A CONVERSATION IN EBURY STREET

By Ernest Brennecke

MR. GEORGE MOORE was annoyed — oh, definitely, visibly annoyed. It was most embarrassing. I was at first quite sure it was because of my intrusion into his morning's tasks, whatever they might be; the little housekeeper had told me that Mr. Moore was "most awfully busy, but come in, come in — he wants to see you".

He had drifted into the front sitting room, somehow, had forced me down into his most comfortable chair (which made me frightfully uncomfortable), and then wouldn't let me sit in it because I had continually to jump up and follow him about: to his garden in the rear, to his front windows, then to offer advice on the rehanging of his precious pictures.

Then I was sure it was the picture hanging man with his ladder and dusting cloth who was furrowing the ruddy Moore brow, adding creaking overtones of petulance to the Moore voice and bristling up the drooping white Moore mustache.

But, dear me, no. It was only the weather.

"What have you done with the sunshine? The spring is over, and it hasn't brought us any sunshine. I want the sunshine!" There was the burden of the dear, polished, seasoned Don Juan's complaint. . . .

And so, like many another gloriously entertaining dialogue, our conversation of that dampish London morning

began from the most banal of all possible topics.

"So many things are the spring's fault", he sighed as the last painting was dusted and hung. And he slid into his second best chair with a last glance over his shoulder at the grey drizzle and the ebon-gleaming street outside.

"Why do your American censors jump on my books?" He was glancing at his "Memoirs of My Dead Life" which was sticking out of my top coat pocket. "Why don't they censor the spring instead? That would be far more logical. It isn't a naughty book that gets into a young chap's blood and sets him a-rolling among the primroses. It's the spring!

"Youths, vigorous swains — you and I, for instance — don't have to read bawdy books; we don't even want to, when we feel the springtime driving the sap up through our bones. It's the wicked old men, including the censors, if you please, who need the books."

My brain was playing idiotic tricks on me that morning. "Alice in Wonderland" seemed to be bubbling within me like champagne, while Mr. Moore's discourse "trickled through my head like water through a sieve". Like the old White Knight — ah, of course! Mr. Moore had instantly reminded me of the dear old White Knight — my thoughts were playing about regardless. "Do you think, at your age, it is right? Do you think, at your age, it is right? Do you think . . ." The line drifted mumblingly through my head, again and again.

I must have mumbled it aloud, or else Mr. Moore had established *rapport* with me and was reading my thoughts, for when I put my shattered attention together again, I became aware of him, saying, "It's quite all right, always, to do anything that seems desirable and all right to you, no matter what anyone else thinks. The only real sin, the sin against the Holy Ghost, I dare say, is to do what you yourself feel is wrong. Yes, therein lay the great tragedy of poor George Eliot's conscience stricken life."

Cantankerousness was in the air, I suppose. "All right, all right! Do whatever you want, by all means, if it will save your soul", I cried. "But why write it all out in novels, why print the boresome stuff as prose fiction? I'm sick and tired of autobiographical lucubrations of indiscreet young men, masquerading in every bookshop as serious imaginative work. It drives me right back to Defoe and Fielding for consolation. I never want to write a novel until I can write about an old man. But I may write straight autobiography."

Mr. Moore waved a graceful hand and became very suave. "Yes, you're right. A young newspaper man in trouble will always write a story of a young newspaper man in trouble, a young poet with a bad manuscript will write a yarn about a young poet with a — good manuscript, and so on. I've always believed that autobiography should be written and sold purely as such. But you've got to make them juicy; old men like them juicy, publishers must have them juicy."

Again I objected. "I recall a literary luncheon in New York", I narrated, "at which one of your own American publishers delivered an address. Mr. John S. Sumner also happened to be present. Well, your publisher vigorously attacked the popular thesis that money is made by 'questionable' books. The risqué didn't coin money, according to him. On the contrary, it lost money. So perhaps you do him an injustice. It

was all very high art, anyway, and designed (he said) to elevate the æsthetic sensibilities of the reader, not to debase them. All educational, you know. He advocated frank education in the 'facts of life' for the very young. For children, even. Said that little girls should be admitted to the spectacle of their papas under the shower bath. Why censor life? . . . The following day one of our unregenerate columnists came out with a proposal to raise a fund for the erection of public shower baths in Central Park for the benefit of little girls who had no fathers, or whose fathers didn't have shower baths! All in the name of education, you see."

"Oh, yes, education." Moore slid gracefully into reminiscence. "I knew a young chap — a university man. He used to write me letters. When he left the university, he started working in a coal pit. Then, one day, he came to see me. 'Why do you work in a coal pit, with your university training?' I asked him. 'I simply must get back to life, somehow.' That was his explanation. But I think your American universities must be better than ours, more lively. I've never been to America. I should like to come over, though."

"Don't think of it!" I warned him. "America is a dreadful place; Americans are horrible people!"

"Ah, you conceited young devil! That's what every American tells me. Of course you don't include yourself in your denunciation of your countrymen, do you? But I've found all Americans quite charming, quite charming, in spite of their conceit. Why not let me come over? I'm sure I shouldn't write about the United States as Dickens did in 'Martin Chuzzlewit', which gave me the first information I ever got about America. I admire a great many of your American writers, too. Take Emerson. He did the best essay on Westminster Abbey that I've ever read. You haven't read it? There you are!"

"But we haven't any living prose writers as finished and as civilized as yours", I insisted. "Take Aldous Huxley."

"Huxley? Yes, he's civilized, I admit. But has he written any works? WORKS, I mean. 'Crome Yellow'? I haven't read it."

I tried again. "Take Joseph Conrad."

"Conrad? — Ah, I have an epigram for you. I delivered it first to your own Henry James. Said I to James: 'Henry, do you know what Conrad's prose is? It's Stevensonian wreckage, floating around in *your* own bilge water!' James took it very nicely. I think he even laughed. It's epigram, but it's still true. You can use it yourself if you want."

I tried yet again. "Take Thomas Hardy. I'm going out to Dorchester to see him next week."

Here Mr. Moore exploded. "The dear God! Going a hundred miles to see — Hardy!"

He rushed out of the room, banging the door behind him. I was quite alone, and the silence became very thick. Just the rain, paddling away outside. It was all very embarrassing. Minutes went by. I started to polish my eyeglass. Was I expected to retire in humiliated defeat? I looked for my hat and umbrella.

Then Mr. Moore returned — with a handful of tightly clutched manuscript. "Listen to this." He read out a paragraph he had transcribed from "Far from the Madding Crowd". "Do you call that prose? Do you call that — anything? I tell you the poor man can't write; he never could write!"

I remained quite speechless for a time. Then I muttered something about "Tess".

"'Tess of the D'Urbervilles'! Cheap melodrama! Cinema stuff!" he fairly shouted. "How does this man handle his crucial episode? Let me tell you. His villain takes his heroine on his horse. They enter a forest. Can I see the forest? No, I can't. Then he lays her on a bed of dead leaves. Then he goes away. Then he returns. Then a page of philosophy. Later on, she has a child. Do you call that novel writing? Maybe you'd rather take the famous sleep walking scene: Angel (what a name!) and Tess. Here I thought I was going to find some truth, some good writing. But no! You can't tell me that people have ever acted as Tess and Angel did. That isn't truthful realism; it's just monstrous, unnatural balderdash!

"My own 'Esther Waters' was written in the same year as 'Tess'. Now, that's a real story. It's a WORK. You ask Hardy what he thinks of it. My 'Brook Kerith' is also a WORK. . . . Hardy is a genius? A modern Æschylus? Wait till Hardy crosses the Styx and asks Apollo to give him a seat next to Æschylus. 'Who are you? — Hardy . . . Hardy? Never heard of you!' That's what Apollo will tell him — with a well raised eyebrow."

I thought I'd switch around and talk of the other modern Æschylus, the beloved Irish Synge, and his "Riders to the Sea".

"I'm sick of the Irish", said Moore. "I'm through with the Irish. I hate every individual Irishman!" Then, suddenly breaking off, with a devastating glare at me: "Do you, Sir, believe in shooting gorillas?"

That was a poser. Of course I hadn't any information on the subject, but Moore didn't await my reaction to his shot. Here was something that must have been rankling in his mind all morning. He continued:

"Well, there's a chap who's getting together an expedition to go down into Africa and exterminate all the gorillas. Shoot them, slaughter them all. The poor, dear, delightful, entertaining beasties! I've just been reading about it in this morning's paper, and I'm very furious."

So this was the thing that had been annoying the dear man all the while. Not the weather, but just humane sympathy with the gorillas! So I also began to make sympathetic noises.

Mr. Moore went on: "What will this world be like if we have no more gorillas? . . . And then, I read about a new and sure cure for tuberculosis — among humans, mind you. The death rate among us will be decreased by some thousands every month. More and more people, more blithering idiots, and no more gorillas. God, what a world it's going to be!"

There followed more conversation on music and painting, but our enthusiasm had become dampened by the weather and thoughts of the wretched simians. And I have been wondering about those plaguy gorillas ever since.