

Sigrid Undset Speaks of Writing and War

An Interview With the Distinguished Novelist Who Recently Arrived From Norway

By **ROBERT VAN GELDER**

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SIGRID UNDSSET said that she had nothing to say about literature. "While the war is on literature is not a thing to talk about." Would the war tend to make the literature of the immediate future reportorial, as Stefan Zweig believes? Mme. Undset shrugged her shoulders. "I do not make prophecies." What of her technique for writing? "If you knew anything at all about writing you would not ask that question. How can I tell how I write? I write! As every writer knows, one must discover one's method for one's self. In any event, I do not give advice."

The author of "Kristin Lavransdatter" is a tall woman—almost six feet in height—heavy, with wide shoulders and hips. Her face is broad and flat and the skin red. She was utterly disdainful of what she considered an inevitable reportorial sentimentality. Interviewers in the newspapers here had spoken of her "grief too great for tears" and of her being a "wanderer on the face of the earth, homeless, hopeless."

"You reporters," said Mme. Undset, "have a German sentimentality for which I have no use. I do not care for the German traits."

She took a humorous pleasure in making such frontal attacks and it was in that pleasure that she was best revealed, for it was only then that her chill, utter impersonality was warmed, that the massive solidity of her mere will to endure gave way to a sparkle of life.

She said that her recently pub-

lished "Madame Dorthea" had been intended as the first volume of a long book, but she did not know whether she would go on with the work. "I left all my notes, all my preparations, in Norway. You see I left the country with only a traveling bag and in a great hurry. I doubt that I can continue writing while the war goes on. It is no time for literature. I shall lecture this Fall and Winter. After that, I don't know."

She said that the young men of Norway "were infuriated that their country was so badly prepared that their elders had put their trust in so weak a thing as neutrality."

"The Germans did not succeed because of numerical superiority but because they had better weapons. All the young men of Norway who were worth anything went to fight, and 40,000 of them lost their lives. Had we been prepared they could have fought as the Finns did, but all we had were machine guns and shotguns.

"Our men are good shots and they are not frightened. I know of men out alone who took on 200 Germans at once. Yes. They would hide on hillsides and fire with shotguns at German columns. They fired carefully, making each shot account for one German, and they were very good ski-runners—they could fight a long time and then get away.

"I know of one who brought down a German plane from a hillside. He shot at the aviator's hands and crushed them."

She said that she had seen considerable fighting. "I watched bombing raids and saw machine-gun fights."

Mme. Undset came here a few days ago aboard the steamship President Cleveland from Japan. After her flight to Sweden she traveled across Russia on the Transsiberian Railway, and it was during that trip that she learned of the fall of France. She

said that this was the worst blow. "France always has been the brains of Europe. If she is smashed permanently I fear it will be the end of Europe."

She said that the people of Russia seemed very poor; that most of the shops were closed and that the window displays were usually of papier-mâché, as there were not enough goods for sale, certainly not enough for display.

"In Vladivostok in a pouring rain I saw a line of hundreds of people waiting to buy some printed cotton goods that were so shoddy that if I had offered some to one of my servants in Norway she would have said that they were not worth the trouble of making into clothing. Of the hundreds of people one man had an umbrella. But they waited patiently enough.

"It is the dirtiest country I have seen, filth everywhere. And they cannot buy goods—I know that. A young man on the train with us sold his Winter overcoat. It brought him 800 rubles."

Mme. Undset lost her son Anders, 27 years old, in the fight against the German invaders. She is accompanied by her 21-year-old son, Hans.

After not more than ten minutes' talk in the lobby of Neb Hill's best hotel she stood up.

"Now you must excuse me. They are giving a luncheon for me on—I believe it is called Treasure Island. I must see that my son is ready to leave when the car comes for us. And please, whatever else you must do, don't be sentimental about me, if you can help it. I know that is a great deal to ask. But, for once, try to be a writer and not a sentimentalist, and simply tell the truth."