

I stole an ashamed glance at Joe, who was also looking at the kind little woman and the grotesque little figure by her side, smiling at them, as if he were really glad they were there also. I knew then that I had learned a part of the real meaning of Christmas, and I suddenly felt much older and wiser.

## Greatness

Don Wall

**T**HE NIGHT after former President Kennedy's assassination, newspapers around the world acclaimed him as a "truly great man." More recently, President Johnson referred to Winston Churchill as a great individual. Greatness implies an outstanding accomplishment and a marked superiority over contemporaries in the same field. Abstract and somewhat arbitrary, this quality of greatness conanates from the lives of a relative handful of history's multitudes.

The first necessary quality is an avid interest in a certain subject in which one aspires toward success. Without this most elementary ingredient, one neither thinks of nor devotes time and energy to an area of endeavor. Great men of this century furnish a primary indication of the importance of interest. When Felix Frankfurter, former United States Supreme Court Justice, landed in New York from Austria, he was fascinated by law. Overcoming a complete ignorance of the English language, he finished law school in his seventh year in this country. His interest in and knowledge of law recently caused Chief Justice Earl Warren to comment that Frankfurter has done more than any other one person in the last sixty years to interpret the law for a changing nation. Arnold Toynbee, the eminent British historian, would never have written his twenty-four volumes on the development of civilization if he had not been intrigued by the history of man's existence and the characteristics of civilization. In the same manner, Charles Hard Townes' maintaining a dedicated interest in high-energy light beams enabled him to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom last year for research in maser and laser devices. Other great men have been engrossed in several fields; Aristotle's pen recorded religious, political, biological, and economic interests. Those who lack this inquisitive concern glide over the surface of education, never diving below the easy, the apparent, to the real challenges of deeper thought. Every evening they flop into an overstuffed easy chair and digest their least soluble mental meal of the day—the nightly weather report. His most profound interest being in how much he still owes the finance company for last year's Christmas presents, Mr. Average America cannot achieve greatness.

But an active interest cannot by itself result in greatness. There must also be an aptitude, or mental capacity to succeed. Without this ability, the world's most dedicated and zealous interest cannot bring favorable results. For example, a high school friend of mine hoped to become a nurse, but blood horrified her, and in her introductory biology class she became ill while dissecting a frog. She thus lacked the aptitude for a career of helping the sick. Alvin Hansen provides an illustration of interest combined with aptitude. He would not be listed among the foremost modern economists if he had not been able to calculate and graph relationships among marginal consumptive propensity, personal income, industrial depreciation allowances, and percentage increase in housing starts. Ernest Hemingway needed both interest and the ability to write clearly and effectively to establish his literary reputation. Jean Monnet, for all his economic genius and theories of European development, could never have initiated the European Economic Community without his organizational and political ability. All of these people combined interest and aptitude to achieve greatness.

But a third component was also necessary. One must associate, either physically or mentally, through seeing or hearing, with the greats. Such an association stimulates latent interests and develops hidden talents. Plato, challenged by the Sophist doctrines of Protagoras, studied under Socrates and eventually joined his teacher as one of the three outstanding Hellenic philosophers. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of today's great religious thinkers, was to a large extent influenced by the Christian Existentialist theories of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian of a century ago. A literary example stems from Thomas Wolfe, who studied the writings of James Joyce. English professors constantly inform their pupils that a writer must read; only by mentally mixing with the best authors can a potential writer develop the syllabic rhythm and diction required in good compositions. Churchill and Kennedy, prior to their seeking public office, had both studied various political theories and associated with previous greats. But greatness is not limited to mental exercises. Rico Carty, one of professional baseball's most promising newcomers, worked under established all-star Henry Aaron. Such association definitely inspires greatness.

This last factor is perhaps the most important. Certainly aptitude must exist, but it remains unused unless interest evokes it, and association with the great is the surest way to stimulate interest. The mental and physical challenge provided by mixing with someone superior to oneself generates interest and enables one to develop his talents. Grade school basketball coaches almost universally encourage their young charges to play against older boys and cultivate their interests and abilities. Few basketball players, however, receive All-America notices. Similarly, memory records few entries in the classification of "great." Many people do not have the aptitude, but most do not have adequate initial interest to associate with the great.