

WANTED: *A Prince for Cinderella*

By MASHALL CRANE

GO INTO your public library sometime and ask the girl at the information desk for a good book on political economy. Tell her you are looking for something not too ponderous, something both entertaining and informative; in a word, for some economic "popular science."

Of all the various servitors who face us across desks and counters librarians are perhaps the most courteous and obliging, but it is odds on that you will not get your book, just the same. In fact, the young lady may regard you either as a defective or a suspicious character. No one knows better than she does that the very sizable literature of economics is anything but popular.

If you tell her that you are interested in physics, chemistry, biology, meteorology, agronomy, astronomy, genetics, philosophy, philology, parapsychology, or what have you, you may have your choice of dozens of works, written for popular consumption by men who knew their subjects and how to write about them. You will find discussions of the techniques of scientific research which are more interesting than current best selling novels. Even the mazes of higher mathematics have been plotted for you, at least to the point where you get a pretty good idea of what the mathematician is trying to do, and, perhaps, why he is trying to do it. But there is very little indeed which can be properly called popular economics.

Instructive, but Not Diverting

As a rule the searcher for knowledge seeks greener pastures. He reads of quantum theories instead of theories of value, of soil erosion instead of ground rent, of the behavior of polar air masses instead of mass production. The occasional stubborn exception finds that his economic sojournings must follow a few very well-trodden paths. He is not outclassed by the older classics. Adam Smith, Ricardo, Malthus, Mill, Bentham and Henry George all speak a language which he can understand well enough. Karl Marx, in the abridged translation, is fairly comprehensible most of the time.

It is not until he encounters the more recent authors that he begins to be worried. There seems to be something the matter with every one of them. For example, though he does not have to be a literary critic to be charmed by Veblen's iridescent style, he often finds him much easier to grasp in the psychological and sociological moods than when he writes as an economist. And the contemporary authors, who, presumably, are writing of conditions with which he is familiar, are just incomprehensible. Some of them present their ideas in the mystic runes of the differential calculus. Others speak a strange pseudo-language which is only English because it is not anything else. Even the

large dictionary on the stand does not know many of its words and phrases, and its definitions do not reduce others to sense.

It is not surprising, perhaps, that many people have found the construction of model trains a more soul-satisfying avocation than political economy.

Not long ago the writer (who has little mechanical talent) asked a teacher of economics if he would recommend a good dictionary of the literature of this subject.

"Don't waste your money," he was advised. "No dictionary can keep up with those chaps. A

lot of them devote their lives to inventing new labels for old ideas. Many an assistant prof's fondest dream is of being remembered as the originator of a good word or phrase. Perhaps we shouldn't blame the poor guys, but their little hobby is an awful nuisance to the student."

Every field of study as it develops creates a language of its own, and its special uses for words and combinations of words. This is of tremendous value to the professional practitioner. Exact definition and logical processes would be virtually impossible without something of the sort.

But of all the sciences political economy can least afford to be without a large and healthy literature in the vernacular. For it is a study whose findings are not put to use by trained technicians alone, in the factory or the laboratory. If they are applied at all, at least in democratic states, they must be understood and approved by a majority of the voting citizenry. Long ago Carlyle nicknamed it the dismal science, but today, as far as the layman is concerned, it would be nearer the truth to call it the foggy science.

Economists often bewail the ignorance of economic theory and practice of our legislators and the electorate whom they represent. But certainly a very considerable share of the blame for it lies at the door of the scientists themselves, who have made of their art an esoteric arcanum, barred to all except the few initiates who know the secret passwords.

It is difficult to understand why this should be the case. There is a steady demand and a good market for "popular science." A majority of the larger publishing houses set aside part of their annual budget for the production of works of this sort. Political economy is a subject which directly concerns everybody. A few more really readable works, written not for other writers, but for the great reading public, would go a long way towards raising this Cinderella of the sciences up out of the ashes of neglect.