

Why People READ



Drawings by Weldon Bailey

by **CHARLES CALDWELL DOBIE**

IN THOSE prehistoric days when the three R's were the bulwark of the little red schoolhouse, potential Presidents of these United States used to cover the pages of their copy books with a legend to the effect that there was always room at the top. It was a pleasant enough myth and no more harmful than a belief in Santa Claus or the conviction that a hair from a horse's tail kept in a bottle of water would eventually turn into a snake. And it was about as short-lived. But, if the incapacity of pinnacles to accommodate crowds finally stood revealed, there remained at least the saving grace of fancying that it was the pinnacles' fault. For had not a hint been dropped by Thomas Gray, also a contributor to the fatuous copy book, that "full many a rose is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air"? And was it not pleasanter to imagine that we were indeed mute, inglorious Miltons, or Cromwells guiltless of our country's blood, rather than plodding rank-and-file men by virtue of inadequacy?

Whether we suspected our divine fire or not, the pinnacles were ever before us like snow-capped peaks, seen now in the white glare of another's achievement, now obscured in the clouds of our own profound despairs. We hungered and longed and wearied for the heights and, in the end, found solace through literature in vicarious adventure. Which is only another way of saying that we touched greatness through our ability to identify ourselves mentally with valorous men and stirring events. And, in doing so, we repeated the ges-

ture made by the first cave woman crouching before a fire of pine boughs and listening to exploits of tooth and fang recited by her mate.

To assert that woman was the first audience and man the first teller of tales is to state a fundamental truth that may seem upon the surface to be constantly modified by changing conditions. To-day the field of literature swarms with women, but there are practically no romanticists among them. Their creations deal with manners rather than events, and, since the basic foundation of the story-teller's art is epic, we may safely assume that man is still the teller of tales and woman the listener. The great preponderance of women readers of fiction in the United States to-day is explained upon the theory that women have more leisure. Is this not just another way of saying that women are more bored with life and, hence, more eager for vicarious experience and romantic escape?

III
THIS theory that man was the first teller of tales and woman the first listener casts no reflection upon the quality of woman's imagination. Quite the contrary. An audience frequently puts into a drama more than the creator intended, or was capable of intending. Moreover, it could easily be assumed that this first teller of tales dealt with facts — facts which he knew at first hand but which it was necessary for the woman to translate into realities by her own capacity for invention.

To attempt to reconstruct the scene of the

first tale told is almost to prove this point. A cave man going forth to his kill encounters a she-bear with cubs. His fight is long, furious, and thrilling. Returning at dusk to his mate, somewhat the worse for wear, he must perforce explain the broken finger, the gash in his cheek, the torn shoulder. Fired by the sympathetic response of an audience, his brooding speech suddenly becomes winged. He not only lives the encounter over again but he shares it with another. He brings action and quickened heartbeats to blood grown stagnant by the dull routine of childbearing and campfire tending. His story loses nothing in the telling, and under the spell of this strange, new loquacity he finds facts growing elusive and fanciful.

A fresh pleasure has come into his life, but it is too soon for him to realize that it is a pleasure that holds elements of thralldom. To set oneself upon a height is one thing; to keep oneself there is quite another. When next our hero is driven to further killings by the rumblings of an empty belly and a shrilling brood, he may have only dull encounters. He returns to find his mate expectant and eager for another wonder tale. In his extremity he invents a story out of hand. The woman hangs parted-lipped upon this recital, believing, or pretending to believe. It is a scene that has been repeated before hearthstone fires over and over again these many centuries: the great, big, beautiful male fictitiously expanding his capabilities for the delight of a mate avid for romance to a point that suffers any imposition.

Man has ever longed for fresh worlds to conquer, and our precursor of Alexandre Dumas and Rafael Sabatini, having strutted his stuff successfully in the home circle, casts his eyes about for a more extended audience. About the tribal campfire are striplings not yet hardened to adventure and old men who relive valiant exploits only in memory. To these our hero-narrator comes with his carefully rehearsed tales. Again he meets success. His fame grows, and likewise his audience. He is on his way to being a best seller. But competition springs up — there are other cave men with exploits and imagination. Brag-fests become the order of the day.

Gradually the discovery is made that not only the adventure but the manner of the telling scores. The man with the greatest exploits to his credit is not always the man who

shakes his audience the most profoundly. There are even those without the strength or capacity for thrilling action who can repeat a tale concerning another with greater effect than those who have enacted it. Tales of wonder pass from lip to lip, are inherited, so to speak, become legendary. The minstrel is born. With creative daring men touch not only the fingers of heroes but the brow of the gods themselves. Humanity discovers that there is room upon the heights for everybody who wishes to scale them through the imagination. Weakness, old age, childbearing, cowardice, timidity — nothing stands in the way of vicarious achievement, of romantic escape from things as they are. And the race sees in a flash that the fruit of the tree of knowledge eaten by the first man and woman was in reality the fruit of imagination releasing them from the boredom of a cut-and-dried Eden, giving them the gift of identification with the very gods themselves.

HHH

THIS escape into a romantic world by the process of identification with a legendary figure is particularly marked in primitive folk, especially children. Without the slightest trouble or preparation, a primitive can walk headlong into vicarious achievement, majesty, power. The unsophisticated find no difficulty in identifying themselves with the salt of the earth, and even Olympus is within their grasp. Primitive stories are stories of gods and demigods to power and majesty born, an aristocracy of glory which a childish simplicity can enter at once. But, as civilization advances, humanity sheds this simplicity. It is not so easily beguiled from its boredom. It requires a bridge to carry it over the chasm that separates life from fancy. It cannot, in an eye's twinkling, become of the stuff of which pomp and splendor are made. At this point the Cinderella myth is born. Here the approach to eminence is through the channels of obscurity. The man who cannot conceive himself a god out-of-hand can imagine a rise to power by a set of fortuitous circumstances.

Most folklore is a modification of the Cinderella myth. Teutonic folk tales, Old Testament stories, and the best sellers of Laura Jean Libbey are all founded upon the Cinderella theme. Practically every one of Grimm's

fairy tales begins: "Once upon a time there lived a poor woodcutter and his wife" — or words to that effect. It is the child of these wretched folk who achieves beauty and wealth and power. And even the stories that have an opening scene laid in the courtyard of a castle do so with the avowed purpose of ultimately enthroning a commoner.

The Bible story of Jacob, the second-born, is a Cinderella story, emanating as it does from an emerging civilization that laid all its stress upon the prerogatives and rights of the first-born son. That Jacob's rise to power was due to sharp practice against Esau, his God, and his father-in-law is beside the mark. Joseph, with his coat of many colors, had neither the distinction of being the eldest nor the youngest. And who does not remember the dialogue between Samuel, the prophet, and Jesse, the father, concerning a successor to the throne of Israel after seven unacceptable sons of Jesse had passed in review? "And Samuel said unto Jesse: 'Are these *all* thy children?' And he said, 'There remaineth yet the youngest and he keepeth the sheep.'" It was this forgotten shepherd lad who was fated to wear the crown.

It is no accident that these patriarchs and warriors and kings spring from the ranks of the humble. The initial pangs of skepticism over, the race must have turned avidly to the first rational beguilement that appeared. Though it had become impossible to identify oneself outright with kingship and godhead, there still remained the possibility of achieving both by a bridge of reason. From that moment, every Cinderella in the world, picking the peas out of the ashes while her sisters disported at the Prince's ball, was presented with a rational escape from the soot and grime of her kitchen. Second sons, youngest sons, sons between, sons of woodcutters, lame sons, halt sons, blind sons — there was an approach to greatness for



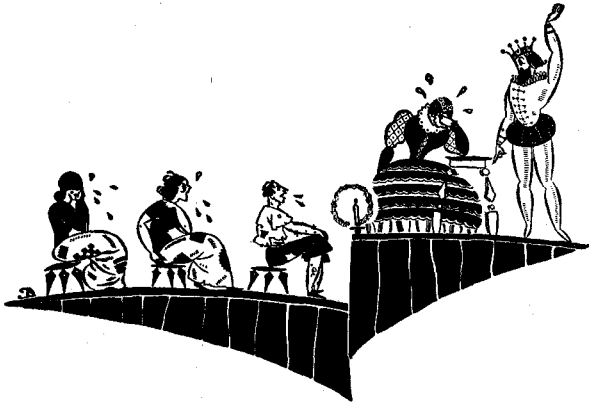
every one. Humanity, cut off from imaginary glory through a sense that all the pinnacles were occupied by gods to Olympus born, solaced itself with the sophistry that the pinnacles could be achieved. The twilight of the elect made way for the sunrise of the elected, and in its enthusiasm mankind dreamed the copy book dream that there was room at the top for everybody.

IV

DISILLUSIONMENT is ever the companion of progress. The race has invented its Cinderella myth as an approach to beauty and power. What then? Like that most modern of all Cinderellas — Tillie, in *Tillie's Nightmare* — the race wakes up to the raucous voice of its mother rising above the rattle of pots and pans. And, like Tillie, it exclaims, "Gee, it was only a dream!" It has learned that the boast of heraldry and the pomp of power are as subject to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune as any other condition in life. No matter how sweet the dream there is always the alarm clock set for dawn. Was it by ignorance or design that weavers of Cinderella tales halted their narratives upon the assurance that the leading man and woman were married and lived happily ever after? And who was the first sardonic author to carry the story a step further to complete disaster by having the heroine awake to the peevish cry of "Cinderella! CINDERELLA!"?

If all is vanity, and if even the valiant battle their way to inevitable defeat, of what avail is it to identify oneself with tinsel heroes pulled hither and thither by the gods? This was doubtless the next question which mankind subconsciously raised. The answer was clear. When everything else was gone, courage still existed. One could still invent and identify oneself with the Ajaxes of the world, intent on defying the lightning. Dimly the race perceived sportsmanship, which is nothing more nor less than a well-mannered acceptance of defeat. From this sense of sportsmanship sprang pity — the mainspring of the drama. Previously mankind's romantic escape had concerned itself with victory and laughter. Now it could conceive the glorious pathos of defeat and tears. It was better to lose sublimely than to succeed meanly.

Drama is the form of literature that most



completely captures our sympathies, that most easily transforms us for the moment into the hero, victorious or defeated, strutting his brief hour upon the stage. Hebel says: "The theater is the only possible pause in a man's life." This is another way of saying that it is the only escape we have from our own dull existences through the personality of another. For the moment we cease to be, so completely do we enter into the suffering and joy of the characters passing in review before us. The fall of the curtain is the alarm clock that starts arrested time on its way again, sending us forth refreshed not only by our laughter but by our tears; for monotony is broken as much by tragedy as by comedy, whether we achieve it through literature or life itself. The only hopeless state is boredom.

Upton Sinclair has made the point that most of the literature of the world has been produced by sycophants intent upon flattering aristocratic and plutocratic powers. It is to this base end, he declares, that Shakespeare put his talents. Because Shakespeare and the Greeks tricked out their protagonists in robes of state and clothed them with authority, Mr. Sinclair assumes that they had no real sympathy with the common people. As a matter of fact, whether these mighty dramatists knew it or not, they had every sympathy with the common people. Did the common people crowd the pit of the Elizabethan theater and the open stadiums of Athens to see dramas woven about the petty and ignoble sufferings of their kind? If they came at all to see characters built upon incongruous lines, it was to hurl laughter and obscene jibes at them. Comic interludes in any classic tragedy are concerned with the antics and griefs of rank-and-file characters — bakers, shepherds, tavern keepers, bawds, soldiers, and wretched scriveners. Cat-o'-nine-tails are never

laid upon the sacred persons of the Lord's anointed.

The explanation of this is found in a statement of Philip Guedalla's to the effect that the world is curiously unmoved by the tragedies of weaklings. This holds as good to-day as it did in Shakespeare's or Sophocles' time. There is one difference, however. To-day the writer and dramatist have discovered that bakers, shepherds, tavern keepers, bawds, soldiers, and wretched scriveners are not of necessity weaklings. Which proves that the audience has discovered the same thing. The Cinderella myth has done its bit in educating men to a realization that many a slender-footed princess is picking peas out of the ashes by virtue of a scant supply of princes and the lack of a publicity bureau. Thousands of movie queens are still adorning the basements of Woolworth's stores, and the Lindberghs doling out oil, air, and water at the filling stations are legion.

But in Elizabethan days the public was not so sure of this, and greatness of soul was compelled to wear the outward symbols of distinction. A queen without her ermine and a king lacking his scepter were incomprehensible to the multitude. Shakespeare would have been glad to clothe a wretched, drunken bumboat woman with glory, as Eugene O'Neill did in *Anna Christie*, if his audience had been ready for it. But he would have tossed aside with contempt the tedious Babbitts of Sinclair Lewis, the wretched weaklings of *An American Tragedy*, the petty, cheap officers striking at each other below the belt in *What Price Glory*. For he would have known instinctively that no one in his audience would care to identify himself with such inadequates, and furthermore, that they are not even of the stuff of which good clowns are made.

V

ONE CANNOT dismiss the public's lack of interest in underdogs by the Upton Sinclair formula of blaming it on literary fare provided by authors who bend pregnant knees before thrones. The obscure man, to quote Shylock, has eyes, hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, and passions. He is fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter

and summer as his more distinguished brothers are. If you prick him he bleeds, if you tickle him he laughs, if you poison him he dies. But who cares? To whom is he anything but faintly ridiculous, as Shylock himself is faintly ridiculous?

If you analyze Shylock, you will discover that he is far from an ignominious person; but the man in the street deals in surfaces, not analyses. Shylock is a Jew, an underdog; he wears the garments of inferiority. Put a crown upon Shylock's head, authority in his hand, make him a Doge of Venice, and see how the audience will suffer with him. As it is, there are only a precious few who are touched by his miseries, who can understand his long suffering, who do not laugh when his worthless daughter deserts him, or exult at the humiliations imposed by a biased court. If this seems heartless and cruel, remember that the rank-and-file man has been betrayed and spit upon and stripped these many centuries.

Slaves of circumstance have no wish to identify themselves with failure. If they identify themselves at all with suffering, it is with the suffering of the great. If, in the end, they die vicariously, it is the death of a hero, not the death of a sniveling coward. It will be time enough to die ignominiously when their own hour comes. Macbeth is a base character ranged against Shylock. With all the Jew's shortcomings we cannot imagine him as the murderer of his guest. Even his revolting contract for a pound of flesh is open and above board. His sly and treacherous Christian clients need not accept it. But accept it they do, with tongue in cheek. There is everything to be said in favor of Shylock, but precious little for the scurvy Gentile breed that took his terms and then crawled slyly out of them. Macbeth, on the other hand, is a regicide, a murderer of a sleeping guest, a man in league with gangsters who butcher widows and their children for a consideration. But in the end he comes clean. When Birnam Wood moves upon Dunsinane, he stands his ground and meets his fate nobly, sword in hand. There is no surrender, in the

manner of Shylock taking his beatings like a docile dog. Both men are defeated, but the rout of one is called tragedy, the rout of the other comedy.

We suspect that Shakespeare's artistic conscience must have been sorely pricked by the intolerance of an age that he knew would never suffer him to deliver poetic justice into Shylock's hand. But Shakespeare was a practical dramatist with his eye on the box office. He would not have dared to give his public a Jew triumphant even in defeat, such as Mr. Feuchtwanger presents to us to-day in his stirring book, *Power*.

That mankind at large has no wish to identify itself with ridiculous, defeated, or even grotesque characters is abundantly proved by the personal reactions of the reading public to such literary inventions. Any writer who builds up such a character from life is sure of escaping the wrath of the man caricatured. For the simple reason

that, left to himself, the caricatured gentleman is blissfully ignorant of the libel. Kind friends may recognize the portrait, and kind friends may conceivably communicate their discovery to the victim, but even then it will take a lot of persuading, crowned with the hope of collecting substantial damages, to make a man recognize his own reflection in the mirror of literature.

The gentleman who contends that he is the original of Andy Gump has taken an incredible number of years to discover the affront. And we have reason to suspect that, left to his own devices, he would never have recognized the resemblance. We would go further and wager that the natural trend of his self-recognition would have been along the lines of Armand in *Camille*, or Sir Launcelot in *Idylls of the King*, or Tom Mix in one of his starry-skied adventures. The Pecksniffs and Dogberrys and Babbitts of literature are always recognized — but by the *other* fellow.

For no more will audiences have villains for their spiritual affinities unless they are presented in a dashing Robin Hood manner. But let the heroine languish picturesquely on a



chaise longue, or the hero take his friend's place on the scaffold, and each one of us settles back with the smug satisfaction that such loveliness of body or soul is of the same stuff as ourselves.

VI

THAT there is a tremendous vogue at the present time for stories of rank-and-file life cannot be denied. The novels of Sinclair Lewis, with the exception of *Arrowsmith*, deal, for the most part, with inadequates who never escape from the ashes of the hearthstone. And even Mr. Lewis's villains are without the grace of plume or unsheathed sword. To imagine a reader escaping into the clouds via the Elmer Gantry route is inconceivable. And yet these books have been read by thousands. More than this, Mr. Lewis is the father of a school of alleged realism that dwindles in an ever-decreasing scale toward mediocrity and dullness.

The stage, too, has become infected and hardly a theatrical season goes by that does not present a number of successes with the scenes laid in the dining rooms of flats in Yonkers or the Bronx. This would be encouraging if the dénouement led the actors Cinderella-wise out of the dining room. But the plays have no such saving grace. They are concerned with dull and blatant people who remain dull and blatant to the final fall of the curtain. If the man in the street reads to touch fingers with the great, why does he crowd to these performances? If the world is curiously unmoved by the tragedies of weaklings, what interest can rank-and-file audiences have in these yokels born of dreary imaginations?

Literature, like everything else in life, has grown complex. We have come a long way from

the cave man and the wonder-tales he told his wife. The mainspring of literature has been supplemented by other forces and other hungers. The impulse that leads the public to stories of cheesemongers who never escape their calling is a sort of inversion of the craving for vicarious heroics. Many of us have developed a dour satisfaction in contemplating other condemned souls, in realizing that one is not the only fly in the syrup jug, in acknowledging that it is the lowlands and not the pinnacles that provide room for everybody. But, however misery may love company, it is scarcely thrilled by it, and the dreariest piece of realism in the world is always in danger of rout at the point of the first glistening sword. Even in the daily press, window-weight murders and sordid oil scandals yield front page columns to the Fitzmaurices and Lindberghs of the world.

One may read for amusement, one may read in the name of curiosity, one may even conceivably read for edification; but, in the end, one will always read to escape life, to lift up one's eyes unto the hills. Books that concern themselves with any but this primary function may be clever books, interesting books, sophisticated books, but they rarely will be *great* books. The great books of the world deal with kings and princes and knights-at-arms moving in their transient glory against a sky blood-red with battle. It may not be as necessary as it was in Elizabethan days for them to wear the crowns and trailing robes of their calling, but they must bear on their brows the unmistakable signs either of nobility or of force. For it is only through them that mute, inglorious Miltons and guiltless Cromwells and even the hopeless inadequates of the world enter for a brief eternity into kingdom and power and glory.



The Human Crucible

**Francis Bacon Award of \$7500
for the Humanizing of Knowledge**



by BERNARD JAFFE

BETWEEN the ancient alchemists' fanatical search for gold and the modern applications of industrial research in chemistry stretches a vast, unexplored no-man's land. The layman, frightened away from this forbidding field by the highly technical aspects of the subject, has never dreamed that behind the formulas of chemistry lurks a wondrous romance — the romance of heroic men working to push back the frontiers of knowledge. He is too prone to think of these men as Chaucer described them centuries ago:

Men may hem ken by smell of brimstone,
For all the world they stinken as a gote.

The stupendous advance of modern chemistry is itself a tale of a magic lamp more potent than that of Aladdin, yet greater still is the human story — the saga of men groping for the causes of things and struggling to frame the laws of nature, of men leading intellectual revolutions and fighting decisive battles in obscure laboratories. As John Dewey has well expressed it: "We are just now beginning to realize that the great heroes who have advanced human destiny are not the politicians, generals, and diplomats, but the scientific discoverers who have put into man's hands the instrumentalities of an expanding and controlled experience."

To most of us the workshop of science is as unreal as the cloistered cell of the Middle Ages. Few of us have any real conception of the spirit in which the pioneers of chemistry worked. During centuries of incessant labor they were impelled by an all-consuming curiosity to discover the inner workings of the matter-of-fact world which lay about them, and to this search

they sacrificed all the common pleasures of life. Yet these saints of science, as they have been called, were supremely happy men: their lives were full. They trembled at each new discovery and never ceased to dream of new conquests.

Such lives were the human crucible out of which has issued the perfection of modern chemistry. Like the alchemists of old, let us then peer into this human crucible and watch for the golden grains of truth as they separate themselves from the leaden dross of ancient errors and superstitions.

I—TREVISAN

He Looks for Gold in a Dunghill

IN THE DARK interior of an old laboratory cluttered with furnaces, crucibles, alembics, stills, and bellows, bends an old man in the act of hardening two thousand hen's eggs in huge pots of boiling water. Carefully he removes the shells and gathers them into a great heap. These he heats in a gentle flame until they are as white as snow. Meanwhile his collaborer separates the whites of the eggs from the yolks and purifies them all in the manure of white horses. For eight long years these strange products are distilled and redistilled for the extraction of a mysterious white liquid and a red oil. With these potent universal solvents the two alchemists hope to fashion the philosophers' stone.

At last the day of final testing comes. Again the breath-taking suspense, and again — failure! Their stone will not turn a single one of the base metals into the elusive gold.