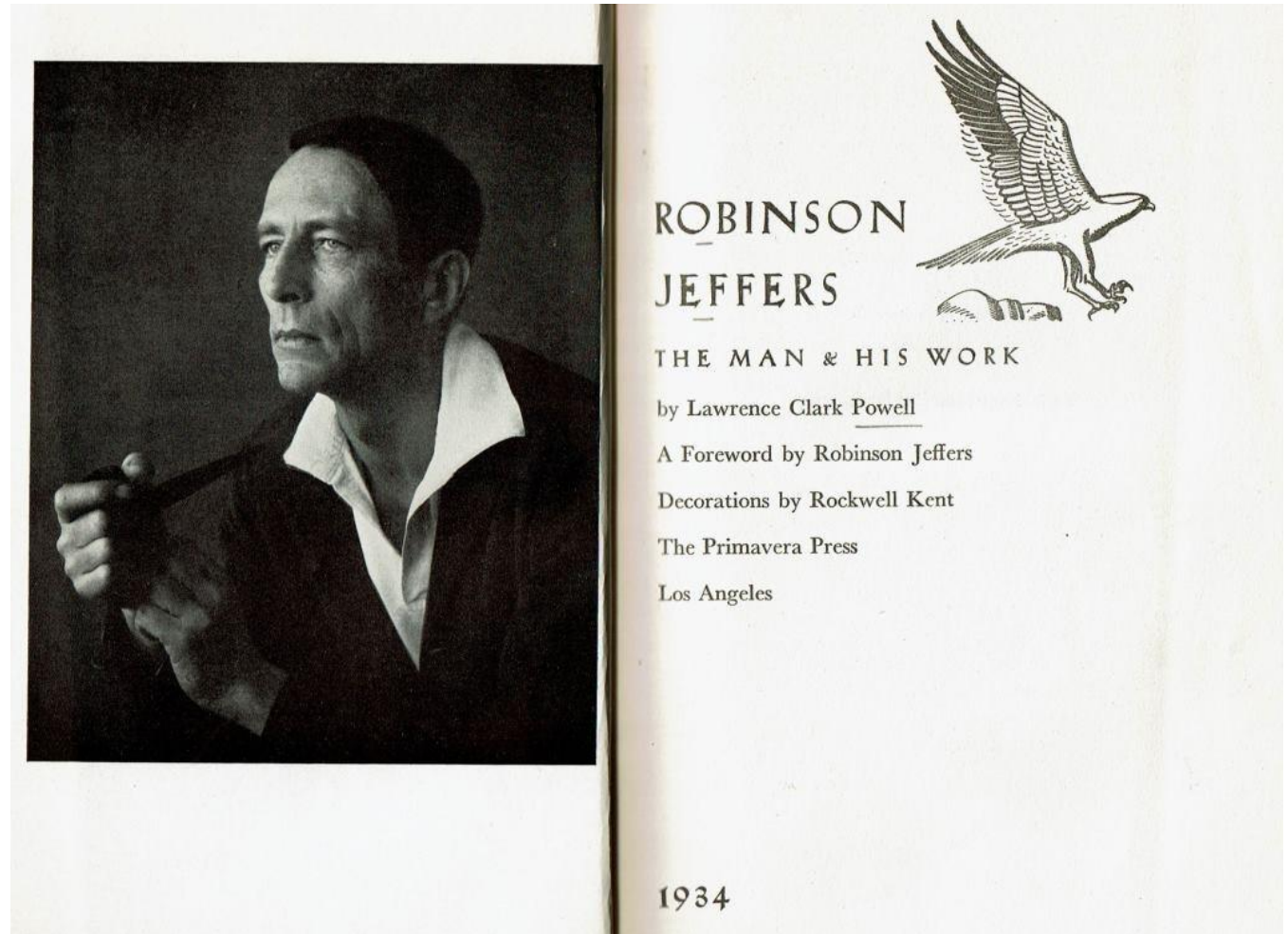




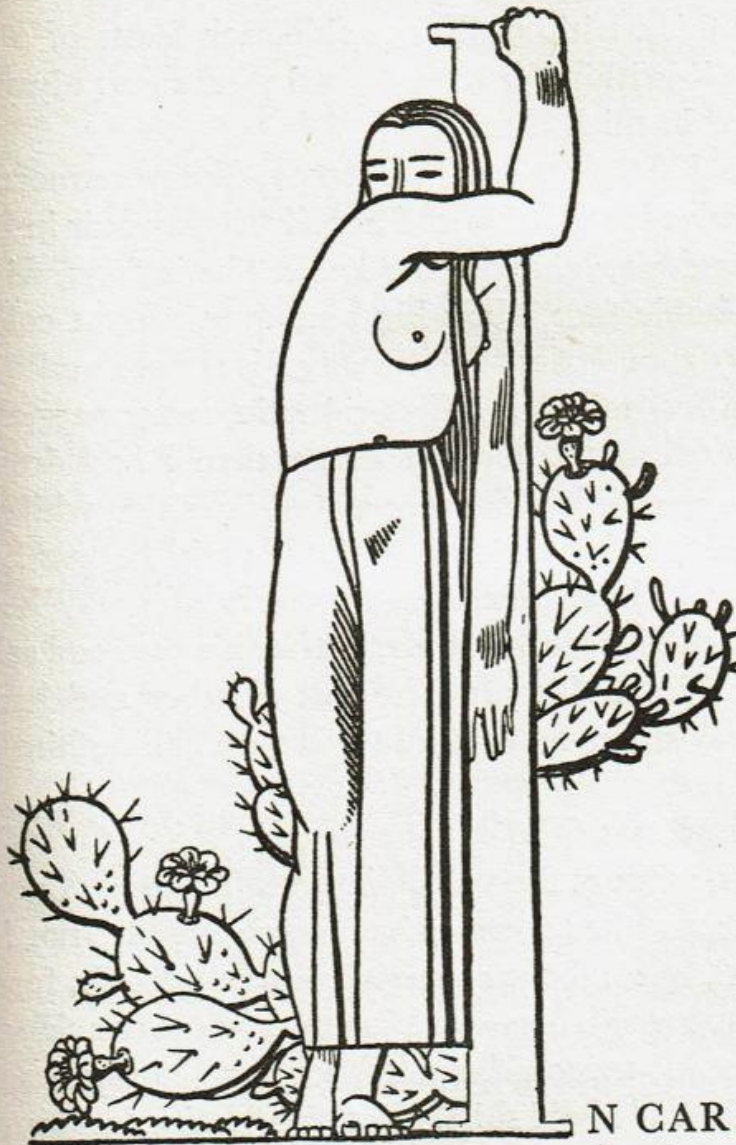
"THE TREE"
(lithograph)

From Rockwellkentiana by permission

The Book spoken about on page 7 above, was subsequently published by Ward Ritchie, with illustrations by Kent. Reprinted below are the title page and the initial drawing from the first chapter.



CHAPTER I
JEFFERS OF CARMEL



N CARMEL
that fogbound September afternoon, the house and
tower, seen from Mission Point, clung to the tor like
lichens on a boulder. Back of the house the grove of
planted trees was a wet darkgreen color. The ocean at
the foot of the low cliff moved quietly.

I