

TO H. L. MENCKEN

[ALS-NYP]

Mencken, who was writing his chapter on Dreiser for A Book of Prefaces (New York, 1917), had on May 12 asked for verification of certain facts concerning the writing and publishing of Sister Carrie.

165 West 10th [Street
New York, N.Y.]

May 13, 1916

Dear H. L. M.:

I feel that you need a serious talking to or with about this whole business but since you are not here I will make a few remarks[.] *Sister Carrie* was written in the fall, winter and spring of 1899-1900. I never saw or heard of *McTeague* or Norris until after the novel had been written and turned in to Harper and Brothers who promptly rejected it with a sharp slap.⁶ Then I took it to Doubleday, Page & Co. and left it, curiously, in the hands of Frank Doubleday, who was sitting in the office usually occupied by Walter H. Page. I was as green as grass about such matters, totally unsophisticated and I remember his looking at

⁶ The opinion from Harper's, rendered May 2, 1900, stated, according to a copy in Dreiser's hand:

"This is a superior piece of reportorial realism—of highclass newspaper work, such as might have been done by George Ade. It contains many elements of strength—it is graphic, the local color is excellent, the portrayal of a certain below-the-surface life in the Chicago of twenty years ago faithful to fact. There are chapters that reveal a very keen insight into this phase of life and incidents that disclose a sympathetic appreciation of the motives of the characters of the story. But when this has been said there remains the feeling that the author has not risen to the standard necessary for the efficient handling of the theme. His touch is neither firm enough nor sufficiently delicate to depict without offense to the reader the continued illicit relations of the heroine. The long succession of chapters dealing with this important feature of the story begin to weary very quickly. Their very realism weakens and hinders the development of the plot. The final scenes in New York are stronger and better— But I cannot conceive of the book arousing the interest or inviting the attention, after the opening chapters, of the feminine readers who control the destinies of so many novels.

"The style is uneven. At times singularly good (and generally so,) it is disfigured by such colloquialisms as 'suspicioned,' 'pulled off on schedule time,' 'staved off,' 'it's up to you,' etc."

me with a kind condescending, examining smirk. At that I like Doubleday. He is such a big husky incoherent clown.

Be that as it may.

The week after I took *Sister Carrie* to Harper's, Rose White, a sister of Mrs. Dreiser[,] came to visit us. We were then living at 102nd St. & Central Park West. She was reading a book called *McTeague* and liked it. Rose, who was [a] peach in her way intellectually and otherwise, persuaded me to read it. It made a great hit with me and I talked of nothing else for months. It was the first real American book I had ever read—and I had read quite a number by W. D. Howells and others.

As a matter of fact my reading up to this time had been the standard American school reading of the time—Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Hawthorne, Poe, Oliver Wendell Doughnut, Bret Harte, E. P. Roe (Yes, E. P. Roe)[,] George Ebers, Lew Wallace, Washington Irving, Kingsley, etc., etc., etc. At fourteen years of age I was dippy over Washington Irving, *Twice-Told Tales* and *Water Babies* and used to lie under our trees by the hour and read them. I thought *The Alhambra* was a perfect creation and I still have a lingering affection for it.

I went into newspaper work—(*Chicago Globe*, June 1—1891)⁷ and from that time dates my real contact with life—murders, arson, rape, sodomy, bribery, corruption[,] trickery and false witness in every conceivable form. The cards were put down so fast before me for a while that I was a little stunned. Finally I got used to the game and rather liked it.

Incidentally in Pittsburgh—1894—I discovered Herbert Spencer and Huxley and Tyndall. They shifted my point of view tremendously, confirmed my worst suspicions and destroyed the last remaining traces of Catholicism which I now detest as a political organization or otherwise. At the same time I discovered Honoré de Balzac—quite by accident—found one book on him and then got down *The Great Man from the Provinces* and began to read it.

Need I tell you that it was a knockout. It was. I was quite

⁷ 1892 is the correct year.

beside myself and read three others without stopping. Then somehow I ceased and began reading George Eliot and Lord Lytton and seemed to get along very well. Incidentally I made a study of Henry Fielding, who seemed and still does, amazing[.] *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* have been favorites of mine for years.

Yet as late as 1897 and 1898 I never had the slightest idea that I would ever be a novelist. My bent, if you will believe it, was plays and had I been let alone I would have worked out in that form. As it was I then re-encountered in New York a young fellow whom I had met in Toledo, Ohio, four years before. Arthur Henry[.] At that time, 1894, he [was] city editor of the *Toledo Blade*, newly married and very anxious to write. Somehow he had taken a fancy to me and now he hung about me all the time. He was tremendously well read, a genial critic and an able man. I think I told you something about him here. He was then advance agent for "Herrmann the Great" ⁸ but tremendously interested in the novel as a form and in short stories[.] He went on the road then, but a year later when I had married, came back and camped in my apartment. It was he who persuaded me to write my first short story. This is literally true. He nagged until I did, saying he saw short stories in me. I wrote one finally, sitting in the same room with him in a house on the Maumee River, at Maumee, Ohio, outside Toledo. This was in the summer of 1898[.] ⁹ And after every paragraph I blushed for my folly—it seemed so asinine[.] He insisted on my going on—that it was good—and I thought he was kidding me, that it was rotten, but that he wanted to let me down easy. Finally HE took [it], had it typewritten and sent it to *Ainslee's*. They sent me a check for \$75. Thus I began[.] ¹⁰

⁸ Henry was Alexander Herrmann's press agent for a short period before the magician's death, December 17, 1896 (Maude Wood Henry to Elias, July 25, 1945 [RHE]).

⁹ 1899 is the correct date.

¹⁰ *Ainslee's Magazine* printed "The Shining Slave Makers" in June 1901 (VII, 445-450) and "Nigger Jeff" in November 1901 (VIII, 366-375). Dreiser's letter to Robert Underwood Johnson, January 9, 1900 (q.v.), however, makes it difficult to believe that the first of those stories was accepted as early as Dreiser says.

The above is exact and sacredly true[.]

Later he began to ding-dong about a novel. I must write a novel, I must write a novel. By then I had written four short stories or five, and sold them all[:]

1. "Of the Shining Slave Makers"
2. "The Door of the Butcher Rogaum"¹¹
3. "The World and the Bubble"¹²
4. "Nigger Jeff"
5. "When the Old Century Was New."

He had a novel in mind—*A Princess of Arcady* (Doubleday[.] Page—1900—same year as *Carrie*)[.] He wanted to write it but he needed me, he confessed, to help him. Finally—September 1899 I took a piece of yellow paper and to please him wrote down a title at random—*Sister Carrie*—and began. From September to Oct. 15th or thereabouts I wrote steadily to where Carrie met Hurstwood[.] Then I quit, disgusted[.] I thought it was rotten. I neglected it for two months, when under pressure from him again I began because curiously he had quit and couldn't go on. (Isn't that strange[?]) Then I started and laughed at myself for being a fool. Jan. 25th or thereabouts I quit again, just before Hurstwood steals the money, because I couldn't think how to have him do it. Two months more of idleness. I was through with the book apparently[.] Actually I never expected to finish it[.]

About March 1 he got after me again and under pressure I returned to it. This time I nearly stopped because of various irritating circumstances—money principally—but since he was there to watch I pressed on and finally got it done. I took an intense interest in the last few[chapters] much more so than in anything which had gone before. After it was done considerable cutting was suggested by Henry and this was done. I think all of 40,000 words came out. Anyhow there is the history[.]

¹¹ When reprinted in *Free and Other Stories* (New York, 1918) "The Shining Slave Makers" was entitled "McEwen of the Shining Slave Makers," and "Butcher Rogaum's Door" (originally published in Reedy's *Mirror*, XI (December 12, 1901), 15-17) was entitled "Old Rogaum and His Theresa."

¹² Once intended for inclusion in *Chains*, this story has eluded identification. If not published under a different title, it may exist in only manuscript form.

At that time, Henry's interest in *Sister Carrie* having been so great his own book was neglected and he could not finish the last chapter. Since he had told it to me so often and I knew exactly what he desired to say, I wrote it. But don't accuse him or me of it in public. It wouldn't be kind, I'm afraid[.]

In regard to *The "Genius,"* I still feel that you are far astray in that book—and for your own sake, not mine, you ought to get in line. I do not propose to try to make you see what you cannot but I suggest you re-examine it some time slowly and dispassionately. It will get over, even with you, for the stuff is there and happily co-ordinated, as long as it is. You change your mind as to books occasionally and you might as well consider changing your mind on this one, before you record a final judgement[.]

Sister Carrie I notice gets over with those who love the shine and tingle of Broadway and the metropolitan atmosphere generally[.]

Jennie Gerhardt with emotionalists—especially women.

The Financier and *The Titan* uniformly appeal to men and women who have some real knowledge of business and finance and who are beyond good and evil in their views or would like to be.

The "Genius" is appealing to those who know love and sex and life generally—but not life in all its particulars by any means.

Among the plays "Laughing Gas" is supremely the best—personally I think the best thing I ever did.

Greeting.

I have just seen my adjectived
self in the S.S.

Th D.