

Some Literary Celebrities

BY G. K. CHESTERTON

THE first great Victorian I ever met, I met very early, though only for a brief interview: Thomas Hardy. I was then a quite obscure and shabby young writer awaiting an interview with a publisher. And the really remarkable thing about Hardy was this: that he might have been himself an obscure and shabby young writer awaiting a publisher; even a new writer awaiting his first publisher. Yet he was already famous everywhere; he had written his first and finest novels culminating in "Tess"; he had expressed his queer personal pessimism in the famous passage about the President of the Immortals. He had already the wrinkle of worry on his elvish face that might have made a man look old; and yet, in some strange way, he seemed to me very young. If I say as young as I was, I mean as simply pragmatist and even priggish as I was. He did not even avoid the topic of his alleged pessimism; he defended it, but somehow with the innocence of a boys' debating-club. In short, he was in a sort of gentle fuss about his pessimism, just as I was about my optimism. He said something like: "I know people say I'm a pessimist; but I don't believe I am naturally; I like a lot of things so much; but I could never get over the idea that it would be better for us to be without both the pleasures and the pains; and that the best experience would be some sort of sleep." I have always had a weakness for arguing with anybody; and this involved all that contemporary nihilism against which I was then in revolt; and for about five minutes, in a publisher's office, I actually argued with Thomas Hardy. I argued that non-existence is not an experience; and there can be no question of preferring it or being satisfied with it. Honestly, if I had been quite simply a crude young man, and nothing else, I should have thought his whole argument very superficial and even silly. But I did not think him either superficial or silly.

For this was the rather tremendous truth about Hardy: that he had humility. My friends who knew him better



Howard Coster

G. K. CHESTERTON

have confirmed my early impression; Jack Squire told me that Hardy in his last days of glory as a Grand Old Man would send poems to the *Mercury* and offer to alter or withdraw them if they were not suitable. He defied the gods and dared the lightning and all the rest of it; but the great Greeks would have seen that there was no thunderbolt for him, because he had no insolence. For what heaven hates is not impiety but the pride of impiety. The whole case for Hardy is that he had the sincerity and simplicity of the village atheist; that is, that he valued atheism as a truth and not a triumph. He was the victim of that decay of our agricultural culture, which gave men bad religion and no philosophy. But he was right in saying, as he said essentially to me all those years ago, that he could enjoy things, including better philosophy or religion. There come back to me four lines, written by an Irish lady in my own little paper:

Who can picture the scene at the starry portals,
Truly, imagination fails,
When the pitiless President of the

Immortals
Shows unto Thomas the print
of the nails?

I hope it is not profane to say that this hits the right nail on the head. In such a case, the second Thomas would do exactly what Prometheus and Satan never thought of doing: he would pity God.

I must leap a long stretch of years before I come to my meeting with the other great Victorian novelist so often bracketed with Hardy; for by that time I had made some sort of journalistic name, which was responsible for my wife and myself being invited to visit George Meredith. But even across the years, I felt the curious contrast. Hardy was a well, covered with the weeds of a stagnant period of scepticism, in my view; but with truth at the bottom of it; or anyhow with truthfulness at the bottom of it. But Meredith was a fountain. He had exactly the shock and shining radiation of a fountain in his own garden where he entertained us. He was already an old man, with the

white pointed beard and the puff of white hair like thistle-down; but that also seemed to radiate. He was deaf; but the reverse of dumb. He was not humble; but I should never call him proud. He still managed to be a third thing, which is almost as much the opposite of being proud; he was vain. He was a very old man; and he was still magnificently vain. He had all those indescribable touches of a quite youthful vanity; even, for instance, to the point of preferring to dazzle women rather than men; for he talked the whole time to my wife rather than to me. We did not talk to him very much; partly because he was deaf but much more because he was not dumb. On an

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RICH LAND, POOR LAND
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honest review, I doubt whether we could either of us have got in a word or two edgeways. He talked and talked, and drank ginger-beer, which he assured us with glorious gaiety he had learned to like quite as much as champagne.

Meredith was not only full of life, but he was full of lives. His vitality had that branching and begetting genius of the novelist, which is always inventing new stories about strange people. He was not like most old novelists; he was interested in what was novel. He did not live in the



SIR JAMES BARRIE

books he had written; he lived in the books he had not written. He described a number of novels that were really novel; especially one about the tragedy of Parnell. I do not think I agreed very much with his interpretation, for he held that Parnell might easily have recovered popularity, if he had been capable of wanting it; but that he was naturally secretive and solitary. But I doubt whether that Irish squire was really any more secretive than any number of speechless English squires, who were at the same moment conducting exactly the same sort of sex intrigue, and would have been equally angry and equally inarticulate if they had been discovered. Only they never were discovered. For there was no hope that the discovery might delay the deliverance of a Christian nation. But that was the quality that struck me personally about Meredith. Ever on the jump, he could jump to conclusions; so great a man could never be called superficial; but in a sense, being so swift means being superficial.

The name of James Barrie dates also from my youth, though of course he was younger than Hardy; he has lived to be my very good friend; but he is of all friends the least egotistical; and I connect him largely with intensely interesting memories of these other men and their contemporaries. He remains especially as a witness to the greatness of Meredith; in a world which has rather strangely forgotten him; but he also told me many tales of the men I never met, such as Stevenson and Henley and Wilde. But there is one impression that has been left in my mind by such memories of such men; and that is the strangely fugitive character of the controversies



W. B. YEATS

even about the greatest literary men. Like anybody writing any memoirs, I find that my first difficulty is to convey how immensely important certain individuals appeared at certain epochs. For those men are no longer topics, even when they are still classics. I remember Barrie giving me a most amusing account of a violent scene of literary controversy, in which Henley hurled his crutch across the room and hit some other eminent literary critic in the stomach. That will illustrate a certain importance that seemed to attach to certain intellectual tastes and preferences. For this piece of creative critical self-expression was apparently provoked by the statement, during a discussion about Ibsen and Tolstoy, that one of these great men was great enough to hang the other on his watch-chain. But what strikes me as the grand and grim joke of the whole business, is that the narrator had apparently entirely forgotten whether Ibsen was to hang Tolstoy on his watch-chain or Tolstoy to hang Ibsen on his watch-chain. From which I venture to infer that neither of those giants now seems quite so gigantic to anybody as they then seemed to somebody.

Of course I have only noted here a name or two, because they are the most famous; I do not even say that they are the most worthy of fame. For instance, supposing that we each keep a private collection of our pet pessimists, I have always been more intellectually impressed by A. E. Housman than by Thomas Hardy. I do not mean that I have been impressed by anybody with the intellectual claims of pessimism, which I always thought was piffle as well as poison; but it seems to me that Housman had, more than Hardy, a certain authority of great English literature; which is all the more classic because its English is such very plain English. I could never quite digest Hardy as a poet, much as I admire him as a novelist; whereas Housman seems to me one of the one or two great classic poets of our time. I have had both friends

and fellowship in discontent with the socialists; indeed, I was not discontented with them about conditions with which they were discontented; but rather about the prospects with which they were contented. And there was a sort of official optimism, when the collectivist ticket-collector of the Fabian tram called out, "Next stop, Utopia," at which something in me not merely heathen was always

stirred to a sympathy with the words of that high heathen genius:

The troubles of our proud and angry
dust
Are from eternity and shall not fail.

As everyone knows, the poet was also a professor, and one of the first authorities on the old pagan literature. I cherish a story about him which happens to concern this double character of the classical and the poetical. It may be a familiar story, it may be a false story. It describes the start of an after-dinner speech he made at Trinity, Cambridge; and whoever made it or invented it had a superb sense of style.

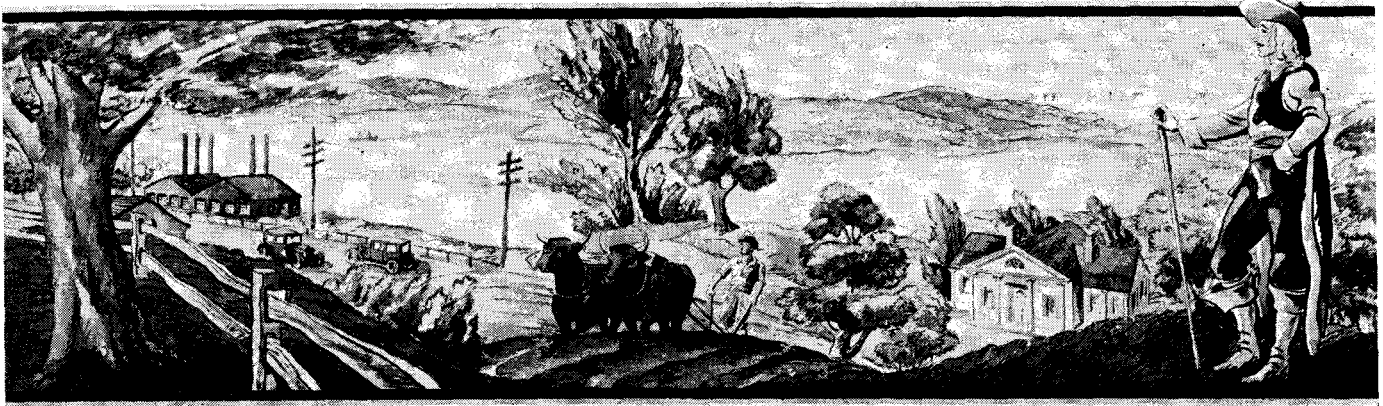
This great College, of this ancient University, has seen some strange sights. It has seen Wordsworth drunk and Porson sober. And here am I, a better poet than Porson, and a better scholar than Wordsworth, betwixt and between.



HARDY AT 21

I have known one or two isolated cases also of the mere man of imagination. It is always difficult to give even an outline of men of this kind; precisely because an outline is always the line at which a thing touches other things outside itself. I have already suggested very vaguely, for instance, something of the position of W. B. Yeats; but that is precisely because Yeats does touch some things outside his own thoughts; and suggests controversies about Theosophy or Mythology or Irish politics. But he who is simply the imaginative man can only be found in the images he makes and not in the portraits of him that other people make. Thus I could mention a number of detached and definite things about Mr. Walter de la Mare; only that they would not, strictly speaking, be about him. I could say that he has a dark Roman profile rather like a bronze eagle, or that he lives in Taplow not far from Taplow Court, where I have met him and many other figures in the landscape of this story. I could mention the fact that I once found a school, somewhere in the wilds of the Old Kent Road, if I remember right, where all the little girls preserved a sort of legend of Mr. de la Mare, as of a fairy uncle, because he had once lectured there ever so long ago. I've no idea what spells he may have worked on that remote occasion; but he had certainly, in the words of an elder English poet, knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road. But even a thing like this has not strictly speaking anything to do with the subject; the centre and fullness of the subject. And I have never been able to say anything that is in that

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JACKET DESIGN FOR "THREE BAGS FULL."

Pageant of Upper New York

THREE BAGS FULL. By Roger Burlingame. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1936. \$3.

Reviewed by WALTER D. EDMONDS

THE epidemic of regional literature that has long been raging in the South, and which recently attacked the state of Maine, seems now to be working its way into New York. Not New York City, which is constantly being covered by its own excited protagonists; but the full, rich panorama that is upstate. It is not easy for the metropolitan to recall that New York City, after the Revolution, was rapidly giving way to Philadelphia as the "first" city and that it was only saved by an upstate measure which its representatives fought, literally, to the last ditch—namely the Canal Act that started the building of the Erie Canal.

Upstate, far more than the city, has been representative of the whole of America. It has had its boom in Western land; it had its slave-holding aristocracy; it made possible and watched the passage of the immigration that in large measure settled the Middle West and the prairie country; it took a most active part in the maturing of the telegraph; its influence on railroading needs for evidence only the name New York Central. The historian of industry can find no better field for study than the main line factory towns. Agriculture, also, in a limited dimension, followed the national trend, with its westward passage of wheat.

Nor can one, I suspect, find a single state more widely mirroring the humanity of this country. It has been the home, birthplace, or incubator of innumerable religious movements, planned societies, and secret organizations, and the refuge of groups of men and women who have for generations clung to and maintained their ancestral ideals.

It is such a group that Mr. Burlingame, in his fine, full novel of the upper counties, "Three Bags Full," has chosen to portray. He is well aware of the sweep

of history through his region; but his imaginary Van Huyten family and their friends, like their historical prototypes, were only vaguely aware of the events maturing beyond their little lake township. Hendrik Van Huyten first saw the lake (recognizably the one at Cazenovia) in 1795, and he fell in love with it. He brought with him his young wife, a brother-in-law of liberal instincts, and plenty of money to invest in unopened country; and his lusty nature made him picture himself as the patroon, the feudal overlord, not only of the lake, which he reserved to himself, but of the poor settlers who followed along the road he and his servants had opened.

These settlers, at the insistence of his brother-in-law, he was willing to help so long as they kept in their places. For over seventy years they had no access to the water, and during that time, he and his descendants maintained a lobby in Albany to prevent the reopening of the Indian trail that by law constituted a highway to the shore. At first the settlers were willing to accept their position and felt pride in the Van Huytens' grandeur; but as they gradually acquired financial independence, they began a stubborn struggle to assert their rights.

It took three generations before they made headway. The struggle attained a singular poignance (paralleled in more than one actual case) through the off-shooting from the patroon's family of a black sheep strain. These disinherited descendants took a common name—Hooten—and married in the town, and for nearly a century held a strange position of relationship with both the "high" and the "low" parties, persecuted by the former and barely countenanced by the latter, and continually furnishing the focus in the struggle for the lake. How the struggle finally ended is the thread on which a long, powerful, and deeply moving novel is strung.

To maintain a reader's interest in a single book covering a hundred and thirty years seems to me a rare feat of writing;

and Mr. Burlingame has managed it with a sure skill that does not once descend to mere dexterity. He approaches the story and carries it through with insight and compassion through the rising of each new generation. By this means he preserves a sense of the present flowing through his pages, even though his scene is a backwater of rock-ribbed conservatism.

All of his characters are flesh and blood: such lusty flesh as the original Hendrik Van Huyten, who found the lake, established the feudal tradition, and begot both lines, the high and the low. The picture of the early life of a man of established wealth in a wilderness paradise of game will not easily be forgotten. Neither will the portrait of the first black sheep, his grandson, Will Hooten, whose adventures furnish a brief but vivid glimpse of life on the Erie Canal. But best of all are the modern-day descendants, Ruth and Dick, who took the working out of the long bitterness into their own hands.

The tracing of this family's history, however, is only a piece of the book. There are the townfolk of the slowly growing town, and better yet the family of country doctors who, generation after generation, looked after both lake shore and village street. And there is the pathetic "outlander," Mary Brice, who for years labored towards the establishment of the town's rights and who, when she was finally victorious, was so dismayed at the result of her labors that she could no longer bring herself to live upon the scene.

It seems to me that in his six hundred pages, Mr. Burlingame has presented a family of living idiosyncrasies together with the growth of a nation around them. His skill and honesty remind me inescapably of Galsworthy's in the long saga of the Forsytes. But Mr. Burlingame is American, solidly and strongly so, as is his book, for which I am glad.

Walter D. Edmonds as the author of "Rome Haul" brought the Erie Canal into fiction. His latest book, "Drums Along the Mohawk," a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, is a story of upper New York State during the Revolutionary period.