

# The Nose of the Camel

by ALAN ST. DENIS

“QUO VADIS?” is a common Latin expression, which became widely known as the title of an immensely popular *fin de siècle* novel. It is also the name of a splendid (and rather expensive) New York restaurant. However, neither the book nor the dining place has anything to do with this opus. What is of concern here is that “Quo Vadis?” is a penetrating and provocative question, which in English is generally translated to “Whither Are We Going?” There are times when the answer is extremely problematical.

For example, there has existed since the early days of the now historic New Deal a welfare arrangement known as Social Security. It began as a humanitarian plan to provide annuities for the aged, the required funds being generated by a modest tax on wages. Social Security in those days obliged certain workers and their respective employers each to pay a one per cent tax on wages not exceeding \$3000.00 per year. The maximum monthly benefits, payable at age 65, were \$45.60 to individuals and \$85 to families. Both the scope and cost were modest.

Since then, bit by bit, Social Security has been “enlarged.” In 1956, women became entitled to benefits at age 62, and in the same year disability benefits were added, payable to the disabled person. The latter benefits in 1958 were extended to dependents of the disabled. By 1960, over fifty categories of employees, not previously covered, were included in the greatly expanded program.

As of 1958, maximum monthly

benefits for individuals rose to \$127 and for families to \$254; and to date the kinds of benefits granted have increased and broadened. Meanwhile, somewhere along the line, the purported practice of handling Social Security as a form of insurance on an actuarial basis ceased operating; thereafter collections went into, and benefits were paid from, general treasury funds.

While benefits have been increasing in type and amount, Social Security taxes have (naturally) risen sharply. In 1950 the total tax was three per cent on wages up to \$3600; in 1954 it went up to four per cent on wages up to \$4200; in 1959 the rate rose to five per cent on wages up to \$4800. The current tax rate is a total of six per cent, which will rise to seven per cent in 1963, to eight per cent in 1966, and to nine per cent in 1969! Moreover, to pay the uncomputable cost of the proposed medical care plan for older people, the President has suggested raising the tax by one quarter of one per cent, and lifting the wage base to \$5000 a year.

So the Congress generously hands out more and bigger Social Security “benefits”—and blandly keeps raising taxes in an effort to keep pace with its own largesse. The camel’s nose has been followed into the tent by its head, and its neck is beginning to show. There is a quizzical look on the quadruped’s face as it twists its heavy lips. If this metaphoric camel can speak Latin, it is surely mumbling “Quo Vadis?” Who knows the answer?