

# "Vera's got tickets on Bob Foster",

said Uncle Chris.



Vera, my niece, was staying with me. Intelligent girl, Vera. Got an enquiring mind; but last Saturday night... "I can't make head-nor-tail of Company reports," Vera confessed.

"Oh?" I said and she passed me the newspaper. From habit I almost fell back on the old phrase "You-shouldn't-worry-your-pretty-head" etc., but you can't say that to a girl like Vera. She's pretty, but level-headed, too. So I took out my pipe and looked at her. "And what," I said, "makes you so interested in this particular report?"

"Well Bob's..."

"Ah," I said triumphantly, "Bob Foster works there, eh?" Vera was not perturbed.

"Bob told me his firm made a whacking big profit this year yet this report says they made only 4.8%. Who's right?"

"Probably both," I said. "Profit after material, labour and overheads are paid is one sort of profit, but real profit is what's left in the kitty after money for new machines, new premises and research has been put aside."

"Yes, but what happens to the 4.8% left?"

"Well, let's see..." I looked again at the report. "3.5% was paid out to the hundreds of shareholders for loaning their money, and the rest—1.3%—was put aside like an umbrella for a rainy day and you, young lady, should be glad they did for it means job security to Bob and thousands like him."

"Yes", I said after a while, "Steady Profits—that's a good sign."

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### "They're Human After All"

BERNARD SHAW once said, or allowed one of his characters to say, that there are "only two sorts of people: the efficient and the inefficient." This was one of those epigrammatic statements so obviously untrue that they scarcely need to be argued. The varieties of mankind are infinite. Every man is a little world in himself, unique and irreplaceable; and our uniqueness makes us interesting, not only to ourselves, but to other people. There may indeed be broad classifications: the good and the bad, the cheerful and the solemn, the clever and the dull, the strong and the weak; and physiologists, going a little further, may explain the differences by the distribution of genes and the operation of endocrine glands. But physical balances can be altered; an individual is never completely known, least of all to himself, and in the best and worst of us are unexplored places. Can it be surprising, then, if so much of our conversation is about people? The topic is followed hungrily; and if the subject is far removed from us, on an eminence in public life or in the arts, the interest is sharpened by a curiosity which can never be satisfied. These are a few reasons why listeners may take notice of a BBC series, *As I Knew Him*, described this week on page 16.

Famous men are elusive in different ways. If they are much before the public, depending on popular support or suffrage, they sometimes learn to play a part. The artist or scientist, who works privately, is better able to be himself at all times, though he too may find that he needs defences. Thomas Hardy, the subject of the first talk in the BBC series, had a reputation for aloofness; and although St. John Ervine is able to explain that Hardy "was neither

silent nor reclusive in congenial company," he goes on to admit that reticence "was the texture of his life." A further difficulty in understanding artists is raised by the image of themselves thrown into their work. Men may be reticent in public, but they seem to tell everything when they work with words, colours or music; and it is therefore surprising and a little dismaying to discover that the comedian is a sad fellow at his own fireside, or that the thinker with a tragic view of human destiny is an incurable optimist in his private dealings. A great man is seldom fortunate enough to have at his elbow a born reporter like Boswell. He is seen in different circumstances by different people, so that reports of him are mixed and fragmentary.

If he writes copiously in journal or letters, he is sometimes betrayed—as Carlyle was—by a habit of self-dramatisation, or by a subtle process of concealment. Even when a man's life and work have left a definite imprint, a time will come for new appraisal. Reputations that promised to be secure are found to be crumbling, and men who in their own day were condemned or neglected may be brought out for a more liberal interpretation. Moral climates change, and judgments with them. Today it is easier to keep in touch with posterity. Broadcasting and the cinema are preserving the voice and the look of the great. Yet it is still true that the anecdote or personal impression, passed on by friends, can bring us closest to men of genius. What we want most of all is to see and hear these people when they can forget the public. They are then a little nearer to our own level, and our vanity is soothed by the discovery that, in the words of a rather inept radio title, "they're human after all."

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