

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE BOUTONNIÈRES OF MR. UNTERMYER

5/18/40

IN 1899, the late Samuel Untermyer, who as a lawyer alternately lambasted and represented some of the greatest corporations in the country, bought a 113-acre estate just north of Yonkers, overlooking the Hudson. He was forty-one and had accumulated a fortune of several million dollars. The chief feature of the place was a large gray granite house, built along English-castle lines and ornamented by a squarish two-story tower commanding an excellent view. It had been built in 1868, at a cost of \$225,000, by John T. Waring, a Yonkers hat manufacturer, who went broke a few years later. In 1879, he sold the house, along with some fifty-five acres, to Samuel J. Tilden for \$125,000. Tilden was the former New York Governor who had smashed the Tweed Ring and in 1876 lost a Presidential election to Rutherford B. Hayes by a scant margin. Tilden, whose town house on Gramercy Park is now the National Arts Club, passed such a large part of his last years at his country place and wrote so many sensible letters to prominent people from there that he became known as the Sage of Greystone—a title which Mr. Untermyer, who was perhaps too violent in his opinions for such an encomium, never achieved.

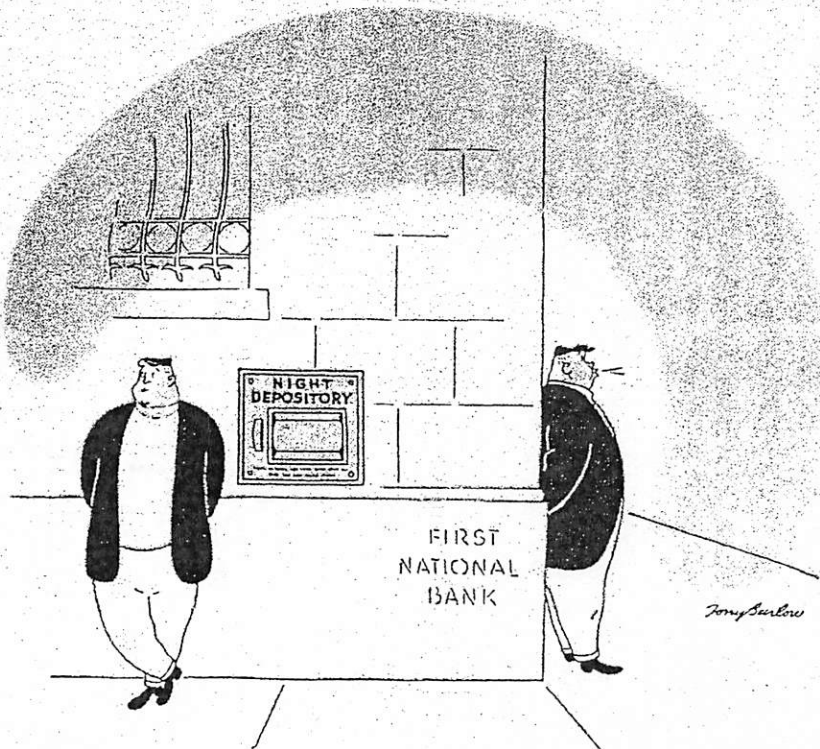
Greystone originally extended from North Broadway to the Hudson; Tilden doubled its size by purchasing land on the east side of Broadway. He constructed elaborate greenhouses and stables, and spent around \$500,000 in improving and enlarging the place. In the liquidation of his residuary estate, Greystone, which constituted part of the residue, was auctioned off in June, 1899. Three years earlier, the place had been appraised at \$372,900, but Mr. Untermyer, whose prodigious earning powers never made him spendthrift, bought it in for \$171,500. As a man whose vituperative legal efforts had already caused him to be regarded with hostility by Wall Street, he may have found satisfaction in the fact that among those whom he outbid at the sale were Archibald Gracie King, head of the banking firm of James G. King's Sons, and Augustus Brown, another prominent banker of the period. Mr. Untermyer engaged an architect to remodel the house and spent some \$100,000 fixing up the plumbing and adding porches, flights of stairs, and bay windows, and building terraces and additional

roads and greenhouses on the grounds.

For the second half of his long life, Untermyer made Greystone his home for the better part of nearly every year. During his forty-one years of occupancy, prior to his death in March, he added bathrooms, rare plants, statues, fountains, rock gardens, a Greek amphitheatre, and, around 1920, the adjoining fifty-acre estate of William F. Cochran, who had made a fortune manufacturing rugs. He knocked out walls and ceilings in the granite castle and replaced them with stained-glass windows and stained-glass skylights, and he installed, on the second floor, a marble swimming tank, eighteen by twelve feet. Last year Greystone was assessed at \$835,000, but its owner had spent several times this sum on it. In recent years he made a number of efforts to give it away, none of them successful. About twelve years ago, he managed to transfer it to his three children, although he continued to live there. His children later succeeded in giving it back to him, and Untermyer then attempted to bestow the place on the State of New York, the County of Westchester, and the City of Yonkers, in the order named. They all declined it, without noticeable thanks,

chiefly on the ground that they didn't want to spend the \$100,000 a year it would cost to maintain it as a public park. Yonkers did not want it for the further reason that it wished to go right on receiving the annual taxes of \$34,000 which the owner would have to pay. Park Commissioner Robert Moses, asked by Governor Lehman to look into the offer when it was made to the state, felt the place had too much sophisticated planting on it to make a very good park but told Untermyer that the state might consider it if Untermyer would throw in an endowment fund of \$1,000,000—although, Moses pointed out, the interest on this would be far from enough to pay for the upkeep. Untermyer seemed astonished at this suggestion and did not follow it.

However, he was a difficult man to discourage. He kept quiet about the matter until he died, and then made a posthumous attempt to give Greystone away to all the localities which had refused it in his lifetime. In his will he left it solemnly to New York State, stipulating that it be used as a public park and gardens, to be called the Samuel Untermyer Park and Gardens. He further directed that the state act on this offer



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within six months, and that if it were declined, a similar offer be made to Westchester. In the event of a second refusal, he specified that Yonkers be given another chance. Less than a week after the will was made public, Governor Lehman announced the rejection of the gift. Westchester and Yonkers have also turned it down all over again, and Greystone remains in the residuary estate. The contents of the big house, which will undoubtedly be torn down, are now being auctioned off, and the grounds will probably be subdivided into fairly large parcels and sold. The major part of the contents of the two and a half acres of greenhouses, including most of the rarer items, are being auctioned off by Parke-Bernet this Saturday. Pending the decision of the Untermyer executors, only enough of the greenhouses to grow plants for the grounds, which are still being maintained in the condition to which they are accustomed, will be kept going, since Mr. Untermyer's sons, Alvin Untermyer and Judge Irwin Untermyer, have not inherited their father's costly passion for home-grown orchid boutonnières, hothouse figs, nectarines, etc. When Mr. Untermyer was alive, the greenhouses functioned on a partially commercial basis. Surplus flowers were sold to various New York florists.

I DROVE up to Greystone the other morning, before the sale of its contents had started, and was shown around by Mr. George H. Chisholm, the estate manager and horticulturist who has been in charge of the greenhouses and grounds for the past eight or ten years. We visited fifteen or more of the sixty greenhouses, undergoing jarring changes in temperature as Mr. Chisholm expatiated on the merits of masses of plants, many of them in hanging pots and baskets, including huge chrysanthemums, grapevines, fig trees, peach trees, English strawberries, giant ferns, South African violets, hydrangeas, begonias, fuchsias, cacti, petunias, and orchids. Mr. Chisholm told me he was nursing along three or four thousand varieties of orchid, representing fifty-seven genera. Untermyer's favorite orchids were the Odontioda, most of which are small, trim, and reddish or white, and he wore a specimen of this group in his Bell or Wetzel buttonhole every day, generally changing his boutonnière three or four times in twelve hours. In the course of a year he would easily run through the approximately four hundred varieties which make up the Odontioda group. In his early and extremely active court-



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room days, when he was busy baiting bankers and Standard Oil officials, his chauffeur would drive down from Yonkers around noon with a damp box containing orchids to replace his 8 A.M. flower and out-of-season figs to brighten up his luncheon. The Odontioda orchids are grown in a small, damp greenhouse, and beneath the pots of orchids are bins of charcoal, kept moist so they will give off carbonaceous fumes, which the Odontioda and Mr. Chisholm thoroughly enjoy. During the last few years, Mr. Untermyer wintered in Palm Springs, where he died, and when he was in California a couple of dozen orchids were air-mailed to him once a week for his rapacious buttonhole.

Although Untermyer's lapel orchids were often modest in size, he liked most of his flowers and plants abnormally large and his fruits out of season. He got enormous gratification from eating grapes, nectarines, and peaches when most people couldn't obtain them, and would become indignant when offered in-season delicacies which anybody at all could get hold of. He was also fond of an extra-large fern, about ten feet high, which Mr. Chisholm showed me. Mr. Chisholm, a Welshman who was once sent by the British government to clean up plant diseases in Bermuda, rather fancies this fern himself and told me it is called *Goniphlebium* and that it has frequently won a first prize at the Flower Show. He thinks it is worth around \$100. It will be sold this Saturday, along with over 2,500 orchid plants, which he values at from \$5 to \$75 apiece, and a thousand begonias, a thousand carnations, and nearly four thousand hydrangeas, worth from fifteen cents to \$2 each. Another Chisholm-Untermyer favorite which is going on sale is a 105-year-old camellia tree, twelve feet high and with a ten-foot limb spread. It had only leaves when I saw it, but is guaranteed to come out with six hundred white camellias just before Christmas, and is supposed to be worth around \$1,000.

Untermyer also took pleasure in various horticultural surprises which Mr. Chisholm sprang on him from time to time. These occasionally took the form of pieces of sculpture made out of flow-



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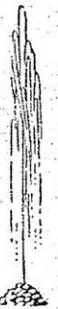
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ers, usually worked up while Untermyer was in California. "I've made him umbrellas, swans, fans, canoes, and Notre-Dame," Mr. Chisholm said. One of Mr. Chisholm's canoes, of which he showed me a colored photograph, consisted of a life-sized craft made of yellow cascade chrysanthemums in a fair-sized pond of mountain laurel. In it he placed a chrysanthemum model of a full-grown Indian wielding a chrysanthemum paddle. His model of Notre-Dame, twelve feet by six, and eight feet high, and containing electric lights, chimes, and thirty-six windows painted to resemble stained glass, won a gold medal at a flower show at the Museum of Natural History last year as the best chrysanthemum Notre-Dame on the premises. Before starting on his more ambitious creations, Mr. Chisholm generally sounded his employer out, although he left the details a secret in order to startle Mr. Untermyer with them when the project was unveiled.

It was Mr. Chisholm who got the notion last fall of trying to inoculate Untermyer honeydew-melon vines with cognac, port, and Bénédictine, an attempt which received a good deal of publicity. The newspapers wrote this up just before Greystone's autumn flower show, which was open to the public, and Mr. Chisholm feels this may have been one of the reasons thirty thousand people visited the show in one day. He is inclined to deprecate his experiment today, since he was swamped with orders and questions which he thinks were frivolous, and he declines to state exactly how the melons, which were scheduled to ripen in November, came out. Orders for them still come in and are tossed into Mr. Chisholm's wastebasket. However, Mr. Untermyer was delighted with this interesting horticultural and alcoholic tie-up when it was inaugurated and permitted the press to take a number of pictures of him in which he was contemplating the spiked melons with an air of suspicion similar to that with which he regarded the late J. P. Morgan during the Pujo investigation. The truth about the experiment seems to be that it was only a partial success.

Mr. Chisholm said Untermyer had a big botanical library and knew more about plants than many of his gardeners. "You're not going to have very good chrysanthemums this year," Untermyer would sometimes complain, feeling the texture of a young plant's leaves, and he would be right.

In recalling conversations he had had with Untermyer, Mr. Chisholm invar-

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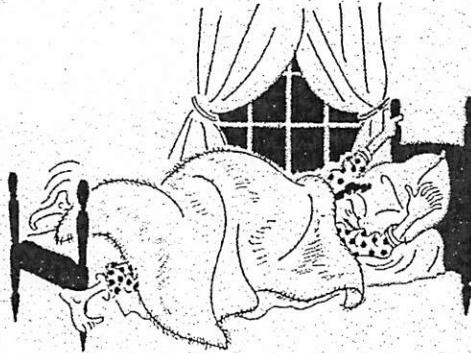
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ably stuck his chin into his neck, glared at me, and imitated his employer's gruff, croupy, dictatorial tone. Untermeyer often used to try to trap Chisholm in the misuse of some botanical term and, when he thought he had his manager in a corner, would rush to his library to check up on him. He never did catch Mr. Chisholm in error, according to Mr. Chisholm.

WE left the greenhouses, most of which are on the property east of Broadway, and went through an adjoining gardeners' dormitory, which contained twelve bedrooms and a recreation hall with billiard and ping-pong tables. Six men work in the hothouses and the gardens are taken care of by a staff which runs up to fifty in midsummer. Most of the outdoor gardeners live at home. Mr. Chisholm pointed down a hill at some empty poultry houses, and said he had sold four thousand chickens the week before. He has also disposed of a good many plants privately, among them several varieties of orchid to several varieties of du Pont.

We crossed Broadway to the main part of the estate and, back of a large garage which still contains a Lincoln and a Duesenberg, now for sale, came on a Greek garden, laid out on terraces and adorned with an archway, statues, fountains, pools, a temple, and a colonnaded amphitheatre. On either side of the arch were stone statues representing Autumn and Winter, the latter in the guise of a bearded old man inadequately dressed in a sheet. I suppose Spring and Summer are somewhere on the grounds, but I never got to see them. The fountains weren't working, nor were many flowers out, though I was told they would be any day. Mr. Chisholm said there were about eighty statues on the grounds and that several were included in the sale, some of them ancient and valuable ones from Greece and Florence. Last October a modern one, Paul Manship's "Actaeon," mysteriously disappeared. It was valued at \$7,500. A few days later it was found in a New Rochelle junk shop, where, Mr. Untermeyer learned to his mortification, it had been sold by the impatient thief for \$6.50.

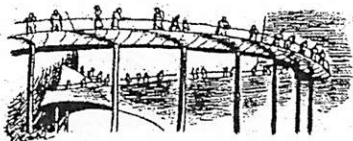
During Untermeyer's lifetime the grounds were opened to the public every Tuesday, and this custom is being continued. For the last two years, when he no longer went to his office, Untermeyer would join the crowds, happily listening to their favorable comments. One Tuesday last summer, about to have lunch, he became so excited at

the prospect of mingling with the sight-seers that he decided to join them at once. A nurse who was taking care of him insisted that he eat his soup first. "He bolted his soup," said Mr. Chisholm, "and made for the Greek Garden."

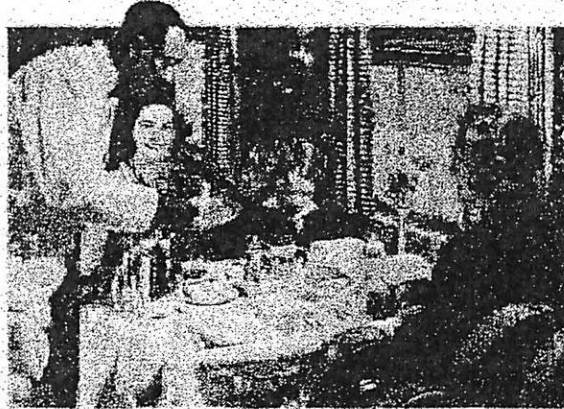
Untermeyer built the Greek Garden and the amphitheatre for his wife, who died in 1924, and she often had various opera stars give outdoor concerts there. Toward the north end of this garden, a large temple supported by fourteen Corinthian columns adjoins a swimming pool, now empty. The temple has a mosaic floor with a Gorgon's head in the centre, and it overlooks the Palisades. Bounding the garden on the north is a colonnade, from which we looked down a quarter-mile vista, flanked by Japanese pine trees, to the Hudson. "We had Diana down there," said Mr. Chisholm, pointing to an unoccupied pedestal near the river, "but we're selling her." He showed me four or five extensive rock gardens, some of which he had had built while Untermeyer was away, as surprises. One was decorated with a small temple, imported from France, in which six columns hold up an iron cupola. Mr. Chisholm told me this was called the Temple of Love and that Mr. Untermeyer often took a snooze there in the afternoon.

The owner of Greystone also thought highly of the one and only living sundial in the world. Just the shell of this timepiece, which is thirty-six feet across, was to be seen when I was there, but Chisholm is planning to put it in shape again for the summer. He pointed out a peculiarly trimmed evergreen, which serves as an indicator, and said that the numbers of the hours, on which this tree throws a shadow, would be outlined in colored plants. The dial will be arranged on a Daylight Saving basis, and, according to its creator, will enable any perceptive person to tell the time to within five or six minutes.

We got into Mr. Chisholm's car and drove down a steep hill toward the Hudson, passing a field of daffodils containing two million blooms, vast patches of rhododendrons, pink peach trees, more greenhouses, and a formal terraced vegetable garden with a fountain at one end and laced with blue marble gutters. Untermeyer's vegetable gardens, which, unlike the greenhouses, have never had any



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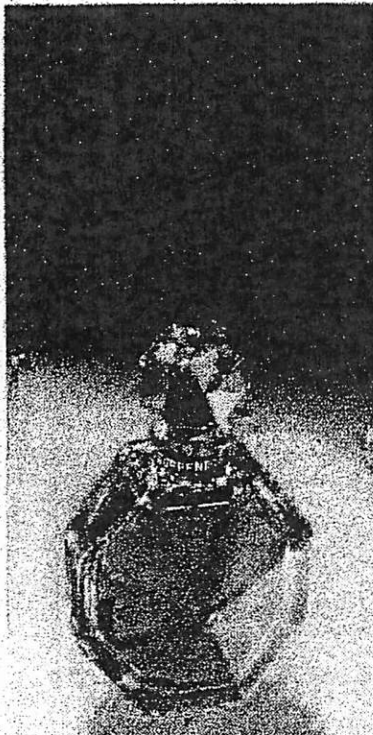
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commercial outlet, were an extravagance, but being a man who disputed the correctness of his electric-light bill and personally bawled out his grocer as being a highway robber, he did not care to have this pointed out to him. "Your cabbages cost nearly a dollar apiece," Chisholm once told him. "I never eat cabbages," snapped Untermyer irrelevantly. Mr. Chisholm, who used to be an independent landscape gardener with William Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie among his clients, said that no matter how mad Untermyer seemed to be, it was O.K. to talk to him as long as there was a twinkle in his eye, and that he liked to be talked back at. Chisholm called on him for the first time eighteen years ago with the idea of selling him a rock garden. Untermyer pretended to be outraged. "Have you seen my rock garden? Have you seen my rock garden?" he asked. "It's a geological monstrosity," said Chisholm, who had seen a twinkle in Untermyer's eye, and this led to the sale of a rock garden, to a beautiful friendship, and, when his business fell off around 1930, to his employment at Greystone.

WE finally came to the gray granite castle, which, I was told, looks externally very much as it did when it was put up over seventy years ago. A fountain with three wildly cavorting bacchantes adorns the front lawn, and on either side of the outside stairway is a lion with a shield. The auction people had stacked up the furniture and paintings, piling tables with knickknacks, lamps, and silver, some of which had been brought up from the Untermyer apartment in town, and they had also moved the most important objects of art—such as Whistler's "Nocturne in Black and Gold," Rubens' "A Feast of the River Gods," and a bronze statuette of Jupiter by Cellini—to the Parke-Bernet Galleries, so it was difficult to tell just how the house had looked inside. A domed vestibule with a mosaic floor, decorated in the middle with the intertwined letters "S U," led into the main hallway, which ran about a hundred feet, ending before a big stained-glass window depicting Christ in the Temple. A long limestone basin for plants, now empty, was in front of the window, and above it was a row of electric bulbs which used to light up the plants. Adjoining the hallway were various small reception rooms, a large Louis XVI drawing room, a library with bookshelves now full of silver, and a dark-paneled dining room with a carved

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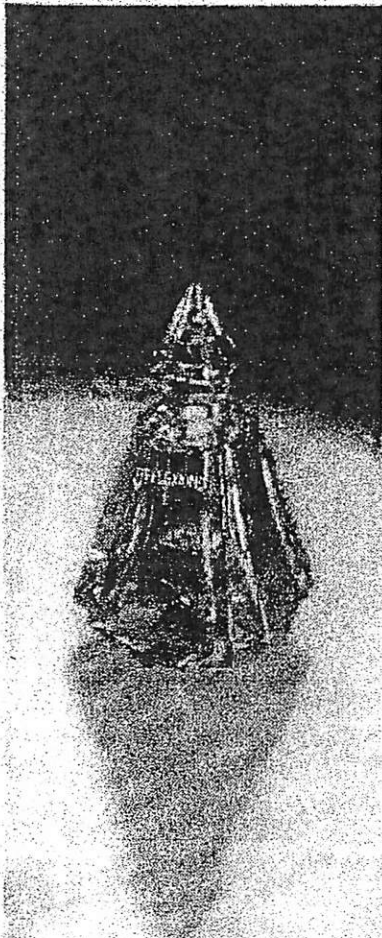
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wood ceiling and its table and sideboards cluttered up with silver, china, candlesticks, and glassware, all tagged with numbers. One set of white-and-gold porcelain plates was marked with "N" and a crown, and Clara, the housekeeper, who had joined Mr. Chisholm and myself, said the Untermyers had always regarded these as having been Napoleon's but that the Parke-Bernet people had expressed doubt on this point.

Clara told me she was seventy-nine and announced, with a wink, that she had been with the family for over five years, originally as Mrs. Untermyer's lady's maid. She said that the desk in the downstairs library, which faced a three-quarter-length portrait of Louis XIV, used to be covered with orchids except for the blotter, and that Mr. Untermyer often sat there going over the household bills and giving everyone hell. Mr. Chisholm took me aside and whispered that Untermyer had once said to him, "I give 'em the devil as a matter of principle."

According to Clara, the master of Greystone liked frogs' legs, broilers with big breasts, very strong chicken soup, and double-yolked eggs. When the Quintuplets were born, he caused a good deal of commotion in the house by demanding five-yolked eggs. He usually had a French chef, and in the days before his children married and left home he had a staff of twelve servants. Later, during the many years when he had the twenty-nine rooms to himself, he had five inside servants. The house was full of odd clocks, tapestries, jade bowls, polar-bear rugs, brown grizzly-bear rugs, black-bear rugs, Bengal-tiger rugs, embroidered cushions, punch bowls, statuettes, screens, chandeliers, and gas lighting fixtures. In many cases the gas lights had been left in and electric lights had been installed next to them.

We went up a staircase past two dim, full-length regal portraits, one of Queen Charlotte, by Ramsay, and came to the second-floor bedrooms. Mr. Untermyer's bed was in the big southwest room, looking out on the Hudson. Over its head hung an old-fashioned fringed lamp and a cluster of bell wires with push buttons, each for a different servant. Clara said her employer always had five soft pencils and three or four pads next to his bed, and that when he threw back the covers in the morning the room would be littered with scraps of paper on which he had made notes. He suffered from asthma and was a poor sleeper. The New York papers, delivered especially early by a Yonkers news-



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UNDER SAVARIN MANAGEMENT
Central Park West at 67th Street
New York City

dealer, and a cup of coffee were brought to him at six. He would read and write in bed for an hour more, then go to the swimming pool on the bedroom floor and take a plunge. He kept this up until two or three years ago. At eight o'clock sharp, he would leave for his office. Clara led us to the marble tank, which was empty, and nearby I noted a massage table, a gymnasium bicycle, a Turkish bath, a complicated shower, various weight-and-pulley exercisers, and an electric horse. Untermyer bought the horse in 1924, not wishing to be outdone by Coolidge, but he used it only three or four times and it looked brand-new.

The top floor, not counting the tower, consisted of a hall with a billiard table and a high ebony cabinet adorned with mineral inlays and bronze figures, rooms once occupied by the Untermyer sons, and a library overlooking the Hudson. Untermyer spent more time in this room than anywhere else in the house, and while the most valuable sets had been removed, there were hundreds of law-books on the shelves and hundreds of detective stories—Untermyer's two favorite branches of literature—piled on the floor. An enormous bust of Untermyer stood in one of the windows, and elsewhere in the room were smaller busts of Sophocles and Solon.

When Untermyer bought the house, he occasionally entertained Tammany Hall cronies there, and both Cleveland and Wilson stayed there overnight, but Clara said that for a long time before Untermyer's death there had been no parties except informal family gatherings. The last really big affair occurred during the Democratic National Convention in 1924, when the twelve hundred delegates took a day off from their Madison Square Garden sessions to visit Greystone and have dinner there. On our way downstairs, Clara tugged at a bronze cathedral bell near the third-floor landing, and it gave a tremendous clang. It had a long crimson rope which for many years was uncoiled every evening by the night watchman and stretched down the stairwell to the ground floor. The watchman was supposed to pull it in case of fire, but there never had been one. Clara has tried it a few times since Untermyer's death, to cheer herself up.

I had once been told, by a lady who accompanied Mrs. Untermyer to an auction of some Stanford White belongings, that Mrs. Untermyer had bid in a ceiling on that occasion. Asked what she intended to do with it, she had replied, "Oh, you can always use a ceiling." I

mentioned this to Clara, and she clapped her thigh. "Oh, my God," she said, "she bought two Stanford White ceilings! We never could use them and they're still in the barn." Mr. Chisholm observed that the ceilings were probably in poor condition and were not being included in the auction.

MR. CHISHOLM walked with me to my car and told me he hoped to stay on, as manager of the greenhouses and perhaps later as landscapist for the contemplated real-estate development, and that Clara, who is well fixed, is retiring to a house she owns at Lake Mahopac. Undermyer's funeral took place at Greystone, and for the occasion Mr. Chisholm made a casket blanket of three hundred orchids and ten thousand lilies of the valley. His services to his employer extended beyond the grave. "I laid out a thirty-six-thousand-dollar plot in Woodlawn for him," he said, "with a hundred and fifty rhododendron trees, over one and a half acres, bigger than Carnegie's." Mr. Chisholm keeps this plot up, visiting it every week or so, and he sometimes reflects, during a visit, that he will probably never again have the incentive to construct a chrysanthemum Notre-Dame complete with thirty-six stained-glass windows, electric lights, and chimes. —GEOFFREY T. HELLMAN

His eyes, traveling before him on the faded red-and-brown carpet, struck a pair of polished brown oxfords, lifted along heather-colored trousers legs to broad, solid shoulders in an old Cogswell chair. For a compact minute the man stared back at him out of round, measuring, impersonal eyes set wide apart in a big face, then impersonally dropped his eyes to the fireplace, where a molten mass of bituminous coal glowed in the grate.—From a story by Frederick Nebel in *Collier's*.

Somebody better round up two or three of those eyes before they get mislaid.

LIFE IN HOLLYWOOD DEPT.
(HOWLING OF GUESTS DIVISION)

[From Motion Picture]

Quaintest Party-Entertainment of the Month—was the performance staged by Kay Francis and Lloyd Pantages, at the so veddy, veddy, veddy formal party thrown by Bill Haines (remember when he used to be a moon-pitcha actor?) . . . Lloyd collapsed on the floor (oh, but not REALLY, y'know. Just in fon!) and Kay Francis, a la Florence Nightingale, went to work with first-aid . . . Kay demonstrated every first-aid technique from how-to-rescue-a-man-from-drowning all the way to assisting-in-childbirth on Lloyd, while the guests howled . . .

Leonard

mais Oui

PRONOUNCED "MAY WE" — MEANS "BUT YES!"

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