

A Half Hour With A Great Man

Margaret Duvall

Seated before a massive fireplace glowing with the light of burning fagots and cottonwood logs, I found myself gazing almost intently at my guest of the evening. A young man of perhaps thirty years, Charles Dickens had already experienced fame. Terminating a somewhat strenuous week of receptions at Boston upon his first arrival in America in 1842, he welcomed a retreat to the warmth of my fireside, and I was granted a few golden moments with him before his return trip to England.

Watching that greatest of all English writers of the age as his dark, pensive eyes rested on the embers aglow in the grate, I felt a surge of inadequacy envelop my being. Here was a man whose very life was mellowed by poverty and humiliation, by constant suffering and misfortunes. Once his shock of thick black hair had rested on the pallet in the debtor's prison of Marshalsea, or in the squalid courts of London which he was prone to call his home. Yet, in face of all "the never-to-be-forgotten misery of that old time" above anything else he wished to be back in London again tonight.

At last he broke the impending silence, and a somewhat plaintive note crept into his voice.

"In this great universe of ours, there is either life or mere existence. In England, our philosophy is to live, and live abundantly, 'sans' pretense, 'sans' fame, in our own realm. There is an unwritten law of unity and stewardship; we know suffering and hardships, but it is sweet when shared with the mass. In your country you know no life, you have no philosophy....you merely exist. You are enmeshed in a turmoil of aggression....a labyrinth to which there is no end."

I tried to grasp the significance

of these laconic statements, as I could see that Dickens was engrossed in profound thoughts, which I hoped sincerely, would justify such degenerate remarks.

"You must realize, sir," I ventured "that we in America are initiating a new era; we are a young, perhaps aggressive nation, but we are ever on the alert for new and higher ideals. By living the independent life of which you speak, we establish stronger and broader foundations upon which to build our future generations. In so doing we have moulded a rich heritage for ages to come; one grown not from the iron hand of monarchs, but the hard fought efforts and cherished hopes of the people themselves."

After this not so much contradictory but explanatory retort, I waited expectantly for Dickens' reaction, and it was not long in coming.

"My good fellow," he entreated, "you are more than justified in launching your beloved nation on the idealistic campaign, the like of which you speak. I readily see that I am of the old school. Where we live on the tradition and the past, you live on the prophecies of today and expectations of tomorrow. You'll agree with me, however, that everywhere human nature remains the same. Perhaps I have been disillusioned." His voice grew softly reminiscent, and his gaze shifted to the flames.

"Once in England, I met an American promoter, and with his guidance I invested in land lots in Cairo, Illinois. He put before me a **vision of rich, rolling plains, a flourishing city**, and on either side a bubbling current of cool water. It was a veritable Eden, and I placed within it a large share of my slender means. Not long afterwards, strange rumors

reached me about the true worth of this land, so I planned to see Cairo for myself. I came....to find only a struggling settlement in mud flats, a dismal swamp, and half-built houses rotting away...." He drifted off into silent reveries, but presently resumed.

Right then, as I watched Dickens wax strong in his vehemence, would I have injected a contrite objection, but some magnetic force ever held me within its bonds. These conflicting emotions, he must have sensed, as he turned slightly, and looked at me admonishingly.

"Sir, I hope you will bear with me in this abrupt manner, but the clay from which I sprang is instilled so within me, that it reveals itself at times like this, and my sentiments run havoc with my saner self.

"Again and again I find it so hard to comprehend; I grope about for a solution, but there seems to be no logical sequence. As I have written books in the light of reform, in like manner would I be inspired by America's adoption of slavery as an institution to flaunt its ignoble theme before the world. Myself drawn from the thralls of poverty, I have a deep understanding of the most morbid humanity."

As he spoke with so much pathos of a tragic life of which haunting memories yet remained, the embers of the log-fire seemed to dim, and a pall hung over the room.

"Now," he continued, "I am on the brink of life, yet I find my place in the crowd, especially the London crowd, I know them all in their wayward, lovable, comical variety."

Then, as if released from melancholy, he arose, and in the semi-darkness took my none-too-steady hand. "Forgive me," he said, "if I have exposed you to ennui or resentment, for I may never encumber you with my accusations again in this country. Should I return, I shall be reminded of the generous hospitality

that I was once offered in your home. Until then, I bid you a most sincere 'adieu'."

In parting, I again took his hand and said, "Sir, you shall never know what you have done for me tonight. There is no means within my narrow life by which I could ever repay you. I can only wish for you a safe homeward voyage, and the abundance of success that goes to all great men."

When Charles Dickens left that evening, I closed the door on a great episode in my life. Raised in the heart of London, he learned to love the everyday people, and they the men in the street, will keep his memory ever aglow; to them he committed it. It is that way of accepting mankind with a large hearted toleration and love, and even when it is not wholly admirable, that has endeared him to the hearts of generation after generation of readers. He teaches mankind the age-old lovely lessons of the understanding heart.

Hobby Horses

Doris Goldsmith

Nothing is sweeter to me than the aroma of a stable. Perhaps it is because a horse is not a complicated machine but a form of "nature in the raw" that I adore.

I can neither understand why "Tapo," my favorite horse, plays his queer pranks, nor can I unravel the mystery of any mechanism.

In short, my hobby is horse-back riding. I have been an enthusiast for many years though I learned to ride only a year ago. I admit that when I went to "Peter Pan" for my first lesson I was frightened to the toes of my boots. But the horse I rode, though I didn't know it, was fourteen years old and had corns. I wasn't aware of these facts and