

# Wasp or Butterfly?

EDGAR JOHNSON

JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER himself devised the symbol of his own personality: the small hieroglyph he carefully signed to his paintings, a formalized butterfly with the writhing sting of a scorpion. The exquisite and tenuous creature summarizes not only the achievements of his art, all harmonies in half-tones and powdered nocturnal mystery, but the venomous wit of his violent controversies. The same qualities may be seen in Whistler's very figure, the slim and defiant little gamecock of a man, elegant in his long fawn-colored frock coat and pointed patent-leather pumps, tossing his well-known lock of white hair like a crest, darting his attenuated cane like a rapier, and uttering his ferocious "Ha! ha!" with the eldritch screech of a peacock. How inevitable that such an artist should have created the *Harmonies* and *Nocturnes*, the mist and darkness of his "Old Buttersea Bridge" and "The Falling Rocket"; how inevitable that such a fighter should be a master of witty and annihilating rudeness.

It is in the delineation of this brilliant bellicosity that Hesketh Pearson's "The Man Whistler"\* excels. He portrays Whistler's life in a series of ferocious scenes in which the Master quarrels with his very friends and disciples, and, like a miniature Mephistopheles, incessantly taunts the art critics and the academicians and administers one intellectual hotfoot after another to the Philistine public. Let a critic but complain that there are other colors than white in his "Symphony in White," and Whistler scathingly asks if he believes "that a symphony in F contains no other note, but shall be a continued repetition of FFF?" Another, Whistler invites to smell the varnish of a canvas. "It will enable you to discover," he explains kindly, "that the picture is an oil color." Still a third he warns against saying that a painting is not good. "You should say you don't like it, and then, you know, you are perfectly safe. Now come and have something you do like—have some whiskey."

Critics are usually fair game, of course, but Mr. Pearson is a little less than just to Ruskin in his account of the famous libel suit in which Whistler sued Ruskin for dismissing his work as "Cockney impudence . . .

flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Mr. Pearson notes that six months later Ruskin had his first attack of insanity, but explains his onslaught upon Whistler as mainly the dogmatism of a self-important moral crusader. He fails to make clear that Ruskin had already been acting strangely for some time or to point out that he libeled several other people in the same number of *Fors Clavigera* that contained his peevish outburst against Whistler; nor does Mr. Pearson in any way suggest that the man who had indignantly defended Turner's endeavors to paint light and air might, in a clearer state of mind, have understood Whistler's rendering of "the many-colored mists of the distant city."

But Mr. Pearson's injustice to Ruskin is only a part of the fact that Whistler himself is the sole figure in the biography who is dynamically

alive. Whistler's mother never becomes vivid, despite her son's devotion to her, nor do his fellow art-students in Paris, nor his later London disciples, nor any of the critics he teased and derided, nor the patrons with whom he furiously quarreled, nor, oddly enough in view of Mr. Pearson's excellent biography of Wilde, even "the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar." And Whistler's own pugilistic vitality would gain in significance if he were seen trouncing more than a crowd of lay-figures.

IN WHISTLER himself, indeed, there is a mystery that Mr. Pearson does not successfully resolve: the secret of his extraordinary and caustic virulence. There is nothing to explain it in Mr. Pearson's rather scanty account of Whistler's childhood and youth in Russia, in Connecticut, or at West Point, nor does it really appear in his art-student days, when his occasional sarcasms are no more than a high-spirited gaiety and his quarrels no more frequent or violent than might be normal in any mettlesome youngster.

His first appearances in the London art world were relatively successful; then, suddenly, in his thirties he

**THE AUTHOR:** Hesketh Pearson, a high-speed British biography machine built like a six-foot-two gentleman, has been writing someone or other's life story since he himself was fourteen. His first readers, an intimate circle of other Pearsons, were treated to periodic biographical outbursts Hesketh apparently was then fond of calling "Summaries of famous men's Lives." That phrase evidently has struck generations of dust-jacket writers as possessing just the right combination of cuteness and things-to-come so that, whenever it is Pearson's turn to be biographed, it is inevitably thrown in, just the way the cherry tree is in Washington's life. Biography has always fascinated Pearson, and, back in the Twenties—January 27, 1927, to be exact—he said he'd written one book, to quote *The Times*, "because of his general interest in public men and of his desire to entertain and amuse people." Pearson issued that pronouncement from, of all places, the witness stand during a literary trial in London. Pearson, it seems, had written a gossipy little something called "The Whispering Gallery," published anonymously by a British house. The house had been given to understand that an ex-diplomat had written it. When the book appeared, protest swept London. The book was promptly withdrawn, and Pearson was arrested, charged with obtaining a check for £225 on false pretenses. He was eventually acquitted. By that time, the book was doing splendidly in New York. Over the years, the Pearson circle has grown to take in a couple of continents' worth of readers. Today, at sixty-six, Pearson has written more than a dozen full-length biographies; in the last decade alone, five have appeared—"GBS," "Wilde," "Dickens," "GBS: A Postscript," and "Whistler." Like any writer worth his salt, Pearson has been many things: shipping-clerk, salesman, soldier, and free-lance journalist. He was even an actor, appearing in New York in 1930 in G. B. Stern's "The Matriarch." For some reason, he was not mentioned in Brooks Atkinson's review. Just about then, however, Pearson quit the stage to devote himself single-mindedly to the writing of biography, and he hasn't put man down since.

—BERNARD KALEB.



\* THE MAN WHISTLER. By Hesketh Pearson. New York: Harper & Bros. 276 pp. \$3.75.

started on what became his lifelong career of provoking misunderstanding by vituperation and insult. Though Mr. Pearson's attempts to account for this sudden violence in terms of Whistler's self-imposed exile from America, his rootlessness in Europe ("a citizen without a city . . . a tropical flower in a temperate climate"), his unfashionable originality as an artist, his reaction against an inborn puritanism, are all suggestive, they do not pierce to the heart of the mystery. Alexander Pope was no less waspish though at home, prosperous, and the most popular poet of his day. We see Whistler very clearly in Mr. Pearson's pages, this sparkling and stinging little figure, but it remains a fascinating enigma; to the end the scorpion-butterfly is also partly a sphinx.

Mr. Pearson succeeds far better in presenting Whistler's services to art. He justly emphasizes the fact that Whistler "initiated the Japanese influence which was to revolutionize interior decoration throughout England." And Mr. Pearson does Whistler the service of allowing him to speak for himself in voicing his principles:

"One wants the spirit, the aroma, don't ye know? If you paint a young girl, youth should scent the room; if a thinker, thought should be in the air; an aroma of personality. . . . And with all that, it should be a picture, a pattern, an arrangement, a harmony, such as only a painter could conceive." For the anecdotal or literary in painting Whistler had nothing but scorn. Of his own "Harmony in Grey and Gold," a snow scene with a black figure moving through the dark to a brightly lighted tavern, he explained, "Now that to me is a harmony of color only. I care nothing for the past, present, or future of the black figure—placed there because the black was wanted at that very spot.

"All I know is that my combination of grey and gold satisfies my artistic feelings." And sometimes in presenting the vision of his art, the painter rose to heights of enchanted eloquence: "When the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili . . . then . . . Nature, who, for once has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master—her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her."

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# Above the Stream of Time

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FOR the third time in our history, a movement for recording in systematic form the writings of our major statesmen seems lifting its tidal current to a crest. The *London Times Literary Supplement* recently remarked upon the superior diligence of Americans in this special area. Where, it asked, are the Collected Writings of Peel, of Palmerston, of Disraeli, of Gladstone? Why have not Englishmen done for them what Americans have now done for so many leaders in the long line from Benjamin Franklin to Theodore Roosevelt?

Let us not vaunt ourselves too hastily upon a supposed superiority to British and French scholarship or enterprise. The comparatively short span of American history, and the desire of a patriotic (or nationalistic) population to endow itself as rapidly as possible with a dignified past, help account for our diligence. Then, too, statesmanship has until lately been our one field of great distinction. British scholarship has busied itself with complete critical editions of the British literary classics, for example; classics for which we have no match. It has had to reach far back into the past with such tremendous documentary compilations as the *Rolls Series*. As our garden is so small, and as it contains few glowing beds of literary flowers, political leaders have received more attention; particularly since several of them—Franklin, Jefferson, and Lincoln in particular—appertain to American literature as much as Burke pertains to British. Perhaps, too, our political habits and Presidential system of government exalt the individual leader a bit more than the quieter British party strug-

gle and the British ministerial system.

But whatever the reason, we have done exceptionally well with the papers of our political chieftains, and, what is more, in three successive waves of effort have constantly improved our methods. Jared Sparks, the leader and inspirer of our first school of editors, represented what we may frankly call the Filiopietistic Era. He rose to prominence at a period when the Fathers of the nation, regarded rather realistically by the Sons, began to be held in special veneration by the Grandsons. Beginning with the writings of George Washington in twelve volumes, 1834-37, and the works of Benjamin Franklin in ten volumes, 1836-40, Sparks gave the young republic more than a hundred volumes.

Sparks was an explorer rather than a scientist. Though indefatigable in his researches, untiring in his travels, and skilful in his selections, he was inexact and old-fashioned in method. Celebrating our heroic age, he could not bear to let vulgar touches mar the classic pose of his heroes; and his editorial looseness infected his contemporaries. When the editor of the Congressionally-supported edition of James Madison's "Letters and Other Writings" found young Madison, in need of money, writing his father, "Unless liberal principles prevail on this occasion, I shall be under the necessity of selling a negro," what did he do with so embarrassing a statement? He simply struck it out.

After the Filiopietistic Era, the Centennial Era; for it was natural that a revival of memorial fervor should attend the celebrations of the years 1776-89. Here the leader was a figure who deserves more credit for his varied contributions to American culture than he has received: George Haven Putnam. He had heroically proved his devotion to country in the Civil War. In his memoirs he tells us that his publishing firm set to work in 1884 by persuading Henry Cabot Lodge,

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