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IX.

The Fringes of Lovely Letters

I

Authorship as a Trade

IT is my observation as an editor that most beginning authors are attracted to the trade of letters, not because they have anything apposite and exigent to say, but simply because it seems easy. Let us imagine an ambitious and somewhat gassy young gal, turned out of the public high-school down the street with good marks in English—that is, in the sort of literary composition practiced by schoolma'ms. Having read “Ulysses,” “Jurgen” and “Babbitt,” she is disinclined to follow her mother too precipitately into the jaws of holy monogamy—or, at all events, she shrinks from marrying such a clod as her father is, and as her brothers and male classmates will be tomorrow. What to do? The professions demand technical equipment. Commerce is sordid. The secretary, even of a rich and handsome man, get up at 7:30 A.M. Most of the fine arts are regarded, by her family, as immoral. So she pays \$3 down on a second-hand typewriter, lays in a stock of copy paper, and proceeds to enrich the national literature.

It is such aspirants, I suppose, who keep the pot boiling for the schools of short-story writing and scenario writing that now swarm in the land. Certainly these schools, in so far as I have any acquaintance with them, offer nothing of value to the beginner of genuine talent. They seem to be run, in the main, by persons as completely devoid of critical sense as so many Congressmen, street railway curve-greasers or Methodist revivalists. Their text-books are masses of unmitigated rubbish. But no doubt that rubbish seems impressive enough to the customers I have mentioned, for it is both very vague and very cocksure—an almost irresistible combination. So a hundred thousand second-hand Coronas rattle and jingle in ten thousand remote and lonely towns, and the mail of every magazine editor in America is as heavy as the mail of a get-rich-quick stock-broker.

Unluckily, there is seldom anything in this mail to bulge his eyes and make his heart go pitter-pat. What he finds in it, day in and day out, is simply the same dull, obvious, shoddy stuff—the same banal and threadbare ideas set forth in the same flabby and unbeautiful words. They all seem to write alike, as, indeed, they all seem to think alike. They react to stimuli with the machine-like uniformity and precision of soldiers in a file. The spectacle of life is to all of them exactly the same spectacle. They bring no more to it, of private, singular vision, than so many photographic lenses. In brief, they are unanimously commonplace, unanimously stupid. Free education has cursed them with aspirations beyond their congenital capacities, and they offer the art of letters only the gifts suitable to the lowly crafts of the jazz-baby and the schoolma'm. They come from an intellectual level where conformity seems the highest of goods, and so they lack the primary requisite of the imaginative author: the capacity to see the human comedy afresh, to discover new relations between things, to discover new significances in man's eternal struggle with his fate. What they have to say is simply what any moderately intelligent suburban pastor or country editor would have to say, and so it is not worth hearing.

This disparity between aspiration and equipment runs through the whole of American life; material prosperity and popular education have made it a sort of national disease. Two-thirds of the professors in our colleges are simply cans full of undigested knowledge, mechanically acquired; they cannot utilize it; they cannot think. We are cursed likewise with hordes of lawyers who would be happier and more useful driving trucks, and hordes of doctors who would be strained even as druggists. So in the realm of beautiful letters. Poetry has become a recreation among us for the intellectually unemployed and unemployable: persons who, a few generations ago, would have taken it out on china-painting. The writing of novels is undertaken by thousands who lack the skill to describe a dog-fight. The result is a colossal waste of paper, ink and postage—worse, of binding cloth and gold foil. For a great deal of this drivel, by one dodge or another, gets into print. Many of the correspondence-school students, after hard diligence, learn how to write for the cheap magazines; not a few

of them eventually appear between covers, and are solemnly reviewed.

Does such stuff sell? Apparently it does, else the publishers would not print so much of it. Its effect upon those who read it must be even worse than that of the newspapers and popular magazines. They come to it with confident expectations. It is pretentiously bound; *ergo*, there must be something in it. That something is simply platitude. What has been said a thousand times is said all over again. This time it must be true! Thus the standardization of the American mind goes on, and against ideas that are genuinely novel there are higher and higher battlements erected. Meanwhile, on the lower levels, where the latest recruits to letters sweat and hope, this rubbish is laboriously imitated. Turn to any of the cheap fiction magazines, and you will find out how bad it can be at its worst. No, not quite at its worst, for the contributors to the cheap fiction magazines have at least broken into print—they have as they say, made the grade. Below them are thousands of aspirants of even slenderer talents—customers of the correspondence schools, patrons of lectures by itinerant literary pedagogues, patient manufacturers of the dreadful stuff that clogs every magazine editor's mail. Here is the ultimate reservoir of the national literature—and here, unless I err, is only bilge.

The remedy? I know of none. Moreover, I do not believe in remedies. So long as the prevailing pedagogues are not found out, and the absurd effort to cram every moron with book-learning goes on in the Republic, that long there will be too much reading, and too much writing. But let us get out of the fact whatever consolation is in it: too much writing, at worst, is at least a bearable evil. Certainly it is vastly less dangerous than too much religion, and less a nuisance than too much politics. The floggers of Coronas, if they were halted by law, might take to the uplift—as, indeed, many corn-fed pedagogues are already doing, driven out of their jobs by the murrain of Fundamentalism. If I yell against them it is because, on days when the rain keeps me indoors, I am a critic. Perhaps other folks suffer less. Nevertheless, I often wonder what the genuinely competent novelists of the nation think of it—how the invasion of their craft by so many bunglers and numskulls appears to them, and affects them. Surely it must tend to narrow the

audience they appeal to, and so do them damage. Who was it who said that, in order that there may be great poets, there must be great audiences too? I believe it was old Walt. He knew. Facing an audience deluged with molasses by Whittier, Felicia Hemans and Fanny Fern, he found the assumptions all against him. He was different, and hence suspicious: it took him two generations to make his way. The competent novelist, setting up shop in America to-day, is confronted by the same flood. If he is pertinacious, he may win in the end, but certainly it takes endurance. Hergesheimer, in his first book, unquestionably had something to say. Its point of view was new; there was a fine plausibility in it; it was worth attending to. But Hergesheimer drove along for eight or ten years, almost in a vacuum. I could add others: Anderson, Cabell, even Dreiser. Cabell became known to the women's clubs with his twelfth book. Meanwhile, a dozen cheesemongers had been adored, and a thousand had made good livings with their sets of rubber-stamps.

2

Authors as Persons

My trade forces me into constant association with persons of literary skill and aspiration, good and bad, male and female, foreign and domestic. I can only report, after a quarter of a century of commerce with them, that I find them, with a few brilliant exceptions, very dull, and that I greatly prefer the society of Babbitts. Is this heresy? If so, I can only offer my sincere regrets. The words are wrung from me, not by any desire to be unpleasant, but simply by a lifelong and incurable affection for what, for want of a better name, is called the truth. Nine-tenths of the literary gents that I know, indeed, are hotter for the dollar than any Babbitt ever heard of. Their talk is not about what they write, but about what they get for it. Not infrequently they get a great deal. I know a number who make more annually than honest bank presidents, even than Christian bank presidents. A few probably top the incomes of railroad purchasing-agents and nose-and-throat specialists, and come close to the incomes of realtors, lawyers and bootleggers. They practice a very profitable trade.

And no wonder, for they pursue it in the most assiduously literate country in Christendom. Our people, perhaps, seldom read anything that is good, but they at least read—day and night, weekdays and Sundays. We have so many magazines of more than 500,000 circulation that a list of them would fill this page. We have at least a dozen above 1,000,000. These magazines have immense advertising revenues, and are thus very prosperous. They can therefore pay high prices for manuscripts. The business of supplying such manuscripts has made a whole herd of authors rich. I do not object to their wealth; I simply report its lamentable effects upon them, and upon the aspirants who strive to imitate them. For those effects go down to the lowest levels. The neophyte, as I have said, seldom shows any yearning to discharge ideas, to express himself, to tackle and master a difficult enterprise; he shows only a desire to get money in what seems to him to be an easy way. Short cuts, quick sales, easy profits—it is all very American. Do we gabble about efficiency? Then the explanation is to be sought in the backwashes of Freudism. Nowhere else on earth is genuine competence so rare. The average American plumber cannot plumb; the average American cook cannot cook; the average American literary gent has nothing to say, and says it with rubber-stamps.

But I was speaking of the literati as persons. They suffer, I believe from two things. The first is what I have just described: their general fraudulence. The second springs out of the fact that their position, in the Republic, is very insecure—that they have no public dignity. It is no longer honorable *per se* to be engaged in travails of the spirit, as it used to be in the New England of the *Aufklärung*; it is honorable only if it pays. I believe that the fact discourages many aspirants who, if they went on, might come to something. They are blasted in their tender years, and so literature loses them. Too sensitive to sit below the salt, they join the hearty, red-blooded men who feast above it, admired by the national gallery. It is, indeed, not surprising that the majority of college graduates, once headed as a matter of course for the grove of Athene, now go into business—that Harvard now turns out ten times as many bond salesmen every year as metaphysicians and martyrs. Business, in America, offers higher rewards than any other human

enterprise, not only in money but also in dignity. Thus it tends to attract the best brains of the country. Is Kiwanis idiotic? The answer is that Kiwanis no more represents business than Greenwich Village represents literature. On the higher levels its bilge does not flow—and on those higher levels, as I have hinted, there are shrewder fellows, and more amusing, than ever you will find in the Authors' Club. These fellows, by the strict canons of ethnology, are Babbitts, but it seems to me that they are responsible nevertheless for everything that makes life in the United States tolerable. One finds, in their company, excellent wines and liquors, and one seldom hears any cant.

I don't believe that this is a healthy state of affairs. I believe that business should be left to commonplace and insensitive minds, and that men of originality, and hence of genuine charm, should be sucked automatically into enterprises of a greater complexity and subtlety. It is done in more ancient countries; it has been done from remote antiquity under civilizations that have aged in the wood, and are free from fusel oil. But it is not yet done in These States. Only an overwhelming natural impulse—perhaps complicated by insanity—can urge an American into the writing of fugues or epics. The pull is toward the investment securities business. That pull, yielded to, leads to high rewards. The successful business man among us—and only the sheer imbecile, in such gaudy times as these, is not successful—enjoys the public respect and adulation that elsewhere bathe only bishops and generals of artillery. He is treated with dignity in the newspapers, even when he appears in combat with his wife's lover. His opinion is sought upon all public questions, including the æsthetic. In the stews and wine-shops he receives the attention that, in old Vienna, used to be given to Beethoven. He enjoys an aristocratic immunity to most forms of judicial process. He wears the *légion d'honneur*, is an LL.D. of Yale, and is received cordially at the White House.

The literary gent, however worthy, scales no such heights under our *Kultur*. Only one President since the birth of the Republic has ever welcomed men of letters at the White House, and that one, the sainted Roosevelt, judged them by their theological orthodoxy and the hair upon their chests. A

few colored poets were added to make the first pages; that was all. The literati thus wander about somewhat disconsolately among us, and tend to become morose and dull. If they enjoy the princely fees of the train-boy magazines, they are simply third-rate business men—successful, perhaps, but without the Larger Vision. If they happen to be genuine artists—and now and then it *does* happen—they are as lonely as life insurance solicitors at a convention of Seventh Day Adventists. Such sorrows do not make for *Gemütlichkeit*. There is much more of it in the pants business.

3

Birth Pangs

I have just said that the typical American author, when he talks intelligibly at all, talks of money. I have said also that his aim in writing is not to rid himself of ideas that bulge and fever his skull, but to get that money in an easy way. Both statements, though true, need a certain qualification. Writing looks easier to the neophyte than any other job open to him, but once he settles down to its practice he finds that it is full of unanticipated pains. So he tends, as he grows older, to talk of those pains almost as much as he talks of their rewards in cash. Here, indeed, all the authors that I know agree, if they agree on nothing else, and in their agreement they show the greatest heat and eloquence. And the beautiful ladies of the trade reënforce and ratify the plaint of the bucks. Writing, they all say, is the most dreadful chore ever inflicted upon human beings. It is not only exhausting mentally; it is also extremely fatiguing physically. The writer leaves his desk, his day's work done, with his mind empty and the muscles of his back and neck full of a crippling stiffness. He has suffered horribly that the babies may be fed and beauty may not die.

The worst of it is that he must always suffer alone. If authors could work in large, well-ventilated factories, like cigarmakers or garment-workers, with plenty of their mates about and a flow of lively professional gossip to entertain them, their labor would be immensely lighter. But it is essential to their craft that they perform its tedious and vexatious operations *a cappella*, and so the horrors of loneliness are added to its other