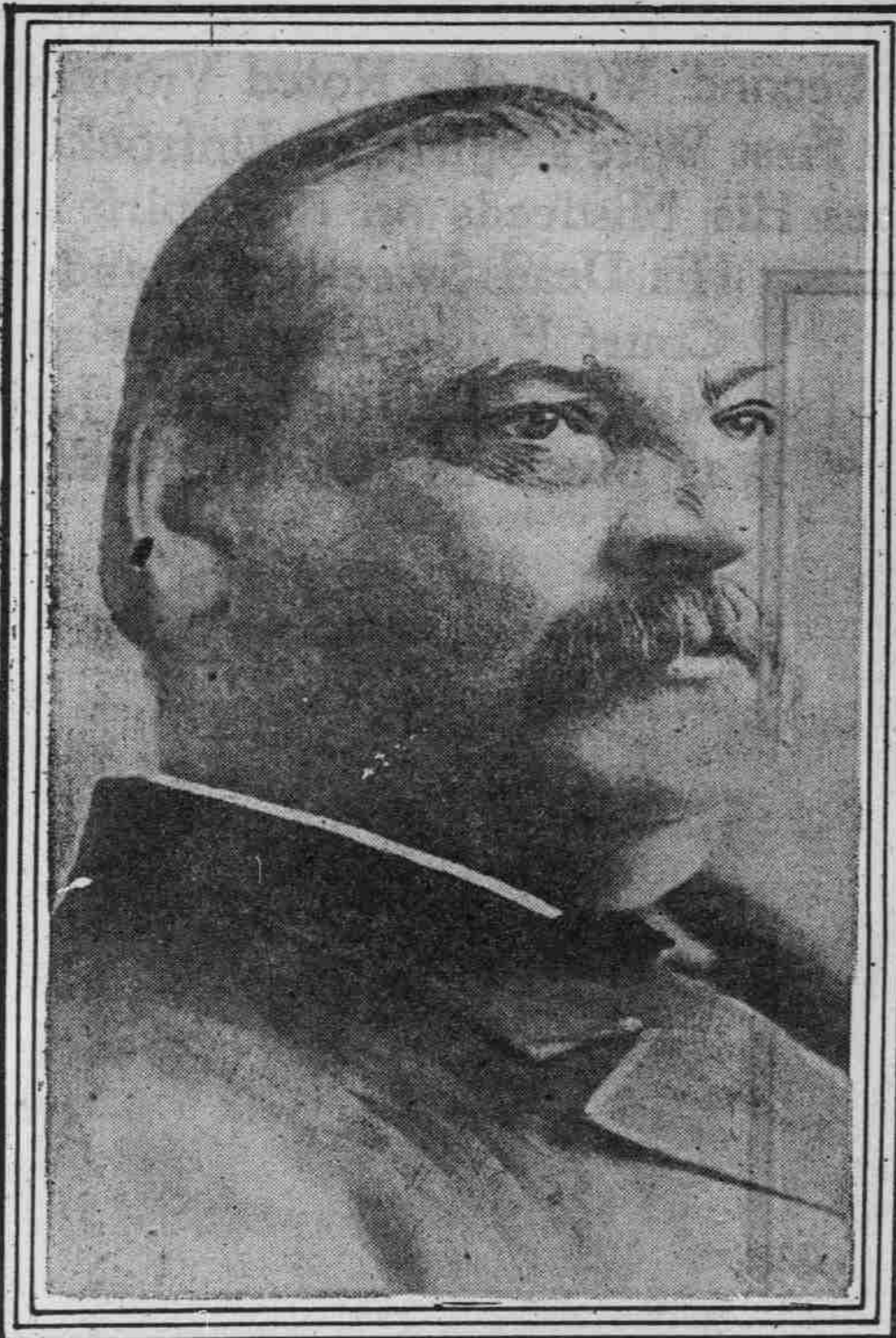


# Interviewing the Great



Grover Cleveland, Who Was Difficult to Interview.

BY WILLIS STEELE.

GETTING an interview isn't always a pleasant or an easy task. Practice may make it so, but it hasn't for me, and my interviewing experiences go back to Benjamin Harrison, Sir Henry Irving, Cardinal Satolli and others of hallowed memory. There is ever the possibility of the said somebody refusing to say it, or, having said it, to wish it unsaid.

My first big interview was with the apostolic delegate to Washington, Cardinal Satolli. He was a little man, frail of body, and these measurements by the eye were accentuated by the simple straight indoor ecclesiastical robe which he wore. Black, of course, and without quality to relieve the fallow skin. The only sharp contrast afforded by his attire wasn't intentional; one could see the line of the white woolen or cotton undergarment rising now and then above the top of his cassock.

He spoke a fluent French and never hesitated for a moment in replying to any question. Indeed, he made opportunities and introduced topics that his guest, fairly ignorant of intransigent questions, would not have thought of, and the interviewer, in consequence, proved a complete revelation, so far as he wished to reveal it, of the motive of the vatican in seeking a closer connection with the United States government.

In fact, Satolli belonged in the category of the interviewer who see the thing as a very satisfactory way of publishing something they wish to "get over." To call this kind of work difficult or requiring a special ability seems to define it badly, for the interviewer in such cases is merely a messenger or a link between the speaker and the printer.

It is quite a different matter when one interviews an unwilling subject, who either declines to answer questions or evades them more or less enthusiastically. Then it becomes a duel of wits, and the man who has come for a story is obliged to sharpen his.

Here is a little list of persons who didn't like and never meant to be interviewed, and who were, nevertheless: Benjamin Harrison and Grover Cleveland, former presidents of the United States; Bret Harte, famous author, and Richard Mansfield, who was too temperamental to push his own publicity, actor though he was. And to this brief list should be added the great Italian actress, Eleonora Duse. She figures in the present catalogue, but sticking close to the truth compels me to say that she does so unwittingly.

It happened on the stage when Mme. Duse was playing in "Francesca da Rimini" and in the scene where the actress visits the walls of an Italian city in the middle ages, when an enemy without was assaulting it with culverin and catapult. All sorts of noises were resounding in every direction as she moved about inspecting everything with the air of an ingenue suitable to Francesca and suddenly there is made a breach in the walls. Francesca's guide hurries her off stage as if to find her a place of safety.

As she passed me I realized that now or never I would get a word with this wonderful woman. I clutched the opportunity with an exclamation picked up from a bootblack. It served to pique her curiosity. The actress stopped and said:

"Italiano?"  
"Si, si, signora, poco italiano" (a little Italian).  
The actress smiled.  
"Do you like to play in this piece?"

She raised her eyebrows and indicated that at least this act was too noisy.

"And do you like America?"  
A shrug and a smile and Mme. Duse passed on to her dressing room.

That constituted the interview—the whole of it. Not worth recording, except for the fact that the interview still remains after all these years the only one ever obtained in America from Mme. Duse.

Bret Harte in London.

Bret Harte held himself nearly as remote from the interviewer, especially after he had become acclimated in England. He was a popular idol there and dined out constantly, also frequently entertaining in return. Through a friend, who was alternately host and guest, a meeting was arranged between the interviewer and the author of "The Luck of Roaring Camp."

It took place in Mr. Harte's chambers in London and passed in the room he called his library. Except that a big desk, very neatly kept, stood in front of a window, the place resembled rather a drawing room. Bret Harte did not rise from his seat at this desk, but recognized my presence with a very faint nod. He said:

"I understand you have lately arrived from the continent. That is very interesting, but after all is said England is even more interesting. There is more wealth here and it is solidly invested. I dined last night with an aristocratic family and all the service was of gold. I suppose you have never dined off gold plates?"

"Never," murmured I, abashed.  
"It is an interesting experience," said Mr. Harte. "To me it was a novel one, but my host and his family treated it as an every-day detail. Gold plates!"

The glitter of those gorgeous plates dimmed every other topic by contrast, but while taking note of Mr. Harte's very sporty attire (his vest, or waistcoat, as he would have preferred to call it, of dark plush, had gold flowers embroidered on it) I did succeed in diverting his mind by asking him to relate the reason for his break with Mark Twain. Mr. Harte smiled languidly.

"It is a well-known fact," said he, "that men who like to play jokes on others do not relish one where they are themselves the victim. Mark Twain was no exception."

"I originated the idea of presenting Mark Twain with a fine meerschaum pipe on an occasion when he was going back east. All the newspaper men and hangers-on to literature, of whom I was one in San Francisco, were in the secret, and Twain was touched and delighted when we met him, and after I had made a serious presentation speech gave him the pipe as a token of our regard and esteem."

"It was an ornate pipe extravagantly carved. It lay on a bed of blue velvet and promised to an inveterate pipe smoker like Mark many hours of enjoyment. Evidently he thought so. The rest of us didn't, for we knew that the pipe was carved of soap."

"When our national humorist made the discovery he was mad clean through. He threw the gift on the floor and stamped on it. And he never forgave those who were concerned in the hoax. Perhaps he is more vindictive toward me because I did not deny that the soap pipe invention was mine."

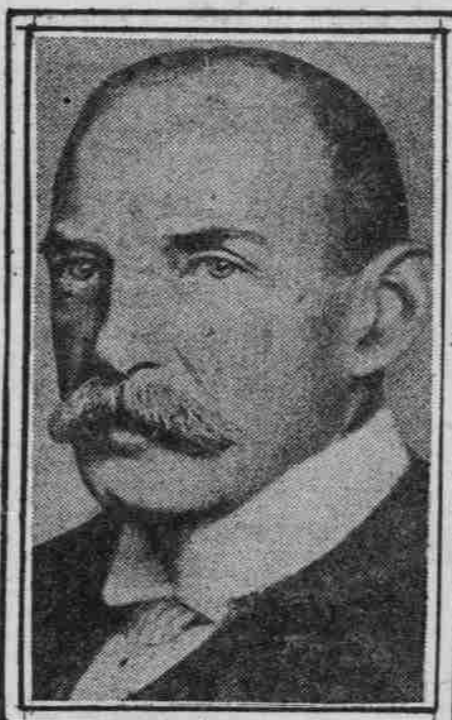
Harrison and Howells.

My interview with President Harrison turned out to be a failure, although it was undertaken at my own suggestion, at a time when matters were quiet, and

Showing Some Wiles of the Interviewer, and the Variety of Angles From Which Different Celebrities Must Be Approached, If He Would Not Fail of Success.



Eleanor Duse, Italian Actress Who Studied Interviewers



F. Marion Crawford Who Reached Novel for Interviewer.

because I had had the honor of meeting him and his family in Indianapolis and had danced once or twice with his daughter, Mrs. McKee. These circumstances may have helped to open the door of the White House for me, but they did not melt the presidential ice when I got inside.

How different was the wholesome and homely chat I once had with the veteran author, William D. Howells, the memory of it coming up right here because, as it seemed to me, there were physical resemblances between him and Mr. Harrison. The novelist was living at the Gainsborough studios on West Fifty-fifth street, and I fix the time by the book which he autographed and gave me. It was "A Boy's Town" and had just been published.

Mr. Howells talked about anything that came into his head—American letters, Italy when he lived there as consul, Italy revisited, Central park, which he overlooked from his great studio window, and the inconsistencies of the menu as it was written nightly in the restaurant on the first floor of the building. It was all spoken in a sweet, slow speech, very agreeable to listen to, but the impression it has left is that he never committed himself to a very definite statement; all was conditional; he saw both sides or all around everything.

F. Marion Crawford, as another novel writer, but a very different spirit, enters by a natural transition. Although I met him several times in the charming pied-a-terre he had made for himself out of a loft in Fifth avenue, the interview itself had occurred 20 years before in his villa in Sorrento, Italy. That villa he had taken as the setting for one of his early novels, "To Leonard." He was not satisfied until he had taken me over it to show the rooms where poignant, passionate things had happened, and finally to the cave under the rocks that sprang up rudy and perpendicular from the sounding sea where he kept his sail boat. In this grim and somber cave, noisy with the rush and splash of water, Crawford

reacted the thrilling scene which is the crisis of the story.

In the fall of the same year after I had come home, I met Richard Mansfield, who was then preparing to put all his undoubted talents to the test by playing "Richard III," his first Shakespearean production. His Baron Chevalier and Prince Karl already had made for him a great name, but there were persons who believed that his power in these modern parts would not help him to a higher theatrical dignity. I don't believe Mansfield shared these doubts, but when I saw him for the first time in private life—it was at the Croisic, an apartment house that has disappeared—he was manifestly nervous, apprehensive and ill at ease. Feeling like this, he was not apt to make a good subject for an interview. And he did not.

Mansfield could be suave and ultra-polite, as I discovered in subsequent meetings, but the clever thing, and the sharp thing, always lay near the surface of his utterance. He said it, too, often when it was impolitic. When he first met me the company which had been engaged to support him in "Cyrano de Bergerac" I stood on the stage not far from the Roxane of the company, Miss Margaret Anglin, who sat on a box waiting for rehearsal to begin, Mansfield, who had not spoken to her, not, indeed, to anybody, walked back and forth, staring at Miss Anglin harder every time he passed her. Finally he stopped and said:

"Roxane, as Rostand pictured her, was a beautiful woman?"

"Yes," quickly replied Miss Anglin, "and as Rostand pictures Cyrano he was the soul of courtesy."

But Mansfield was a sick man then, although neither he nor his doctors knew the nature of his fatal malady, and much of his harsh speech and of his often very bad manners must be attributed to this and forgiven. Yet it is safe to say that nobody who ever came under the lash of his tongue will ever forget this famous actor.

If I call my brief contacts with Mr. Mansfield uncomfortable, I need a stronger word when I come to speak of Sir Henry Irving. He had arrived at the title when he came over here for the last time and opened in a piece by Sardou, "Dante," written to the Englishman's order. I was writing dramatic criticism on a newspaper that is still going strong, and, like all earnest and inexperienced critics, I worked very hard over my little pieces. "Dante," you may be sure, was a big job for me to review, and I studied the encyclopedias until I could talk about the Divina Comedia as if I had written it. I did write a column, filled with much unnecessary information, and had it in type before the opening.

Sir Henry looked the part to perfection, but there was no making anything of the play by any degree of genius, because it was a melodramatic farago. I went to my office at midnight and killed my beautiful article, then wrote a line or two saying the play was "rotten."

That brought about my interview with Sir Henry without my solicitation. Miss Laura Burt, a talented American, who carried the most melodramatic role in the piece, happened to be present when Irving read aloud in a tone of cold disgust this ribald critique, and, glancing at the paper, she said:



Richard Mansfield, Remembered Actor.

"I know the man who writes drama for that sheet."

In this way Sir Henry became possessed of my name, and he wrote me a note inviting me to go to see him. I went, of course, and I am not yet sorry I did, for the great actor talked to me in his halting speech for half an hour. The silliness of pretending to knowledge that one hasn't got was one of his themes and another was the crime of treating with indignity a tremendous literary name. I might have retorted that Sardou had shown me the way in both cases, but I didn't, and while it was rather a bad half hour it closed friendly enough.

Too Much of Cleveland.

Reporters of New York city papers, at the time Grover Cleveland, on completing his term as president, came to New York to live, will remember how almost impossible it was to interview him. They will remember also that the city editors of those papers were in the habit of giving out assignments on every conceivable subject with the remark:

"See what Grover Cleveland has to say about this."

Just as simple as that. And it was the ex-president's habit to stare rudely at his questioner—whenever a questioner got at him, which was rarely—and refuse to say a word. This sphynx-like silence protected him; nobody dared quote when not a single word had been vouchsafed.

The Grover Cleveland "interview" of those days became a joke and foisted its name on any interview which proved unfruitful. Therefore I was never more surprised when, a political situation having arisen, my city editor gave me instructions to go to Mr. Cleveland, at his home in Princeton, for his views about it. I went, of course, but thought of the trip as a simple day's outing.

To my surprise Mr. Cleveland received me affably in the quaint, delightful colonial house in Princeton, which he had bought as a home for his family. For but a few minutes the ex-president left his caller to stare at the portrait of Mrs. Cleveland which was the chief ornament of the parlor, a real parlor, and then he walked in and asked the purpose of the visit.

Mr. Cleveland listened in silence and then said:

"I will answer these questions. Meanwhile would it interest you to walk about in my somewhat narrow grounds?"

Whether it would or not, I found myself wandering about in them and trying to kill time. It did not seem that I would have more than half an hour of this murderous business.

But I reckoned without the ex-president. Noon came, then 1 o'clock, at which hour a servant sought me out and invited me to have luncheon. This was served in a small dining room in solitary state. After it I wandered along the formal paths of the garden again, up and down and back and forth, over and over again.

At length, when the sun dial had quit registering for the day, the heavy and stately figure of Mr. Cleveland was seen moving slowly down the path. He carried a bulky manuscript in his hand. This he gave to his "interviewer" with the remark:

"Here, I believe, are the answers to your questions."

They were in truth full and complete answers, so many and so full as to constitute in the newspaper office an embarrassment of riches.

Croker Spoils a "Beat."

But of all the singular experiences in the line of interviewing which I am able to recall that with Richard Croker, "boss" of Tammany Hall, given at a time when the society went down to defeat, ranks as the oddest.

Croker, as is very well known, was like Napoleon I in one respect (one only). He wasn't talkative when things were going his way, but he became a veritable chatterbox when they weren't. On the occasion in question he was seen at the Democratic clubhouse on Fifth avenue at

All he was asked to do was to make a forecast. He made one, the only one he had indulged in for this campaign, and it was a very full and rambling forecast.

When he finished he said that he would like me to write out what he had said and send the article upstairs to him. I did this and sent up the finished story about 7 o'clock. Then I sat down to wait for Mr. Croker's vise.

I waited till 8 o'clock. Not a sign from the upper floors of the clubhouse. I waited half an hour longer, seeing dinner and every other plan going by the board.

At 9 o'clock I summoned a page and sent him upstairs to see if Mr. Croker had finished with the article. The boy went and never reappeared.

The clock struck 10.  
"Is Mr. Croker still in the house?" I asked the clerk at the desk. Oh, yes, Mr. Croker was upstairs and couldn't be disturbed.

At 11:30 the article was given back and I carried it to the editor in a mood of silent rage. However, it was a "beat," an exclusive expression from the Tammany chief, and that must serve as consolation for lost time.

And next day every paper in the city came out with exactly the same article. The Tammany chief had mimeographed the interview and served everybody alike.

## "Si Perkins" Has Gone for Good

(Continued From Page 2.)

recognized as sterling, and when they announce a course of action along certain lines they are pretty apt to be followed. The spread of this respect is wide, and the change that is taking place in methods as a result is unlimited. The reason is that the farmer accepts the station facts and tries them out without protest and arguing. He has found that this pays, that practical men have them in charge. The agricultural experiment station has saved the farmer of this and other states uncountable thousands of dollars. This can be proved.

It would not be quite the right thing to close this article without paying some little tribute to the woman on the farm. She also is going to school and she also is adopting the professional attitude. The woman on the farm possibly has a much more important place than the woman in the city, for hers is the great opportunity to suggest and even take a hand in the work of her men. She is not so often informed in family business matters. She knows something of what her men folks have to do and what problems they have to meet, and the new rural woman is often able to assist materially by her trained advice, for she, too, goes to school. Not all of the women take the economics courses embracing only household sciences alone. They also enroll in general courses, such as poultry raising and floriculture and make successes as their work.

Wife Will Now Stay Home.

Adv. in Bridgeport, S. D., Herald.  
I wish to express my appreciation and gratitude to the numerous and kindly disposed ladies who were with me at the time during the late absence of my wife. You were a wonderful help to a man in his hours of loneliness. I am expecting that my wife will be away again in the future. Be assured that I entertain happy recollections of your visit. I also liked the lunch.—S. E. Doughty.

Phonograph Owner Broke Anyway.  
Kansas City Star.

You can form an opinion of a man's finances by his stock of phonograph records. If the records are all three or four years old, he's broke and isn't buying new ones. If they're brand new and up to the minute, he's broke from keeping up with the new ones.