Elbert Hubbard

(19 June 1856-7 May 1915)

Hank Nuwer

MAJOR POSITIONS HELD: Publisher, *Philistine* (1895-1915), *Fra* (1908-1915).

SELECTED BOOKS: *The Man: A Story of Today,* as Aspasia Hobbs (New York: Ogilvie, 1891);

One Day: A Tale of the Prairies (Boston: Arena, 1893);

Forbes of Harvard (Boston: Arena, 1894);

No Enemy (But Himself) (New York: Putnam's, 1894);

Little Journeys, biographical booklets (New York: Putnam's, 1894-1900; East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1900-1908);

These Pages Recount Little Journeys Made to the Homes of Ruskin and Turner (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1896);

This Is the Story of the Legacy (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1896);

As It Seems to Me (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1898);

A Message to Garcia (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1899; Richmond, Surrey: Dimbleby, 1915);

So This Then Is The Appreciation of Ali Baba of East Aurora, as Fra Elbertus (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1899);

Time and Chance, 2 volumes (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1899; revised edition, New York & London: Putnam's, 1901);

So Here Then Are the Preachments Entitled the City of Tagaste, and a Dream and a Prophecy, as Fra Elbertus (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1900);

Old John Burroughs, as Fra Elbertus (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1901);

Contemplations, selected by Heloise Hawthorne (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1902);

This Then Is Consecrated Lives (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1904);

The Man of Sorrows (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1904); revised edition, edited by John T. Hoyle (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1916);

Respectability: Its Rise and Remedy, as Fra Elbertus (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1905);



Elbert Hubbard in 1904

Love, Life and Work (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1906);

Justinian and Theodora, by Hubbard and Alice Hubbard (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1906);

This Then Is a William Morris Book (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1907);

So Here Cometh White Hyacinths (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1907);

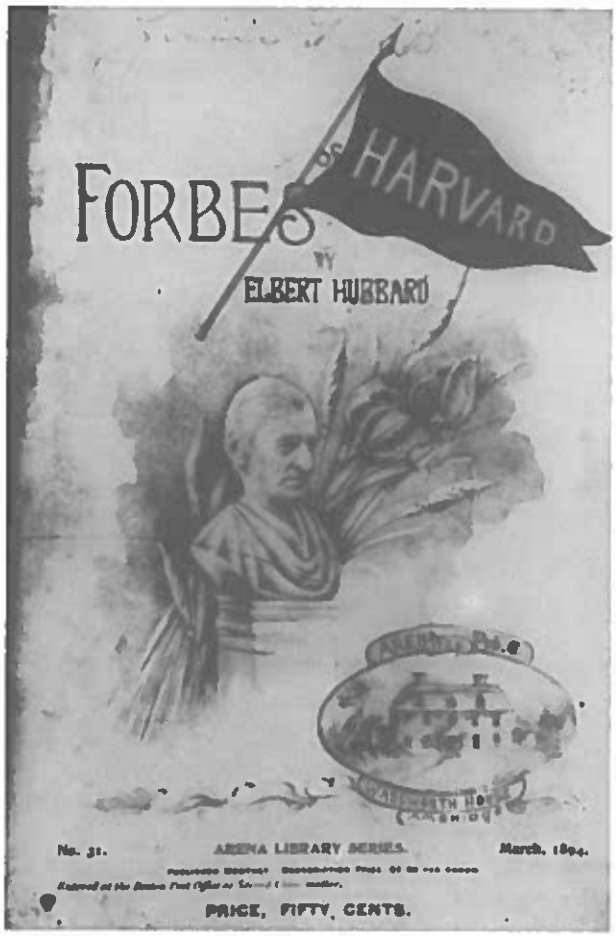
Health and Wealth (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1908);

The Complete Writings of Elbert Hubbard, 20 volumes (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1908-1915);

Three Great Women (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1908);
The Cigarettist (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1908);
The Doctors (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1909);
The Motto Book, as Fra Elbertus (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1909);
The Mintage (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1910);
The Closed or Open Shop (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1910);
A Thousand & One Epigrams (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1911);
Hollyhocks and Goldenglow (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1912);
The Book of Business (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1913);
The Roycroft Dictionary Concocted by Ali Baba and the Bunch on Rainy Days (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1914);
So Here Then Cometh Pig-Pen Pete; or, Some Chums of Mine (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1914);
The Liberators, edited by Hoyle (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1915);
In the Spotlight, selected by Hoyle (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1917);
John Jay, the First Chief Justice of the United States (New York: Hartford Lunch Company, 1918);
Abe Lincoln and Nancy Hanks (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1920);
Concerning Slang, and Other Droll Stories (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1920);
Elbert Hubbard's Scrap Book (New York: William H. Wise, 1923);
Elbert Hubbard Speaks (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycroft, 1933);
The Elbert Hubbard Book, edited by William Griffith (Racine, Wis.: Whitman, 1934).

OTHER: *Little Journeys to the Homes of American Authors,* edited by Hubbard (New York & London: Putnam's, 1896);
The Song of Songs, includes commentary by Hubbard (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1896).

From the waning years of the nineteenth century until his death aboard the *Lusitania* in 1915, publisher Elbert Hubbard exerted a tremendous influence upon his contemporaries as a pundit, thinker, and lecturer. All but forgotten today except for a few epigrams rarely credited to him, Hubbard is one of those illustrious men of his times whose glory failed to extend beyond the grave. His greatest talent was his Barnum-like ability to fleece the unsophisticated American public. While he lived, his self-described "periodical of protest," the *Philistine,* helped him achieve the literary stature he lusted after, although few men attracted more vocal enemies.



Title page for Hubbard's epistolary novel about life at Harvard. He enrolled at the university in September 1893, at age thirty-seven, but withdrew the following December.

Elbert Green Hubbard (at age thirty-seven he dropped his middle name) was born in Bloomington, Illinois, on 19 June 1856 to Silas Hubbard, an eccentric country doctor, and Juliana Frances Hubbard. A latecomer to the world of letters, the industrious Hubbard peddled soap door-to-door for a living until he was thirty-six years old, although later in life he concocted a false biography that had him spending part of his early adulthood in Chicago as a free-lance journalist. More than a little vain, he possessed offbeat taste in clothing and, after forsaking business for the

life of a publisher and thinker, switched from the rakish clothes of a dandy to a costume made up of baggy corduroy pants, Buster Brown cravats, flannel shirts, thick brogans, and a western Stetson. Likewise, he eventually grew his hair long. His ostentatious but distinctive appearance helped him gain a healthy income as a traveling lecturer, prompting a fellow showman to quip, "Elbert is the only one of us who wears his makeup on the street."

A ladies' man during his drummer years, Hubbard wooed a customer named Bertha Crawford of Normal, Illinois, marrying her in 1881. She was a pretty woman but he found her otherwise unremarkable, tiring of her long before the two finally divorced in 1903. In 1884 the Hubbards purchased a Queen Anne style house in the quaint village of East Aurora, New York, located sixteen miles from Buffalo, soon after adding a farm on acreage close by. The junior partner of the soap firm J. D. Larkin & Company, which had begun dispensing with outside soap "slingers" in favor of mail-order sales tactics, Hubbard staved off boredom by trading trotting horses. He and Bertha had three children by 1888.

In 1889 Hubbard's life changed suddenly when he met an East Aurora high-school teacher named Alice Moore, who offered him the intellectual sounding board that his wife could not. A feminist and a free thinker, but no beauty, Moore inspired Hubbard to begin a writing career at age thirty-three. His first work was a novel written in 1890 under the pseudonym Aspasia Hobbs. A novel of ideas, *The Man: A Story of Today* is, and was, tedious reading. By the time the book was published in 1891, Moore had already departed western New York to attend the Emerson College of Oratory in Boston, but the literary bug had infected Hubbard, inspiring him in 1892 to sell his interest in the soap company for sixty-five thousand dollars. "Why have I gone and done this thing?" he told his mother in a letter. "Because, dear Mother, I have all the money I want and there is a better use I can make of my time."

Hubbard's first use of his free time was to complete a fictional sketch called *One Day: A Tale of the Prairies*, a sentimental tale about a bright girl doomed to an unhappy existence on a small farm. Arena Publishing Company of Boston, owned by Benjamin Orange Flower, a friend and admirer of Hubbard, published this short novel in 1893, and a more substantial work, *Forbes of Harvard*, in 1894. Hubbard also wrote essays on the constitutional liberties of tramps and a defense of Catholics for Flower's magazine, *Arena*, and he put his mail-order experience with his old soap firm to use, working to increase the magazine's subscription list by five thousand names. No doubt Hubbard's excitement at appearing in the same magazine that published such well-known figures as Hamlin Garland, Clarence Darrow, and Stephen Crane excited in him the dream of someday publishing his own magazine.

In 1893 Hubbard left Bertha and his small children in East Aurora and entered Harvard to seek a formal college education. He took several classes with humbling results, failing to show the distinction necessary to gain formal entrance to the institution. Some measure of the humiliation he felt after this rejection may be seen in several diatribes he wrote at those in academia, including a May 1896 essay in the *Philistine* entitled "By Rule of Three," which attacked Harvard English professors Adams Sherman Hill and Barrett Wendell. Of course, besides Hubbard's loftily expressed reason for going to Boston to further his education, he went there to keep company with Moore until she found a teaching job at Potsdam State Normal in September 1893. According to biographer Freeman Champney, "in effect, Hubbard was a man with two wives at this time." In 1894 he fathered an illegitimate daughter, Miriam, with Moore (the child was left with Moore's relatives), and with Bertha he sired a daughter named Katherine.

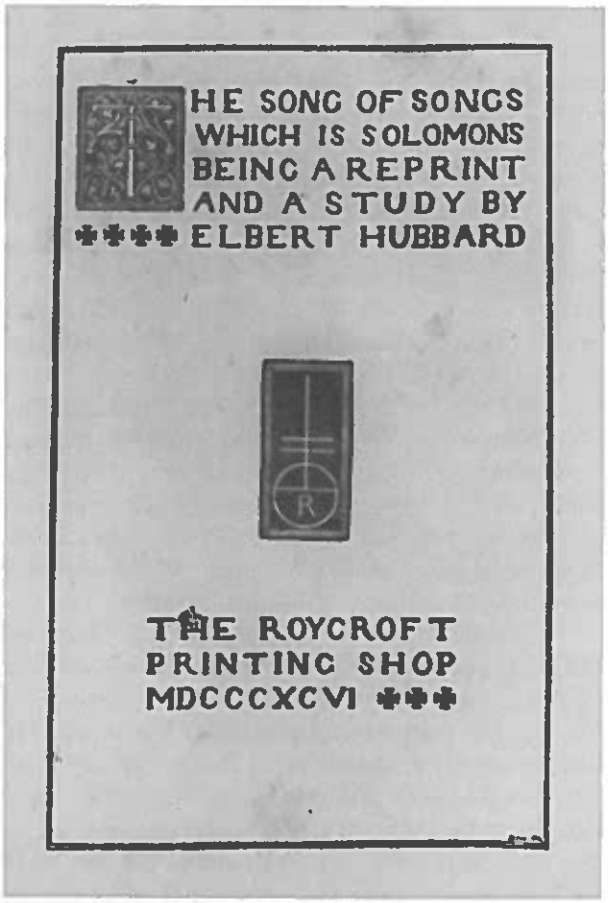
During a trip to Europe in 1894 Hubbard briefly visited William Morris, the poet, utopian thinker, and furniture maker who believed that making quality goods by hand would counter the dehumanizing ill effects of the industrial revolution. In 1895, following his return to East Aurora, Hubbard established the Roycroft Shop, which he announced was dedicated to printing fine books, making handmade furniture, and crafting copper goods. In June 1895 the Roycrofters printed twenty-five hundred copies of a little magazine called the *Philistine* that included the work of Hubbard and a group of Buffalo journalists and would-be artists such as Harry P. Taber, Eugene White, David Gray, and William McIntosh. It was so popular that a second number came out in July. The idea, curiously, was not Hubbard's but that of McIntosh and White. However, the energetic, comparatively wealthy Hubbard soon became its most influential voice, and his name became synonymous with the *Philistine*. According to a notice carried in every issue,



Poster for the December 1895 issue of the pocket-size magazine Hubbard described as a "periodical of protest" (Bruccoli Collection)



Cover for an issue of the magazine Hubbard founded in 1908. Though the editorial content was similar to that of the Philistine, *the* Fra *was much larger and included more advertising.*



Title page, designed by Bertha Crawford Hubbard, for the first book published by Elbert Hubbard's press. The Roycrofters device was adapted from that of fifteenth-century French typographer Nicolas Jenson.

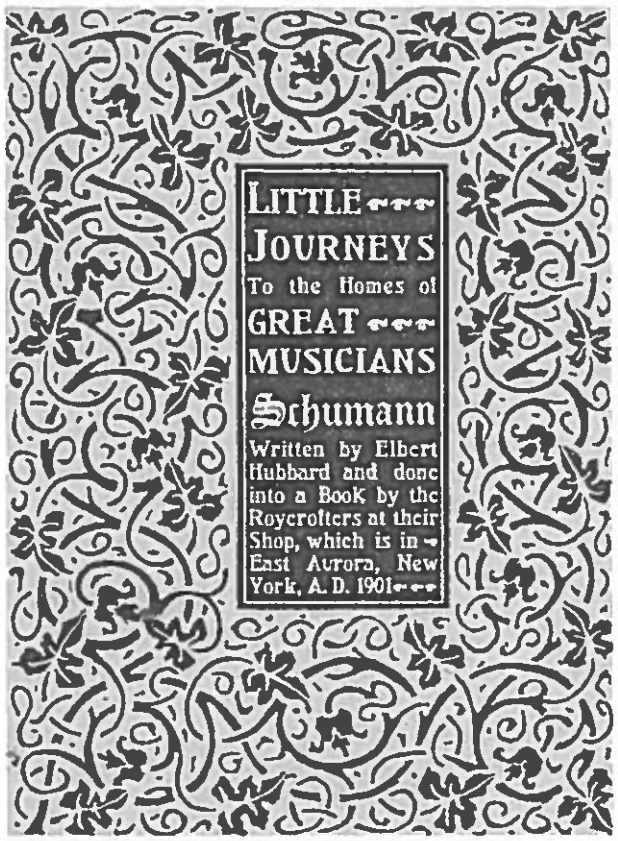
the *Philistine* was "Printed Every Little While for the Society of the Philistines and Published by Them Monthly." Subscriptions were available for one dollar a year or ten cents a month, according to a February 1910 announcement. Hubbard believed in extending credit to subscribers, and other publishers soon adopted this practice. The magazine's eventual 5 1/2-by-7 1/2-inch size was intended to fit in the subscriber's pocket.

An article by Mark S. Hubbell that appeared in the inaugural issue of the magazine gives a clear indication as to the magazine's future content: "I doff me hat to The Philistine, and hail it brother, well met. In the name of all who have hated shams, in the name of all brave knights whose lances have shivered against the dead walls of human stupidity, ignorance, malice and convention; in the name of every pilloried hope and dead ambition killed in the long battle with the Mediocrities and the banalities, I greet thee, knight errant from Philistia and bid thee God speed." Also, in that first issue Hubbard wrote: "It is because we cannot say what we would in the periodicals [that] we have made this book."

Hubbard and his cohorts deliberately attacked the literary establishment, the "Chosen People," in his vernacular, that he had once aspired to join, including such respected names as William Dean Howells (referred to snippily as W. Dean Howl) and Mark Twain. "Mark Twain says he is writing *Joan of Arc* anonymously in *Harper's* because he is convinced if he signed it the people would insist the stuff was funny," said a *Philistine* column. "Mr. Twain is worried unnecessarily. It has been a long time since any one insisted the matter he turns out so voluminously was or is funny." By the fifth issue Hubbard could boast that the *Philistine* would do reviews only of authors the publisher deemed worthy of pillory. The little magazine also poked fun at such leading periodicals of the day as *Century, McClure's, Ladies' Home Journal,* and *Cosmopolitan,* as well as at their respective editors. By and large, the leading literary figures of the age failed to contribute items to the *Philistine.* The major exception was Stephen Crane, who published four poems in the magazine in 1896. Hubbard held an elaborate banquet in Crane's honor in December 1895 and used the opportunity to distribute a forty-eight-page journal, the *Roycroft Quarterly: A Souvenir and a Medley,* which consisted of highly appreciative commentaries on Crane's work by Hubbard and others. Hubbard wanted to be thought of as Crane's patron, and, indeed, John Berryman credited Hubbard's championing of Crane in the *Philistine* as a major boost to the young author's reputation.

In January 1899 the forty-fifth issue of the *Philistine* announced an important change in policy. "Beginning with the next number of the magazine I propose to write every article and paragraph in it," wrote Hubbard. "If it were possible to secure any one to write so well as myself I would not do it." Champney notes that it was not true Hubbard wrote every word in the *Philistine* as claimed, but "the great bulk of it was his." Often Hubbard wrote epigrams attributed to the person of Ali Baba, who espoused convictions such as "Art is largely a matter of hair-cut."

Significantly, while Hubbard made many enemies in the literary community, he nonetheless found a niche for his magazine with readers who liked his sophomoric humor, gossipy tone, and iconoclasm. There were 20,000 copies of the *Philis-*



Title page for one of the monthly biographical booklets that Hubbard produced between 1894 and 1908

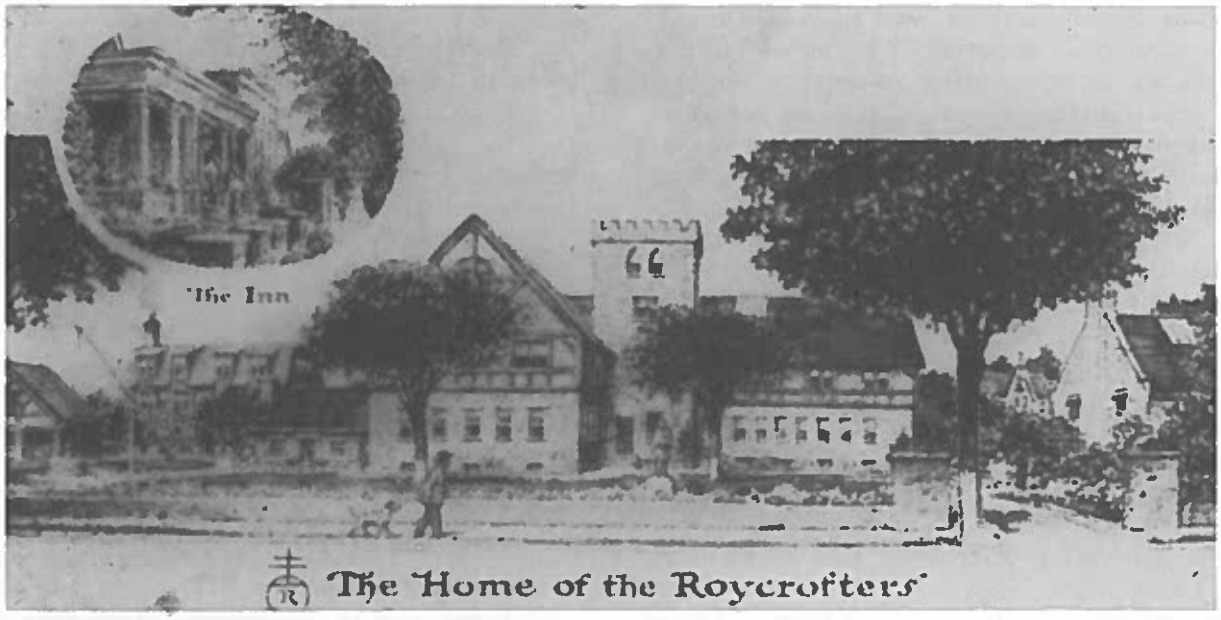
tine in circulation after three years, 52,000 after five years, and 225,000 at the time of Hubbard's death. Among the advertisers attracted to the magazine were a bicycle manufacturer, a typewriter company, the Emerson College of Oratory, and two railroad companies. Hubbard wrote the advertisements for the handmade books printed by the Roycrofters, including his own edition of *The Song of Songs* (1896), offered as a defense of free love, and for the furniture his people constructed upon the premises. The flyleaves of the books and the distinctive Roycroftian furniture all bore a Roycroft emblem. In fact, Hubbard even sponsored a baseball team that displayed the emblem prominently.

In 1897 Hubbard's periodical inspired a rival called the *Anti-Philistine,* which lasted but four issues. Other little magazines of the day also parodied and mocked Hubbard's style, but none approached his success with the general public.

Brom Weber, in his doctoral dissertation, convincingly demonstrated that Hubbard depended upon a gullible public to hawk his "handmade" magazines and books. Roycroft publications were never fully made by hand since many, for example, were bound by a nearby Buffalo printer. In addition, Hubbard lacked the pride and knowledge a good printer must possess. Weber noted that Hubbard's red and black inks frequently were printed out of register, one color upon the other instead of aligned, and that the Roycrofters frequently reduced leading to make an article "fit" on a page. Moreover, according to biographer David Arnold Balch, even Hubbard's signed editions were often phonies. He ordered assistants to perfect his signature so that not even he could tell his from theirs. And Hubbard's so-called limited editions of three hundred copies–purchased by consumers who thought scarcity would add to their value–were seldom ever limited to the number he claimed. He also made slight changes in type or design to sell a brand new "limited edition" of a sold-out series.

The hundreds of Roycrofters who lived on the premises came to East Aurora in search of a utopian existence. Hubbard allowed anyone to stay on his premises in exchange for work. He was personally magnetic and a glutton for work, always conscious of his role as an American sage. His most famous surviving epigrams are those that deal with work: "If you want to get the work done, select the busy man–the other kind has no time," and, "Get your happiness out of your work–or you'll never know what happiness is." One of Hubbard's assistants, Michael Monahan, wrote that Hubbard's "smile was very beautiful in those days; both men and women readily yielded to its fascinating charm." Hubbard agreed, noting in the *Philistine* that "my smile was contagious, also infectious, as well as fetching."

Hubbard gained international fame with the publication of a *Philistine* essay in March 1899 that became known as *A Message to Garcia.* Written, claimed Hubbard, in a single evening hour, "when I had been endeavoring to train some rather delinquent villagers to adjure the comatose state and get radioactive," the essay is basically a defense of capitalists who too long have suffered at the hands of incompetent and lazy hired help. The author's point is that a hero is a man who does his job without questioning why, just as the messenger, Lt. Andrew Rowan, did when he overcame all adversity to deliver a note from Pres. William McKinley to Gen. Calixto Garcia, leader of Cuban insurrectionists, during the Spanish-American War. Hubbard wisely allowed the New York Central Railroad to reprint the essay several times, and this practice was imitated



Engraving of the Roycrofters community in East Aurora, New York. Hubbard's office was in the tower.

not only by businesses and industries of the day but also by the governments of Japan and Russia. Hubbard boasted that the essay had been reprinted forty million times in his lifetime, but this number, of course, cannot be verified.

In 1902 Hubbard's long-suffering wife filed for divorce, naming Moore as corespondent. The ultimate indignity for her had occurred when Moore's brother-in-law, a lawyer, had sued Hubbard for payment of child support and Hubbard had been exposed for his deeds in the national press. One year later the author announced his engagement to Moore, describing her in an article as his "affinity," and thereby opening himself up to ridicule for the term in both the local and national press. At the height of the scandal Hubbard married Alice Moore on 20 January 1904. Hubbard retained custody of his eldest sons from the first marriage, Bert and Sanford (the latter nationally known because a photograph of his muscular, bare-chested body appeared on boxes of Grape-Nuts, a breakfast cereal). Hubbard had, for some time, increased his fortune by writing ad copy for such national advertisers as Armour, Burroughs Adding Machines, Wrigley's Chewing Gum ("Box vobiscum," wrote Hubbard, "buy it by the box"), Heinz's Fifty-Seven Varieties, and the Gillette Safety Razor. (Many of these advertised in the *Philistine* by 1906.) His secret for writing ad copy was "to let a smile go into the ink bottle" and "to say it and stop." He had no patience with those who criticized him for writing drivel. "The man who is afraid of advertising is either a nincompoop, or has something to hide," Hubbard declared, forgetting that he had called advertising "our daily rot" in a *Philistine* essay before he hired out to write copy.

Hubbard's writings and lectures (including many given on vaudeville stages) made him well-known across the nation. To be sure, he had his detractors. The *Indianapolis News* called him "the idol of silly sentimental women." The *Chicago Journal* said, "his egotism is insufferable." And the *New York Nation* wrote, "He says he's not a college graduate, a fact that need not have been stated." Hubbard himself published excerpts from derogatory reviews in the *Philistine*.

In the March 1908 issue of the *Philistine* Hubbard announced that he intended to publish a new magazine. This nine-by-five-inch magazine was called the *Fra*. (Hubbard's byline for the magazine was likewise "The Fra.") Although such famous names as Luther Burbank wrote essays for it, Champney argues that the venture was a failure artistically, charging that "There was too much material and too little focus," and claiming that the main reason for launching the publication was to accept advertising that could not fit in the pocket-sized *Philistine*.

Hubbard's untimely end came with wife Alice aboard the *Lusitania*, the British liner sunk off the coast of Ireland by a German submarine on 7 May 1915. Although the German Embassy had published warnings to United States citizens

to stay out of German waters, Hubbard went abroad anyway, declaring that one of his purposes was to try securing an appointment with the kaiser. He and Alice were two of the 128 Americans lost on the *Lusitania,* and their deaths helped rally support of those who favored an end to American isolationism in World War I.

Hubbard's son Bert and the Roycrofters printed a final, "valedictory number" of the *Philistine* in July 1915. The magazine would appear no more, said Bert, since "No one else can now do it as he did." It was announced that the *Fra* would continue, but high costs and a diminished readership caused its demise in 1917. In 1938 the Roycroft Shops were officially declared bankrupt.

Biographies:

Felix Shay, *Elbert Hubbard of East Aurora* (New York: Wise, 1926);

Mary Hubbard Heath, *The Elbert Hubbard I Knew* (East Aurora, N.Y.: Roycrofters, 1929);

David Arnold Balch, *Elbert Hubbard: Genius of Roycroft* (New York: Stokes, 1940);

Freeman Champney, *Art & Glory: The Story of Elbert Hubbard* (New York: Crown, 1968).

References:

H. Kenneth Dirlam and Ernest E. Simmons, *Sinners, This Is East Aurora: The Story of Elbert Hubbard and The Roycroft Shops* (New York: Vantage, 1964);

Charles F. Hamilton, *As Bees in Honey Drown: Elbert Hubbard and the Roycrofters* (South Brunswick & New York: Barnes, 1973);

Bonnie Ruth Baker Thorne, "Elbert Hubbard and the Publications of the Roycroft Shop, 1893-1915," Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Woman's University, 1975;

Brom Weber, "Spurious Sage: A Study of the Conspiracy Between Elbert Hubbard and His Times," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1957.