

The Merely Great

BY BERENICE C. SKIDELSKY

Some reminiscences of an interviewer

TEACHER, of course, was a Being Apart. She sat, solitary and all-powerful, upon a platform, arbitrating your destiny for several hours a day in School, that mystic world into which you had lately been inducted and which seemed wholly unrelated to your former one. That did not last long. Before many years of grade school had passed, Teacher had become a person. A person still marked out a bit, it is true, from the common herd, but nevertheless a thing of human clay. Through the processes of education a new set of Beings Apart had risen. These new ones were no longer living. Glamorous and misty with distance, they were to your childish mind in no way related to the bipeds you commonly knew as human beings. They shared with them no functions, no needs, no habits.

About the time you were nine or ten there was a prize essay contest for school children of your city, the theme being: "Who Were the Three Greatest Americans?" and you heard and took part in considerable discussion about it. Washington and Lincoln rolled trippingly off your tongue and the tongues of your

contemporaries. Not one of you would have dreamed of denying them priority over all others. Concerning the third, there was considerable disagreement. Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, Patrick Henry and a few others, all had their staunch supporters.

You talked about it one night at dinner and your elders took it up. "I don't class Washington among the three greatest Americans," said your uncle.

You fairly gasped with incredulity. Why, one might as well deny the alternation of day and night!

"Of course," added your uncle, "he's one of the most famous; but there's no inevitable relation between greatness and fame."

You swallowed that, undigested. You had no idea, then, what a ruminant it was going to make of you; no faint inkling how often it was going to be regurgitated through the years.

The processes of education revealed to you more Beings Apart than those in political fields. Shakespeare was the greatest writer who ever lived; seven cities claimed great Homer dead; Rembrandt was one of the world's greatest painters, Bee-

thoven one of the greatest composers, and so on and on.

There were Beings Apart, too, who were not dead; all sorts of persons in high places whose apartness was luminous and intangible. The President of the United States was one. The kings and queens of Europe (they were more numerous then) were others. Judges, politicians, famous actors, opera stars, writers, editors and a host of others in what seemed high places, all belonged to a different world from yourself.

I remember (to change the pronoun, for after all these are my experiences, although I suspect that in their essence they are yours as well) — I remember traveling once from St. Louis to Springfield, sacred to the memory of Abraham Lincoln, and encountering on the train an old woman who lived on a farm a few miles from the latter city. She remembered Lincoln from the time when she was a little girl (she lived in Petersburg); and she said her family knew him well. Her whole tendency was to disparage him.

"We around here," she said, "we knew what a small world he lived in."

Washington, on the other hand, she fairly apotheosized. She kept emphasizing the fact of her first-hand knowledge of Lincoln's world, and seemed utterly unaware that the implication of her every word was that a great figure to her had to be an abstract figure; that Washington, hallowed by tradition, would outshine Lincoln, seen in the flesh. Not, of course, that she was different from the rest of us.

Meeting celebrities, the great, the near-great, the pseudo-great, has an

inevitable effect upon one's sense of proportion. After half a dozen such encounters in which nebulous names are resolved into persons, one realizes once and for all time the flesh-and-blood-ness shared alike by the great and the mediocre — sees Caesar, actually, for instance, as the funny bald-headed old man of Cleopatra's description (via Mr. Shaw), or Trojan Helen as the simple woman that Erskine makes of her.

A "feature writer" for newspapers and magazines is exposed to disillusionment of this sort much more than normal people; and after having in that capacity many interviews with persons whose names for one reason or another stood out, I realized fully how true my uncle's wisdom was.

When, after my first few weeks on a newspaper I was set to writing special stories, Galli-Curci had just made one of those spectacular débuts that a generation earlier would have resulted in the horses' being taken from her carriage and a throng of ardent admirers substituted to draw the vehicle through streets lined with cheering crowds. (At least so we're told it used to be done.) I was sent to interview her. I was not yet hardened to "greatness" and had painful misgivings over her reception of so humble an individual as myself, but she was gracious and entirely simple. We talked about American and European music, about her marvelous natural gift, which had brought her to prominence with almost no instruction, about various aspects of her art. It was a very satisfactory interview, from my point of view, and from hers, evidently, for she sent me an autographed photograph

and a note of thanks after it appeared. But —

"It's a good enough interview," said my managing editor grudgingly. "But why did you talk to her about her 'art'?" (With contempt emphasizing the monosyllable.) "Of course they all love their art! Why didn't you ask her what she thought about Brooklyn?"

The comparative importance of Brooklyn and great art had been fixed quite firmly in my mind, but this editor was a man of experience and his comment shook me badly. Still, the interview itself remained a vivid and satisfying experience, in no way subversive to my illusions. Others brought me a better understanding of my editor's cynical point of view. For instance, I was sent once to Mrs. Vernon Castle's home to learn what the famous dancer thought about such vital feminine topics as length of skirts, height of heels and sleeveless gowns. She had started, it may be remembered, the bobbed hair fashion, and the part of her conversation which I remember best was this:

"I find bobbed hair so comfortable that I hate to give it up. And yet I suppose I ought to: I know every one is wondering what I'm going to do next."

This was in those troubled months just before the close of the Great War, when every one had much, much else to wonder about.

ONE day I went to interview Theodore Dreiser. His novel, *The "Genius,"* had been suppressed a few years before and the case was just coming up for trial. He lived at that time on West Tenth Street in

New York, very simply and unpretentiously. He opened the door himself, a tall man, dressed in a smock, with a face certainly not handsome yet individual and arresting. He welcomed me politely enough, but guardedly, as if he meant to take my measure before committing himself. His scrutiny must have been satisfactory, at least in assuring him of my sympathy, for he talked at length on life, literature and people.

We talked chiefly of suppressions, and pondered the fact that books of serious intent, like his own *The "Genius,"* challenge the attention of the suppressors, whereas musical comedies, burlesques and vaudeville skits, oftentimes shameless in their obscenities, pass without protest.

"As I see it," he said, "life — the technique or method of living — is not a fact but an agreement. To that can be traced the roots of most protests such as this which has been raised against my book, and of which there are of course innumerable counterparts in literary history. There exists an uneasy, smoldering fear lest the points of the agreement be nullified; a fear that what has been achieved might be destroyed.

"And what would seem to corroborate that analysis of motive is the fact that only when a so-called 'objectionable' work is sincere and above vulgarity in its intention do people get excited about it. Some of the plays presented on the stage today, the moving pictures, the musical comedies, though surely in need of censorship, evade it.

"I confess I'm puzzled; I don't understand the psychology back of their acceptance by the vice com-

mission, in view of the general stand that it takes. Perhaps it is their brevity, the fact that they are quickly over, and that the points condemnable from the censors' standpoint are passed almost before there is time fully to grasp them.

"The novel's fate seems to bring it more within the grasp and the investigation of the censors and vice commissions than any other form of art. A novel is a full spiritual transcript of characters; because of its logic and its philosophy, there is no escape from its true significance. It relentlessly shows all facets of life, being the most leisurely of all literary forms."

At that time, Dreiser felt no resentment toward those who didn't like his books. He declared it to be the most natural thing in the world that persons should be divided in their opinions about him and his work, for he saw in that division an expression of the inevitable friction of ideas inseparable from man's relation with man, and unquestionably an important element in furthering human growth.

"Of course I have my following," he said, "and that is all one can expect, or indeed wish for. But I want them, at least, to be allowed to 'follow' in peace! If there are mature minds who want what I have to give, I object to its being forbidden them because a handful of persons, whose competence to judge might well be questioned, feel that it isn't good mental food for children."

One wonders, since the success of *An American Tragedy*, whether Dreiser still retains the same spirit of humility and large-minded toler-

ance that was his a decade or so ago. There are rumors abroad in the land that he does not, though to any one who ever felt and believed in the basic simplicity of the man, a superior, self-important Dreiser is incredible — even granting that anything is possible in man.

THE platitude that "all truly big people are humble and simple; it is only the little ones who take themselves seriously" is far from watertight in its applicability. They say of Victor Hugo that he entertained no doubts concerning his consummate greatness; he accepted as his due all the homage lavished upon him by the sycophants with whom he surrounded himself, and when some of them assured him that the name of the city of Paris would one day be changed to Victor Hugo, he saw nothing ludicrous in the idea, but gravely acquiesced.

Simplicity and humility would hardly be called the outstanding characteristics of one man of indubitable position who furnished one of my most interesting interviews. It was a conversation in Ebury Street — though not one which got itself incorporated in George Moore's book.

The house in Ebury Street is quaint, old, rather small and wholly Victorian in tone. The front part of the ground floor is taken up by a long narrow room, strongly reminiscent of an old-fashioned American "parlor," into which I was ushered from a narrow hall. There was a square table near the window; and this was for the moment the tea table, though probably it was at other times also a work table, for a desk stood just beside it. There were many paintings

on the walls, some of them the work of Moore himself, for he was a painter before he turned to literature. In one corner, catching the full light of the windows, hung the portrait of Moore familiarized by frequent reproductions; a portrait of a middle-aged, red-haired, rather red-faced man, with a drooping red mustache. There was little of resemblance to be traced between the portrait and the white-haired old man drinking tea that afternoon.

George Moore's reputation is that of a man who shuns publicity and scorns the public; but I found him so briskly alive to the values and methods of the former that I rather doubted the validity of the reputed scorn. He thrust upon me with no delay the rôle of auditor to a recital of *The Apostle*, a play which he had just written, adapted from his novel, *The Brook Kerith*. After that, with lively understanding of the spirit of interviewing, he pegged away in a steady stream. Sometimes he lapsed into a method favored by vaudeville artists.

"—and then you must ask me so-and-so," he would say, "and then I answer such-and-such." Not much scorn of publicity there!

Several times in outlining his play, he stumbled and hesitated in his effort to formulate his thought. Once he apologized and added:

"You phrase that yourself—I'm sure you have a much readier pen than I have!" Back of which remark could be read, through the tone and the accompanying glance: "You know, of course, that I jest; it wouldn't be possible for any one to have a readier pen than I have!" Which is true enough, at that!

After we had disposed of the play and its implications, which Mr. Moore had elected as the interview "topic," the conversation became general and more interesting. Mention was made of D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, and of Cabell's *Furgen*, both of which Mr. Moore dismissed contemptuously with a comment to the effect that he had "read a few pages here and there—couldn't see anything to them."

One of the most amusing elements in that talk was his indignant dissertation upon the passing of courtesy in the modern world, especially among young people, whose failure to say "sir" and "madam" in addressing their elders he found unforgivable. I attempted a defense by saying that the present generation tends to find that the extraneousities of courtesy are not the essence thereof, but Mr. Moore overruled me with a plea for forms as being inseparable from essences.

To one long familiar with *The Lake*, with *A Drama in Muslin* and half a dozen other fine pieces of literature, that afternoon was a remarkable one. Passages from them kept drifting through my mind—bits of summarized wisdom that reflected various aspects of their author's personality. But, try as I would, I could not fit them to the man who sat opposite me.

Not that the written word can ever safely be taken as index to the writer. Thomas Hardy has commented drily that "it is as risky to calculate people's way of living from their writings as their incomes from their way of living." I heard in London, from a delightful old man named Macmurdo, who had been the intimate of the Brownings and other

Victorian notables, of an incident in which the poet who wrote "kind hearts are more than coronets," threw the mustard pot at his children's tutor (Macmurdo's brother-in-law) one morning at breakfast, because the tutor, in the course of an abstract discussion, stood firmly by opinions in opposition to Tennyson's own. "Simple faith" may be "more than Norman blood," but illustrations are legion that the man who said it was the quintessence of autocratic arrogance and undisciplined temper.

A STUDY in violent contrasts among the great — or better stick to the safer word "famous" — was afforded me through interviews, within a few days of each other, with the late Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, the Spanish novelist whose *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* had such overwhelming success during the War, and Maurice Maeterlinck, Belgian apostle of the mystical.

I met the Spaniard, very simply, in a small and ordinary hotel room. To meet the Belgian, I was ushered with much ceremony into a very large, very lofty, very dim and stately hall, filled with oriental rugs, elaborate chairs and, at one shadowy end, a large canopied structure, like a throne platform, which would have served admirably in the setting of some vague and mystical Maeterlinck drama. A manager stood stern guard over him, shielding him with a solicitude both annoying and amusing from the stings and bruises of contact with such harsh realities as American journals and their representatives. In fact, the poor author himself seemed so bewildered by it

all that one had to feel sorry for him.

Ibáñez, on the other hand, was vital, buoyant and self-assured. He was a large man and his heavy face was deeply lined, giving testimony that as one measures by years he was no longer young. But his mobile mouth reflected an amazingly youthful and plastic spirit and the smoldering fire of brown eyes beneath drawn brows corroborated the evidence of his mouth. There was a dynamic, driving power about him strikingly different from the timid, shrinking self-effacement of the Belgian Maeterlinck.

"I write explosively," Ibáñez said. "I am sometimes hardly aware of what I am doing. It is a species of somnambulism, of hypnotism, perhaps. The germ of an idea comes to me; it grows and grows, until there is a spontaneous combustion and in the ensuing fever it writes itself."

He talked — prophetically, as time has shown — of the future of War books. "The great flow of War-inspired fiction," he said, "is for the moment practically stemmed. But in the course of a decade a new type will begin to appear: War books with much mellowed philosophical commentary."

Suddenly he looked at me with eyes of keen inquiry.

"Have you written a novel yet?" he demanded.

"Why, no," — startled — "not yet."

"What are you waiting for?" he interrupted. "Oh, I know — you don't have to tell me. You want to wait until you're sure you can write a good novel. Well, don't. That way you'll never get anywhere. Write a

poor novel, if need be. Be content to write a bad one. It's just as satisfactory, as a start. Begin — begin! Otherwise you'll accomplish nothing."

Which bit of advice, from one who accomplished much, at least materially and quantitatively, is herewith passed on, for what it is worth.

From Maeterlinck nothing vigorous nor personal could be extracted. We talked of literature and he expressed admiration for Emerson and Poe among Americans, seeming to know no others. I did draw him out just a little when I mentioned his excursions into the realms of the occult. He reiterated his belief in the survival of the human spirit after bodily death, although he was reluctant to elaborate upon it.

A year or two later, in Paris, I had a kind of abortive interview with Max Nordau — abortive, because he was at that time exceedingly ill (he died a few months later), and it was impossible to conduct an interview along the accustomed lines. But I had been very eager to get his "thirty years after" impressions of his own book, *Degeneration*, which in the 'Nineties had caused such commotion in literary circles, with its theory that whereas genius and disequilibrium do not necessarily go together, it is possible that they might, and that more often than not they do. Maeterlinck, termed "a poor devil of an idiot," was among the genius-degenerates of whom the book treated, along with such other notables as Ibsen, Tolstoi, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Wagner and many more.

"If I had it to write over again, I would say the same things," Nordau

had said, in response to my first general question, drawing his patriarchal figure to its full height, his eyes flashing in a last reminiscence of the vigor of personality which must originally have been his. I thought of the shy, bewildered soul I had met in New York, and of Nordau's characterization of him in his book.

"Maeterlinck?" I asked.

"Ah—Maeterlinck!" replied Nordau. "There, I grant you, I might make some change. That is," he went on hastily, "I am by no means saying that I would take him out of the ranks of the degenerates. But I would do now what I was not ready to do then; I would at least grant him real genius. Some of his subsequent work has gained him that."

THE word "great" is bandied about with astonishing nonchalance. A visit to a library catalogue reveals some amusing evidences of it; one can read about great achievements, great adventures, the great American ass, great apes, great auks, even the "great bastard, protector of the little one" (with 5,000 *louis d'or* offered in Cologne, 1689, to discover the author), great murder cases, battles, etc., throughout the alphabet.

Some one has said that

The merely great are, all in all,
No more than what the merely small
Esteem them . . .

which isn't without its measure of truth. A few years ago when *Lummon* was moving thousands of good but indiscriminating souls with its maudlin saccharinities, I asked a number of readers of Miss Hurst's novel upon

the fortunes of a servant girl whether they had ever read George Moore's *Esther Waters*, that fine work about the same humble type of character. Many had never heard of it; they knew Fannie Hurst well, but nothing of George Moore. Yet surely there is little question that when time has subjected contemporary literature to its inevitable chemistry, *Esther Waters* is far more likely to have remained in the precipitate, and *Lum-mox* (there can certainly be no question about this!) to have disappeared in the evaporation.

A volume of Edgar Allan Poe's criticisms, picked up at random one day, revealed rhapsodies over persons who no longer exist, even as names. One of them was about a poet, a Mrs. Kirkland who wrote under the name of Mary Clavers.

"Unquestionably," declared her eminent critic, "she is one of our best writers."

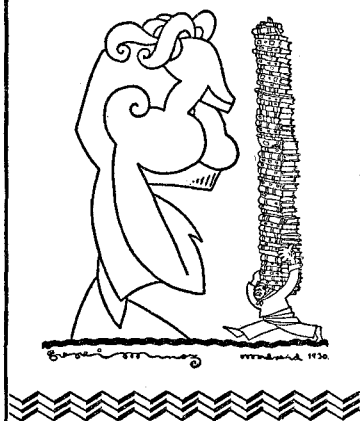
Yet I for one had never heard of Mary Clavers; and I am fairly sure that a questionnaire circulated today would demonstrate an almost universal like ignorance.



THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

by

HERSCHEL BRICKELL



ALONG with a few hundred thousand other farmers, the Landscaper has spent a good deal of time recently trying to extract some degree of comfort from the speeches of Messrs. Hoover and Roosevelt, both of whom give every evidence of being intensely interested in the plight of American agriculture. Politicians are more disturbed than ever over the plight of the farmer this year, for his numbers, already large enough, have been considerably swollen by the recent trend back to the land. Little enough can be said about tilling the soil as a business just now, but farmers eat with pleasing regularity, no matter how few clothes they may have, or how little gasoline they can buy for the old Ford. Mr. Hoover thinks that what is needed is to lend the farmer more money; what Mr. Roosevelt thinks is pretty much of anybody's guess. Neither seems to be getting much of anywhere with a problem that appears about as grave as any we face today. Grave from a number of angles; it is not inconceivable that the appalling trend toward tenant-farming may hold within itself the seeds of a revolution, for it is the property owner who

makes the warmest defender of the *status quo*.

Not long ago the Landscaper read that the national income from agriculture was something like sixteen and a half billion dollars in 1919, and that it had declined steadily year after year until it would hardly

exceed six billions in 1932, a loss of ten billions of dollars in purchasing power, which by no means tells the whole story, because in the same period everything the farmer has had to buy has mounted steadily in price! Perhaps if one said that the American farmer, in spite of improved methods of production, resulting in greater yields at smaller costs, was twenty billions of dollars worse off in 1932 than in 1919, the guess would not be far wrong. No remedies that have been offered up to now have had any effect whatever; actually there is no answer except a rise in the price of farm products with a lowering in the price of the products of industry. Perhaps something might be done by a lowering of tariffs — at least the desperate situation seems to justify the suggestion of a trial of the plan — perhaps, on the other hand, the answer is that farming is not a profitable business in terms of dollars