THIS FICTION BUSINESS

H. BEDFORD-JONES

To the literary snob, who shudders at the word "commercial," and sneers at popular taste, while starving unknown in a garret, Mr. Bedford-Jones has nothing to say in this volume on fiction writing as a business. But to the writer who has no such exalted dignity at stake and frankly wishes to make a comfortable living out of fiction writing, Mr. Bedford-Jones discloses some of the priceless secrets of the trade, gathered from extensive and highly successful practical experience.

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WHATEVER THIS BOOK MAY CONTAIN OF ERROR IS DUE TO THE AUTHOR. WHATEVER IT MAY CONTAIN OF WORTH IS DUE TO THE TUTELAGE, ENCOURAGEMENT, AND GREAT-HEARTED FRIENDSHIP OF WILLIAM WALLACE COOK.

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PREFACE

First published in 1922 and now enlarged and brought down to date, this book does not presume to tell "how to write." The author refuses to believe that anyone could be told "how to write"; in his opinion one can only learn by experience, practice, and the innate qualities which make up a story-teller. That is to say, if one expects to make a living by writing.

These pages try to tell the rudiments as the author sees them, informally, avoiding all scholarly vagueness and solemnity. Between you and me, the real sin against the Holy Ghost is that of taking ourselves seriously. I am afraid very few writers have discovered it, so I give you the information for what it is worth. It is actually the most valuable bit of information in the entire book, though in this you may disagree with me.

PREFACE

This book is not to be regarded as an authority on story-writing; by no means should it be read by anyone who aspires to literature, for, like Socrates, it will assuredly corrupt them and lead them into the worship of strange gods. It is destined only for those who desire to make a living by writing stories, in the hope that it may be of some benefit to them.

As may be imagined, the author is superbly assured of his competence to admonish, divert and perhaps assist the tyro. Under his own and assumed names, he has something like forty books, of divers natures, to his discredit, and well over a hundred booklength novels, with as many novelettes and some hundreds of short stories. At one time he even made verse pay him a living wage. With the exception of perhaps half a dozen stories, he has sold all he has written, and he writes prolifically.

Therefore, when the theories of the author sound unorthodox—as they will—they will at least bear consideration, being justified by

their success in his own case. And, brethren, if you find any practical and useful hints in these pages, accept them with the sincere good wishes of

H. Bedford-Jones

THIS FICTION BUSINESS

CHAPTER I

"Can I Write Stories?"

CAN you write stories?

Of course you can. It's the simplest thing on earth to do. Anyone can write stories, and everyone does, from a schoolgirl to the inmate of a veterans' home. In the old days, every newspaper man had a play in his trunk, ready written —but why limit the matter? Nowadays, plays are legion, but stories are everywhere and the sky is the limit.

The milkman, the baker, the rancher, everyone writes stories! The street-car conductor writes stories—one of them got a Nobel prize for his work. Not long ago a neighbor of mine who is a miller, handed me a story of 100,000 words he had carefully written out on both sides on thin onion-skin paper, all rolled up in a wad that would have choked Jonah's whale.

He wanted me to sell it for him—maybe to re-write it, if I had nothing else to do.

Yes, it is simple to write stories. We are taught to do it in school, and we keep right on doing it. In it, most of us find the outlet for a great craving which is usually repressed yet none the less insurgent—the craving to create something. His need for hunger and love satisfied, man then seeks to create, being fashioned in the image of God; and if he can make his creative work supply his needs, if he can make his imagination pay his bills, he is in the seventh heaven.

Usually, however, he cannot. This is a sad but insistent truth, my brethren of the typewriter. Even in these days of wild prosperity, when magazines flood the news-stands and new ones appear weekly, it is a very difficult matter to sell stories—because everyone is writing stories. To break into print is an extremely hard business. I have already granted that you or anyone else can write stories—

But, can you sell them?

We are talking, remember, of plain commercial stories; stories not written because you have a message or want to say something but written to sell. Commercial stories, not literature. Stories such as appear in the fiction magazines—pulp-paper prints. Stories such as are sneered at by literary folk who won't stoop to write them, or who can't. Stories such as provide a comfortable and pleasant living for their writers. Can you sell such stories?

The answer depends entirely upon you, and upon nothing else. You certainly would not hope to become a doctor or lawyer without a long training. You would not hope to take up any profession ignorantly—you wouldn't have the nerve. So it is possible to write stories and to sell them too, but not ignorantly. You must know something about the game, and the rudiments of the business; it is a business, I can assure you, as keen and cut-throat as any other, in which a few at the top are successful and

famous, and a great many struggle along on a living wage. And, as in any other business, success and fame can drop away in an hour's time.

This book attempts to set forth some of the rudiments of the business, without any of the hypocrisy so often attendant upon such an enterprise. It is an extremely difficult thing to do, and you will see why upon looking into any of the various textbooks about writing. No two teachers look at the affair from the same viewpoint, perhaps for the reason that those who cannot write, teach. Or so it is said. As a matter of fact, teaching requires a special aptitude, and I do not claim to be a teacher.

The textbooks are unconsciously humorous, from the angle of commercial writing. The little gods of Plot and Character and Dialogue and so forth are all nicely modeled and set up on the shelf before our eyes. The Rules of Conduct are neatly framed and hung upon the wall. Then each professor steps back and proceeds to look at the Gods and Rules from a different

angle, and says what is in his heart with much reverence and solemnity, for he takes his gods very seriously.

Bosh! I find it much simpler to break all the gods, which are graven images of clay, and to erase all the rules, which are writ in water, and then to say: "Get to work!" This business of fiction has no tables of stone and has no Moses either.

Can you succeed without education?

This depends on your definition of the word. Book education is an asset in any business, yet it amounts to little as compared with the education of experience. Often it isn't knowing how to do things that counts—it's knowing how not to do them, and this is particularly true in writing. Jack London's story is known to everyone, and he had no sheepskin. There is a very clever writer, a woman whose stories appear continually in the magazines and who has published several books; and she has no education

at all in the accepted sense of the word. Ours is the profession of democracy, brethren.

Do you expect me to tell how to write, how to sell, how to become rich and famous? If I could make a good bluff at all this, I would soon be rich and famous myself—on your money. I don't believe in it for a minute. All I can do is to set forth simply and plainly much of what I have learned about the game, which is much less than you may yourself know; to give all the pointers in my power; to tell how the work is done by myself and others, and not to take the damned thing too seriously as I talk. But—to tell you how to do it is an entirely different thing.

Why? Because we are men and women and no two of us, thank heaven, are quite alike. Your success in writing will depend absolutely upon you, yourself—upon your character, your personality, your experience. No profession permits anyone so much freedom of choice, so much chance for specializing, as this one. No

profession is so dependent upon the character of the practitioner, and upon his individuality.

Schools are not famous for catering to the individuality of pupils. Therefore, I believe that any certain course in story writing might do you no good whatever, although it might develop certain things in you and lay bare many minutiæ of the business. Typewriter oil and experience and will-power form the best school.

Correspondence courses are not useless things; quite the contrary. You may learn vastly from them. Many of them advertise that their pupils have accomplished high things and have achieved much success. Some of them are conducted by eminent gentlemen. I have recommended one or two whose courses would have much aided my early struggles. At the same time, let me make a confession in strictest secrecy. I have the inner conviction that, were I about to learn the violin, I should go to a violinist for my teaching and not to books. Violin playing is predicated upon certain rules which

no two teachers interpret alike, and is an entirely individual thing. Just so with the fiction business.

Why is no school for writers conducted by some recognized writer—why don't I start one myself? Because I can make more money and have more fun in writing than in teaching. Ask me something hard. Besides, there are a dozen angles to writing—fiction, verse, advertising, trade journals and so on. We are in this business to make money, therefore we concentrate upon one angle alone—whatever angle best suits us. The ideal school for writers would have a successful literary gentleman to handle literature, a successful fictionist to handle fiction, a prominent poet to handle verse, and so on—but I have not heard of any such school.

True, England has certain schools for "literary aspirants"—yes, just so—which are supposedly conducted by well-known writers. This may be the case; never for a moment would I be tempted to believe that a writer, even an

English writer, would merely allow his name to be used in such a connection, receiving fat fees in return. No, such a thing were beyond credence. At the same time, until the ideal school for writers comes to pass, I shall continue to doubt that anyone can be told how to write stories.

Nor do I intend to attempt the impossible. If, however, you are still interested in how to go about the business of fiction, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER II

Going About It

LET us assume, in these chapters, that you know nothing about writing—that you want to know all I can tell about it. This naturally assumes that I know something worth telling. No other writer, reading these lines, will grant such an assumption. He may be envious, or he may believe that I know mighty little about his line of work, and this may be entirely true. Occasionally one of us reads the other fellow's story, and then we either wonder how he managed to do it so well, or how he got away with worse than murder. Everything is highly individual in the fiction business. No two men write the same type of stories—very long.

Well, then, how are you to go about taking up this alluring profession of no work and all

play, not to mention fame and fortune, as it is generally regarded? My advice, which may be worth nothing at all in your own particular case, is very simple.

First, get it firmly in your head that this is only a matter of straightforward business. Take it up in business hours and by business methods, if possible. There is plenty of time for artistic neckties and moonshine after you can afford to make a fool of yourself. You may have to be born with imagination, but you can't be born with inspiration—this, as Edison said, is only perspiration. It is no divine afflatus, producing suddenly a story in your head. Real inspiration comes from thorough knowledge of the business, combined with an ability to put this knowledge to account and get ideas out of it.

The man who makes out the daily schedule of cars in a Pullman office, as I used to do under John Seese in the old Chicago Western, uses inspiration every minute. He must know

just where each car is in the division, where it has been, its present condition, and so forth. That is inspiration: the ability to combine details, and the judgment that will set them to work co-ordinately.

Facing the matter squarely, as a business proposition, you now take up the details. What branch of writing do you want to follow? There are many branches, all of them sub-divided, and in these days of savage competition, each branch demands special skill. If you sell railroad tickets you may be a railroader, but you can't belong to the Brotherhood. You may write for trade journals or do cable re-writes, hash up beauty columns or turn out radio one-act dramas; but what we are talking about in this book is fiction. We are talking about fiction because, in all honesty, I don't know anything else worth talking about.

Thanks to the individuality of each writer, fiction is divided into a great many commercial lines, and few writers can turn out more than

one line with any great success. The man who does adventure or mystery stories is not apt at love or humorous or society yarns. Of course, the exceptions do prove the rule. William Wallace Cook can write an Arizona mining story, a wild Jules Verne tale, a fine historical novel, or a humorous-sentimental book to make you laugh and cry at once. How does he do it? By inspiration, naturally—about forty years of it.

You may fall into your own niche, into your own branch of writing, by predilection, but the odds are even that chance will guide you or experience take you by the hand. Of one thing you may be fairly sure; the knack of it will come slowly, for you get out of this game only what you put into it.

Newspaper work has started countless men in the writing game, both in the field of literature and in that of commercial writing. For this there is a very definite, common sense reason. A reporter is trained to the details of the business; the chief detail of his and our business

is words—a vocabulary. He must know how to string words together, using one here, another there, to best impress the reader; he learns how they look when rightly strung, and learns their value—how to make them felt.

Thus the reporter tries fiction with a big advantage, for words are the tools of the trade and he has mastered their use. He knows "how to write." That does not mean style or grammar or construction; it means the use of words in combination. This is the fundamental of fiction writing. A story where the words are well placed is half sold.

Yet, newspaper work is no essential to the fiction game! It is merely one way of going about it. You learn what is actually the hardest part of the game, the sense of word-values, and earn your living meantime, if you survive. If you don't survive, if you can't hang on to a newspaper job long enough to learn about words, try the ten-cent store by all means.

Other ways of going about it: Read every-

thing you can find on the subject of writing, and be doing it while you read. If you can find some friend who has the ability to detect weak points in a story, you have a great aid; the friend need know nothing about writing—merely about stories. Many writers have found enormous help in this manner. Jack London did; I know a man down in Texas now, who had the honor of criticising the "Sea Wolf" before any editor ever saw it.

Then, of course, there are plenty of books about writing. I have tried to read many of them, but could not find very much that was comprehensible in the text, for I am a simple sort of person, unable to absorb great ideas and sound theories, and content to drift along in my blissful innocence. This does not prevent me from advising you to read all these books, for they can do you one distinct service: they can give you an idea of what constitutes a story, and this is something I have never learned. They can teach you all the rules of the game.

Nor does this prevent me from believing that there are no rules whatever in the fiction game.

A story that breaks every accepted rule and axiom may be a world-beater—why? Because the writer has character, individuality, which shows up in his words and fairly shines through his whole story. The rules are made for those who cannot observe them, and we are not compelled to follow them. Once you have learned them, you can well afford to forget them. Sit down and write your own story by whatever rules seem good to you.

Once you obey the laws as a matter of course, you then begin to make certain laws for yourself. Otherwise, you have no chance for originality, which comes by discarding accepted precedent.

So now we come to the end of our general theorizing. These things had to be said, for this business of fiction is rather a difficult matter to explain. Any college professor can tell you how to write stories, but I am not so certain how

many fiction magazines send professors checks for accepted work. So be patient, and if you are inclined to discover what chance the amateur has in the writing game, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

The Amateur's Chance

HAS the amateur really a chance? You bet! When the magazines say they're looking for new writers, they mean it. They are looking, and looking hard. One reason is that they don't have to pay new writers so much money, which evens them up on the amounts they pay well-known writers. An amateur, too, will swallow the old patter about having to edit his stories and cut out a good deal, and so forth.

The amateur, however, must be able to write.

Aside from the cynical reasons above, the magazines welcome and get in active touch with anyone who can do their kind of work, because they desperately seek originality. They seek it chiefly in subject-matter—something fresh. If you want an example, you have it in Hugh

Wiley's "Lady Luck" stories. Any amateur with a story to tell, who can tell a story, has every chance to break into the magazines.

A friend of mine, who doubted this, tried it out not long since. He wrote half a dozen stories, signed a fictitious name, and sent them to as many magazines—they went to the editors from a totally unknown writer, with no pull. Every one of them sold, nearly all at the first try. The fictitious writer is still getting letters asking for more of his work.

Even though the story be crude, the finish imperfect—let character shine through it and it will sell. By this I mean the personality of the writer, which is bound to be reflected in his work. It is the man who can hold down another job, and hold it down hard, who can make good at writing. Why? Because he has force of character.

The chief puzzle of the amateur is what to write about. Most of the textbooks say: "Write only about what you know best, whether per-

sons or places." Fiction editors hand out the same advice, because if you send one an Arabian story, he likes to be sure you know about Arabia.

What bosh it is! What arrant nonsense! When Moore wrote "Lalla Rookh," when Sam Coleridge wrote "Kubla Khan"—what did they know about it all?

This nonsense has discouraged whole flocks of writers—another wall built up around them by slodgy people who don't know how. One editor who lays great stress on this rule, some time ago published a long yarn about the New Orleans carnival, which proved conclusively that the writer knew nothing about Mardi Gras down there and had not even bothered to be accurate. That was fine poetic justice; the editor had no right to make rules. Can a person who has lived in Madagascar write a better story about Madagascar than you can? According to the rules, yes; according to actual facts, no! Not for a minute.

I am not trying to look smart by breaking the rules. When they are broken, there must be a logical, common sense reason. Let's go into the matter on a common sense basis, and you may realize that the only good rule about what to write, is to write about what you like.

As a matter of cold fact, the very hardest thing or place to write about, is that which you know best; I find this to be true with the majority of writers. You know so many details about it that your imagination is frightfully cramped and limited. If you want to write stories with success, you must have imagination, plus. We are talking, understand clearly, with commercial fiction alone in mind, for this type of writing demands clarity and pictures.

You must be able to picture scenes and places in your own mind, seeing them as it were in a moving picture, and then transfer them to paper—making your characters talk and act naturally. Go to live in China for a while, and you'll find it hard to write stories about China;

come back home, get a proper perspective, and you'll catch the highlights and be able to write about them. You may be able to write even better about them if you've never been to China.

Don't get me with reverse English, now. I do not advise you NOT to write about what you know. If you know the west, you can certainly write about it more readily than otherwise. But knowledge of it at first-hand is not an essential—not in the least. The finest descriptive work is done when you actually know whereof you write; however, commercial fiction does not call for great descriptive work. A few sentences in a story give all that is necessary, a few words can convey atmosphere.

Local color? You can get it from travel books galore, if you have imagination and an accurate eye for details. Accuracy is essential. I find the simplest plan is to pick upon any part of the world which appeals to me personally, study it from maps and charts and books, and then write about it. Then I do it better,

put enthusiasm and verve into it, because I like it. And usually I make fewer mistakes.

A case in point is a story of mine in *Adventure*, laid in San Francisco, where I lived when the story was written. It mentioned a certain corner at the intersection of two streets—which are actually parallel! The blunder occurred—how, I have never known. None of the readers caught it either, in this case, for no kick ever came in about it.

My first long fiction story was laid in Algeria, and was sold to an editor who had served in the Foreign Legion there. He bought it because the local color was accurate—and could not believe I had never been there. I have been there since, with the story in mind, and have marveled at my own accuracy. A recent story in *Short Stories* deals with an interior city of China which is described in no guide book, which the author never saw, yet which is pictured accurately and with detail—the local color was gained from some letters or other

source. So there you are. To get across with this sort of thing, naturally, much study and hard work are required, and imagination. The same is true of anything worth while, isn't it?

After all, what we write about is merely human character, brethren, regardless of location. We must visualize what people will do under certain conditions, how they'll do it; and our hardest task is to know when our written words "sound right."

I know a woman whose husband sells automobiles and knows nothing of writing. He listens to her stories, he knows human nature, and when her characters make a false move or a false speech, he spots it—and she benefits by his criticism. This is the only kind of criticism really worth while, in the long run.

You may write best about what you know, or about what you don't know; it depends on you, and no rule can be laid down for individuals. Zane Grey has been much criticised for inaccuracies in his western stories; yet years

ago, on the Arizona border, I ran across Mr. Grey's trail and met some of his friends. That he knew his west was indisputable. Perhaps he reported inaccurately. What matter? The story's the thing!

Anything goes, if the story is good. If you're wrong, somebody is sure to praise you for being right. If you're right, someone is sure to kick about your mistakes. That is one beauty of fiction writing, and if you're interested in seeing how some of us do the actual work, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

Doing the Work

I SUPPOSE you, like everyone else, want to know just how the work of writing is done—the actual work, in detail. How do the wheels really go around?

Famous writers only work of mornings—they always say it in interviews. Perhaps a f.w. only does work of mornings so far as the act of writing is concerned, but he is always thinking about his work. It is with him all times. And if he had not been scribbling for ten or twelve hours per day before becoming famous, he never would have become—take it from me!

No two writers work in the same manner, for they are creating something out of their own characters and individualities, and each one goes about it in his own way. William Wallace

Cook is one of the most prolific and successful of fiction writers, whose every tale is replete with fine little touches of artistry. He has every detail of a story laid out in his head or on paper, before he goes to work. He has more plots mapped out than he'll ever write, and they are exceedingly ingenious, too.

Believe it or not—I haven't; nary a plot nor a scheme. Instead, I have followed a system of my own for the past twenty years; it just happens to be my own way of writing a story, that's all. Recent examples of my system, or lack of system, were stories which appeared in *Adventure* during 1929—"The Four Black Moons" and "The Pirate of D'Arros."

Here is my own recipe: Put a sheet of paper into the machine, start writing, and go ahead. The chances are that you can get a flying start with a good bit of dialogue or a fine situation. After a few pages, stop and study your characters. Go on writing from page to page, and let the plot form itself as you proceed. If you

like, have a climax to write up to; otherwise, let the climax come of itself. Plot and climax will come as you go along.

Laugh at that recipe if you like—they all do! Yet it suits me. One must freely admit that this is not a safe, sound and conservative way to write a story. It is not to be commended to the amateur, except as an experiment at which to take a whack. Of course, it may work all right with me and may not work at all with you. There are no rules!

Only the other day I was congratulating a friend upon an exceedingly ingenious story which had just appeared. He admitted that, after duly laughing at my recipe, he had tried it out in this instance, and had been astonished by the result. He found that, in not knowing himself what was coming next, he wrote the story in such a way that the reader was also unable to guess the next development. So, perhaps, the advice is not so wild after all! Try it for yourself.

DOING THE WORK

Many able writers can sit down and type steadily, hour after hour, like a machine, day in and day out. Others cannot do this. Some men limit themselves to an hour's work a day, on the principle of producing quality and not quantity, and after the example of one or two great authors.

It is noticeable, however, that the gentlemen who limit themselves are usually limited. I met one of them the other day, and he wondered how on earth I could turn out so much work! He himself worked a couple of hours in the morning, and never, never wrote more than three hundred words per day. He whined about hard times, and wondered anew how I managed to make a living. The suggestion that hard work might turn the trick for him, fell on deaf ears. Not yet! His "art" might suffer!

An hour's work a day is all well and good when you get old and atrophied. Otherwise, ten hours of it every day is fine exercise. Look at Jack London! How much a day shall you write?

It depends on how fast you can hit the machine. Go to it; turn out all you can. This grandstand play of a few hundred perfect words a day is all right for the elect, but you and I are talking business this trip. Art, flowing neckties, and free verse are all in a class to themselves.

Under pressure I have written 25,000 words in a day, a complete story and entirely original work. Recently, a stenographer stated that this was flatly impossible, that this amount of work could not be done on the machine in a day. When I convinced the gentleman that I could hit the keys a good deal faster than he could, he backed down. Having the training of a stenographer and the ability to write fast on a machine, is a tremendous asset.

The beginner cannot afford to work fast, until he is where he can work both fast and well. He must be content with working hard. He must afford long hours. It goes without saying that, working at a fast rate, carefully written copy cannot be turned out. Except when un-

der pressure, I find that five to ten thousand words is a good day's work; but many writers exceed this, and do excellent work too.

Working hard does not mean working fast —not at all! Many writers sweat blood over a thousand words a day, and work all day and night doing it. As a matter of fact, a writer should not spend more than four or five hours a day at his actual work of writing; if he does, it is going to drain the vitality out of him at a fast rate. Four hours of intense brain-work and concentration is equal to a ten-hour day at hard manual labor. Your other work-hours can be devoted to reading or study.

Writing is curiously tiring work, both to body and brain. The mental stimulus of concentration will carry you to the end of a long story with culminating power, until you finish it up in a blaze of furious energy; then you are "all gone." For some little time you will be fagged. Your brain demands rest and recrea-

tion, and at this period the moving picture is a great little invention.

Many fiction writers in this country are astonished to find that in England, for example, most writing is done by longhand in the first draft, and turned over to a typist. Most of our own writers work directly on the machine, and their brains are accustomed to this. Be your own typist, and you're sure of what you do, also.

The best advice on how to work, is to borrow a typewriter and beat it. The more you turn out, the more you'll have to re-write, criticise, and learn from. The more you do, the more you learn—and if you are interested in the further details of writing, such as plot, go ahead with the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

Plot

THE word "plot" is one of the professional walls raised around the amateur writer. The term is dwelt upon with great unction and ritual. Plot is the all important thing—if he is going to write fiction, then he must strive for plot, plot, plot!

I most disrespectfully submit that this is absolutely B-U-N-K.

In the first place, let us determine just what the word plot means—not an easy thing by a good deal. I do not believe it can be defined more accurately than in the precise words of Pitkin: "Plot is a climactic series of events, each of which both determines and is determined by the characters involved." There, in a nutshell, is the clearest definition of plot ever attained.

At the same time, few people entertain the same notion about plot. Poe held that a story had an excellent plot when none of its component parts could be removed without detriment to the whole structure; yet this is far from conveying the exact meaning. Poe's stories had very little plot, as the word is commonly understood among writers today. Therefore, I have actually seen him held up as a bad example in this respect—Poe, who made himself a classic in English, and whom Baudelaire made a classic in French! It is undeniably true, however, that the world's greatest men are usually held up as bad examples.

Howells, on the contrary, believed that any plot was constituted by a series of events which grew entirely out of the central character. This is the literary viewpoint, usually followed by great artists like Howells, and applies chiefly to novels. The didactic viewpoint, that of Pitkin as stated above, is entirely satisfactory, and is the belief held by schools and teachers and by

many writers. It is the strict dramatic plot. Read over any good play, and you'll be able to apply Pitkin's definition and to understand it more clearly.

However, we are not dealing with literature or the drama; our interest is centered on the business of fiction—and the foregoing remarks have nothing to do with it. Therefore let us consider the horrible proposition: A Good Story Needs No Plot.

Reflect, brethren! Some of the best short stories ever written have very little, if any, plot. That is why some professors stiffly refuse to call them short stories, and apply other names to them. It is hard for a teacher to see any horizon—his spectacles are too strong. He wants to keep all young writers between two narrow and high walls—that is his business.

Look at magazine fiction. Has it any pretensions, any purpose, other than to entertain the reader? Absolutely none. A fiction magazine shuns in horror all propaganda, religious

controversy, and boresome highbrow effusions. Its business is simply to make its readers forget their troubles and come again for more. When it ceases to be entertaining, it ceases to have any existence.

Very well, then. What is the most entertaining story ever written? What story has brought delight to the most millions of people and has been most widely read? Probably certain Chinese romances would fill the bill, but we are speaking of the western world; therefore, our answer would be: "The Arabian Nights." Out of this collection of tales, the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor are perhaps the best known. They have not only been read for themselves, but have entered into fiction, myth, drama, all over the world. In the most erudite oriental studies, those of Berthold Laufer, you will find Sinbad and his adventures figuring prominently. And these stories have not the least vestige of plot. They are nothing but loosely woven

incidents, which are controlled entirely by chance. So much for plot, as an essential.

On the other hand, we must not be blind to the value of plot in its strictest sense. It is highly essential to many forms of writing. To many commercial writers it is a great aid, and some of them depend altogether upon it. At the same time, it is another of those things which you must grasp and understand in order to disregard if you so prefer. It is another of the many walls around the writer, which his imagination may over-leap.

Certain magazines are strong for plot, and most editors assert with pathetic enthusiasm that they must have plot. As a matter of fact, none of them care a hang about it, and any of them will buy a good story without a plot, just as readily as they would buy one with a strong plot. Let me prove my point, brethren, by a little story just between ourselves, which must pass no farther.

Two editors of well-known fiction magazines

were holding a lovely lodge of sorrow over me. They would like to use my stuff, but their magazines were famous for having strong and manly plots. Their readers wanted 'em, looked for them. As one editor expressed himself:

"Your stories are well written, but they're nothing except a lot of incidents strung in a row. They haven't a vestige of plot!"

I might have pointed out that the reading public seemed more or less satisfied with my yarns, and that other magazines were not kicking. Instead of argument, I submitted to each of these editors several stories under a pen-name, keeping carefully from sight my own connection with them. They were even typed in a manner entirely different from my own. And what happened? The gentlemen bought them and wrote enthusiastically for more with offers of contracts.

There are two possible explanations for this. One, that the editors themselves had only a vague idea of what they meant by plot, and

had in mind merely a certain type of story. This is highly logical. The second explanation is that plot makes no difference whatever to a good and entertaining story. Take your choice, or combine the two.

Never accept the dicta of a magazine as to what it wants; never guide your work so as to make it fall in line with the "requirements" of a magazine. That is, naturally, unless you're engaged in some special line of hack work, as will be touched upon later. Aim only to turn out an excellent product. An editor would publish the Prophecy of Esdras if he thought it would entertain his readers—and is there not one newspaper, indeed, which is running a serial called The Holy Bible?

Without any desire to be critical, I am quite positive that to editors and teachers the word "plot" is merely professional patter—something to teach and talk about. An editor recently gave me the same old line about a story, said it had no plot, and he'd buy it if I'd put

some good strong plot into it. I agreed. I changed the name of one character, deleted one word, had the story copied on fresh paper. And what did he do when he read it again? Bought it as being entirely satisfactory. Of course.

Studying plot development, you understand, will not corrupt your morals in any way, and if you're going into the writing game seriously, you must study plot with the rest. However, do not dally with the notion that plot is the one great essential to be mastered, that a good plot will carry off a poor story. Not by a good deal. Plot is really one of the subservient elements to entertaining fiction.

And returning, upon due reflection, to Edgar Allan Poe's theory, I am inclined to appreciate it more fully. He was one of the first of our commercial writers, and he knew his business down to the ground. When the gentlemen who gently scoff at him can turn out stories which will rival his, then by all means

let us accept their dicta with reverence. Until then, let your story be so written that not a paragraph of it could be cut out without positive detriment to the whole yarn—and you needn't worry about whether it has plot or not.

If the story is in you, it will come out. And if, in writing it, you do not commit the deadly sin, you have an excellent chance of selling it. If you're interested in hearing more about the deadly sin, go on with the next chapter.

CHAPTER VI

The Deadly Sin

My friend Max came to me the other day with a story and a long complaint. First, let me give you a very brief portrait of Max, because he deserves it. He is a newspaper man of ability. For nearly three years, Max has sweat blood trying to write fiction. He has taken all the advertised courses in story writing, and some that don't advertise. He has overcome handicaps, has studied like a dog, has put into his work more real effort and agonized determination than anyone I know. And he never got very far with stories.

"What's the matter with this stuff?" said Max, handing over his story. "I can't sell it. Everyone says it's fine stuff—but fine words butter no parsnips."

We looked over the story. The professional critics had called it excellent, had suggested a few minor changes, had nowhere come down to earth on it. They had led Max to think it would sell the tenth time out, sure! Yet any writer could see in two minutes why Max had not sold it and never would.

He had committed the deadly sin.

A high-sounding title, that, but a good one. Max had done the thing that nine out of ten inexperienced fiction writers do. He could handle words very well, he had a fine notion of how to throw a plot together, and behind him lay a burning and stubborn resolve to make good. What, then, had he done that was wrong?

In the first place, he committed a minor error which in itself damned the story. He opened up the tale with an incident which was well told; it was good stuff. But when it was over, the chief character in that incident dropped out of sight and never came up again. The reader, looking for his re-appearance, was

disappointed. This was not the deadly sin, however.

Presently we located the real trouble. In two places, Max had hinged his plot on big scenes —well conceived pivots upon which the whole story swung. One of them was the climax, and it was an excellent climax. Each of these scenes should have covered at least a page of manuscript. Each of them, as Max wrote it, was compressed into a single short paragraph—and the story was ruined.

There was the deadly sin. The lack of perception as to what must be emphasized, played up strong! Max was so absorbed in telling the story, that he failed to see things in their right proportion.

You read a story, get interested in the characters, find the plot absorbing and good, entertaining. When you come to the climax, do you want to be told that the hero "knocked the skipper into the scuppers, overawed the crew, and took command of the ship"? Not much.

You want the details of the knocking and overawing. You want to be on the inside, learn how the thing was done! In other words, you want to follow the emotions of the hero in detail.

Never forget that the reader, in general, identifies himself with the chief character of a story. He desires to see things through the eyes of that character. When the reader arrives at some crucial point in the tale and finds it glossed over in a couple of sentences, he is bitterly disappointed. He wants some analysis of emotions right there—some emphasis that shows him the bigness of the situation.

One way of doing this is to quote the thoughts of the hero, which also serves to break up too many solid paragraphs of description. The reader wants the situation prolonged in proportion to its bigness, or at least emphasized; even though it passes in a moment's time.

Not true to life, you say? I don't know about that. A person's mind moves mighty fast in a pinch—it covers a lot of territory. In any case,

your hero is bound to be something of a superman, so never mind whether it's true to life or not. It is one of the tricks of the trade—one of the little things that go to make a good story. In this case, however, it is a very large thing. If it were not for the prevalence of this deadly sin, I imagine that many manuscripts which now go into the "reject" basket, would at least draw a letter of commendation from the editor.

The amateur writer seems bound to commit this sin. He seldom realizes what points in his story he should lay most emphasis upon, and what points are least vital to his tale. It is a question of seeing the story in his own mind, of visualizing it, in its proper proportions. This perception of values, however, is something that he must come to learn unless he is to fail utterly. It is, undoubtedly, the great essential of fiction writing. It is more important than anything else, and I had proof of this point only a few days ago.

One of my friends startled me with the information that one of the most prominent publishers in the country had accepted a manuscript of hers for book publication. I had read the story in manuscript, with no great amount of interest. It was written in poor English—not even in good American—and was full of really absurd mistakes and general carelessness.

Upon reading the letters from her publishers, however, I came to understand the matter. The publishers had listed the technical errors for her to correct. They had undertaken to correct her grammar and spelling themselves. Because she knew intuitively just what to emphasize, just what were the big scenes, the story went through. Her sense of values had brought her to success. She had turned out a good story—even if it was badly written. And every character introduced was brought in for a definite purpose, not for the sake of telling an interesting incident. There may be no plot to a

story, but it must have purpose in the characters.

This deadly sin, this lack of proportion in telling the story, is hard to avoid. It comes largely through experience, through being able to see the story in your mind something like a moving picture. And once you learn the knack of it, you have a grip on success. This sense of the right thing is in part dependent upon the construction of a story, and if you are interested in this phase of the business, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER VII

Story Construction

THERE are, of course, all sorts of rule-of-thumb diagrams telling you just how a short or long story should be constructed. The only trouble with them is that they're like Sam Putnam's second-hand automobile—elegant to look at but not worth a damn to use.

No one can successfully tell you how to construct a story; there is no definite framework or skeleton, except such as you make for yourself. You must get your own viewpoint on that, and express your own character in doing it. A story has a beginning and an end; keep the definite relation between beginning and end, and that's all there is to the trick.

At the same time, various elements enter into the construction of a story—in fact, have a

direct bearing on its construction. You can pick up certain highlights which will perhaps be of help in this direction, and one of these is the highly important atmosphere.

If you want to know what atmosphere is, in its finest form, read "Merry Men." Stevenson himself said that the story was written to express the sentiment inspired in him by a portion of the Scottish coast, and he produced a classic. Note, however, that he did not introduce any nature description merely to be painting it; he had a purpose in each paragraph.

What the reader is after in a magazine story, is entertainment—bear this always in mind. He likes description of foreign parts, to a certain limited extent; just enough to place the story, lend it color. Mere description can be found in any travel book. And natural scenery is far from being entertainment, unless it is to have a direct bearing on your hero's state of mind, or upon the story itself.

Atmosphere can be created, too, with very

little sheer description. There are other ways. James Francis Dwyer coined a very pretty method of injecting atmosphere into a story, in few words and without slowing down the action in the least. Something like this: "Her eyes held the same startling, vivid shade of blue that one sees embosomed in the Lu Wang lagoon." Or: "Her voice had the low music of the little brass bells that one sees tinkling and chiming under the eaves of the Ting-ling pagoda."

Such a trick, supposing the story to be laid in China, keeps impressing upon the reader all the time that the story *is* laid in China, without saying so. It is an excellent notion, when not carried too far. Any such trick can easily be carried too far—just as my friend Jack did with his notion.

Jack got the idea that repetition would carry him to fame. He knew, and rightly, that each word in the language has a distinct meaning, and that most of us are very careless about get-

ting the right meanings. So he began to introduce phrases like this:

"Into the ray of light came a hairy arm. It was hairy as the body of a spider, hairy in a reddish and horrible fashion, hairy beyond all description!"

That was pretty good. Jack swung along into many magazines on that distinctive way of writing. Then he extended the idea by degrees. Every time he wanted to impress the reader, he repeated in the same fashion. Finally, he got to where, every time he brought a character into action, he would repeat word for word the sentences with which he had first introduced that character into the story! That was too much; it made his stuff unreadable, and Jack blew up. He had solved one problem of style, but he had carried the solution to extremes.

Aside from literary work, with which we are not concerned, most young writers get headaches over the word "style." Now, just what is

style? What makes it? Style is like faith—an impalpable and unseen thing, yet a mighty force.

In reality, it is the manner in which a writer's character and individuality shine through his words; it is the expression of himself. The textbooks may not define it that way, but so it is. You cannot point out definitely just what style is, of what it consists. You cannot consciously go after it, or get it down concretely. You cannot even know when you have it.

Perhaps style is largely caused by the way in which you handle words and sentences. In this connection, comes an excellent bit of advice from another writer. He says: "Use long sentences whenever the action is slow, as in description. When the action is brisk, as in a fight scene, make the sentences short. But never make them too long or too short." That is good advice. Short sentences make fast, vivid reading. Long and involved sentences are never very necessary in magazine fiction; for, although

they may be perfectly good English, they are very poor American.

Nearly every fiction writer has his own fashion of throwing words together and thus creating style. Walt Mason once poked some fun at us, saying that we all wrote alike and that all magazine fiction came out of the same pot. Now, Walt himself is an ardent fiction fan, and was merely having a bit of a joke. A lot of editors and writers, however, took him very seriously. They began to fill columns showing how the various magazine writers had distinctive ways of saying the same thing, and they really made their point good, of course. Everybody jumped on poor Walt, without any valid reason, having misunderstood his intent.

Yet, in one sense, Walt was dead right. A great deal of magazine fiction does come out of the same factory, because not every writer stops to figure out some way of making his product distinctive, branding it with his own

name and trademark. They don't try to make or let the story express their own character.

Clarence Herbert New does it, largely in the way he constructs a story and tells it. Most of the story, for example, may be concerned with the preamble, even with the introduction of the characters. Very often the action of the story, the story itself, comes in a few paragraphs at the end. Sometimes he carries this trick to the point of danger—but a fine writer can run risks successfully.

Another element entering very largely into the construction of a story, is the depiction of character, and this is frequently a stumbling-block to writers, small or great.

In several descriptive paragraphs, you can sketch the character of a man—that is, define him in the eye of the reader as good or bad. A magazine story, however, shies at several descriptive paragraphs to each character; it is poor writing. Or you may tell what his character is, tell what his thoughts are, and then show

his personality in his actions; in doing this, the chances are that you will have character study and not a story. Magazines seldom find character studies very entertaining.

Again, you face the problem of differentiating each character, so that each one will stand out clearcut and distinct in the mind of the reader. This simply must be done, yet it is a difficult affair to accomplish.

One learns with experience to do it fairly unobtrusively, as a part of the writing technique. But we are assuming that you have slight experience; so the best way to show how to do it, is to show how it is done.

Here is one way, perhaps the most common and easiest way. Introduce your character as briefly, yet in as vividly striking words as possible. "Stevens had close-set, nervous eyes, pinched features always at high tension." Well and good. Now, all through the rest of the story, use those same adjectives on Stevens—

don't merely introduce him once, and think the reader will remember his appearance!

Every time Stevens comes into the story, qualify him with one of those originally used adjectives. "His close-set eyes blinked nervously." "The strained, tense look of his pinched—"

One very good help in this respect is to choose names for the characters which will be very unlike; each name will then help to place the character in the reader's mind. And keep reminding your reader, very gently but continually, of some point about each character, some point that will help the reader to picture him or her.

The danger in all this is pointed. You are liable to the error of stamping each character with a certain label, to be retained throughout the story. One is seen as good, another as bad, and so forth. It is much better workmanship, when possible, to leave the characters of your actors to be expressed through the story in acts or words, while briefly describing their

personalities. A story in which the hero or villain is not labeled, is usually very fascinating, because the element of uncertainty is involved. The reader never knows what to expect.

To accomplish this is not easy—particularly as each character must also be made to stand out clearly in the reader's mind. Mr. De Bra accomplished it admirably in a *Blue Book* story, "Diamonds of Desire." There, almost to the end of the novelette, the uncertainty is sustained; at the same time, the characters are well drawn. Yet artistically so. That of Westingham, for example, is never explicitly described, the man's personality is never shown in words. Yet the reader has it in mind all the while. Westingham is cleverly described without description, usually between bits of dialogue.

Our problem is to present three or four characters in the course of a short story, and to make each of these personalities a vivid reality to the mind of the reader. The chief way of do-

ing this, is by presenting the highlights of each character—surface indications merely. The sneering lips of one, the whimsical gaze of another, the calculating caution of a third. By thus opposing such indications, you are enabled to lend each person reality—make each different from the others.

Another worry to the beginner is the point of view, which will be more fully gone into in a later chapter dealing with the booklength. Shall we tell a story in the first person or in the third? Some editors give out that they do not like a story that is told in the first person; why, I do not know. It is comparatively easy to write; the writer can much more readily imagine himself as the dominant character. For this very reason, it is perhaps difficult for the reader to imagine himself the hero, which the reader likes to do.

A rather good way of experimenting, is to first write a story in the first person, imagining yourself the teller of it, and thus making every-

thing very vivid. Then, in re-writing it, change the "I" to "he." A third writing will polish off all the rough places and smooth down the alterations. In this way you get the benefit of first-person writing, and at the same time the benefit of the impersonal style. It is only a suggestion, but it has worked well in many instances.

Another thing—the "kick" at the end of the story, the unexpected surprise. Some advisors abhor it absolutely, some declare it a fine thing. Like everything else, it is excellent in moderation, and if done with a deft touch the reader invariably likes it. Clumsily done, it is apt to be foreseen.

The kick is not essential to any story, and must not be too violent, but it does make an excellent climax. The best advice is never to strive for the effect—don't carry the surprise ending to extremes, and don't use it at all unless it comes logically.

I have just mentioned re-writing a story,

but that demands a chapter to itself. There is a good deal of pose about this point, and the truth is hard to discover. "What is truth?" asked jesting Pilate; and it has always been a matter of infinite astonishment to me that people invariably seem to think this question remained unanswered, when as a matter of fact it received a most striking response. You will find it, if you care to look it up, in the "Apochrypha." As we are now talking about fiction, however, you may be more interested in the concrete matter of re-writing—in which case, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER VIII

Re-writing

ONE of the vexed questions about this writing game of ours, my brethren, is the re-writing of manuscripts. Most authorities advise that a story should be re-written several times, and cite the example of the masters. Many authors give out sob-interviews regarding their enormous labor on every story produced.

It is interesting to read all this, of course, and to know that an author is painstaking and worn down to the point of exhaustion by each story. However, being neither an authority nor an author, merely a moderately successful commercial fictionist, I find myself unable to accept the matter as viewed by others, and much prefer my own innocent standpoint and custom. If some of us had to re-write each story before selling it, we would not make money.

RE-WRITING

Although I seldom practice it, I do believe that re-writing a story once is always a good thing for the story. Here again, it depends largely upon the individual—upon you yourself. If you are prolific, turning out quick work, it is liable to carelessness; re-writing is the rule for you. If you are slow and painstaking, if every paragraph makes you sweat blood, then re-writing will smooth down your whole manuscript.

If you are an inexperienced writer, however —what then?

Look at the matter logically. You want to earn a living from writing fiction. In order to do so, you must write with some facility—not necessarily quickly, but with facility. You must train your brain to this. I could name half a dozen men who can write a story of any length, on any subject, in any given space of time. Magazines like to depend on such men, very often.

Suppose you take a manuscript, and work

on it six months, altering and re-writing. What have you to show when you get through? One story, perhaps good and perhaps not. Have you learned enough to make this work worth while? No—emphatically, no!

You have learned a good deal about story-writing through this work, no doubt. You have corrected a lot of mistakes, you have produced one fine story. But you have given your brain no facility, and you are so sick of that cursed story you could gladly throw it away.

An alternative frequently proposed, is that you lay aside for several months everything you write, then take it up and re-write it. That is just as bad. You have lost your enthusiasm about that story, in the interim; you have cooled off. When you take it up, the thing is like a school exercise to you, and hard to re-write.

This alternative is too extreme altogether, and I have a much better scheme to set forth. It has proven good for me in experience, and

wherever used has greatly improved my own work.

When you finish a story, your mind is hot with it; you firmly believe it to be the best short story ever written. Everyone does! Well, then, let it repose in your drawer for a couple of days, and busy yourself with something else entirely different. Then go back to your story and give it a complete revision. Your mind is still enthused over it, yet time enough has passed to let you see the mistakes and visualize changes that might improve it. Such is the formula. Let the thing alone for several weeks, and your enthusiasm has grown cold. Work and slave over it, time after time, and you come to hate it.

How, you say, does this give the brain facility? Because you are spending less time over one story, and you are turning out more stories. That's what counts—learning by doing—faith by works! By all means give your stories a revision; but give them only one. Make it thor-

ough, honest, laborious. Then, if the tale won't sell, forget it.

Many of us, who have attained facility and got the knack, sell the first draft of a story—and it is a completed story. Out of about a hundred booklengths written and sold, I do not believe that ten have received anything more than a revision for mistakes, grammatical errors, and other such "slips." Not one has been actually re-written. Often a portion of one is re-written to effect some change in the story, but then only a few pages are affected. It would be much better for our work if it were given more care, I grant you. On short stories it does get more care.

The revision of a story is particularly hard for a novice, because it is hard for him to see where his mistakes lie. The remedy for this, of course, is the professional critic. But how do you know that the critic does not turn over your story to a stenographer, and send you "form

letter 6" in criticism? Something of the sort has been done ere this, and will be done again.

There are, I make no doubt, professional critics who give honest criticism; even they are working from theory alone, and from established rules. There are so many of them in the field, however, that I am constrained to think some of them must be excellent. Some of them simply *must* give an honest, individual criticism that is worth something. How to find out who these men are? The best way, is perhaps by experience. Try them out and use your head. Criticise the criticisms for yourself, and let your common sense do the rest.

All this, remember, is nothing but the viewpoint of one man, who does not claim to be an authority, a critic or a figure in literature, and who is merely telling the truth about commercial writing, as he sees it. He may be wrong all the way through. Probably he is wrong a good share of the way. At least, he can write and sell a story, however!

When you are learning to write, you want to learn to *write*—time enough later to learn revision and polishing. To advise a young writer to "ceaselessly polish, revise, polish again" is venerable and absolute bosh—utter nonsense! How should an inexperienced writer know how to polish and revise? It is a supremely difficult achievement. Anatole France laid down half a dozen simple rules; I kept them by me a year or two, but the manuscripts on which I used them did not sell very readily, and I discarded his advice. What the young writer needs is a little re-writing, and a very great deal of writing.

Come, then, my weary brethren, and let us be concrete. You need to do all kinds of writing, tackle all sorts of material, before you find the medium best suited to you. No two people make the same errors, or will need the same sort of criticism. You must be your own critic. Make out for yourself a list of mistakes, apply them to each story you write, and then re-write

the story just once with the list propped in front of you. Change the wording as much as possible, in order to practise fluency in words. Read the dictionary to enlarge your vocabulary.

But—don't sit down and stew over a story until you hate it. Don't force yourself to a job from which you get no pleasure and into which you can put no enthusiasm. A story is like one of the old Chinese bronzes which were gold-plated in the fire. The finish may not be perfect, but too much rubbing will certainly wear away the gold and leave the bronze.

The story "D'Artagnan," published in *Adventure* and as a book by Covici, Friede Inc., was only a month in the writing. Except in two or three places, it was not re-written or revised. It contained one glaring and egregious blunder, which passed the author and the proof readers for both magazine and publishers—and why did it pass them? Because they were all

too much interested in the story at that point. They admitted it.

So think twice before you polish too hard, but if you are interested in the small details of getting your manuscript perfect, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER IX

Your Manuscript

ANY advice on "how to prepare your manuscript" will probably bring a smile of derision to your lips. Still, we may put it in a new way, brethren, just like a story plot that's older than King Solomon. And besides—this is no conventional treatise. We're not solemn, we don't take ourselves seriously, and all we give a damn for is results. So!

The general directions are simple, yet they may cover a multitude of sins. Your manuscript must be typed on one side of the paper, naturally, and double-spaced; this is simply to make it more legible. At the top of the first page inscribe your name and address, the number of words in the story, the rights you offer for sale, and the title of the story. Omit any

clip which binds the pages together—plenty of editorial offices are inconsiderate enough to mar your manuscript by providing one.

Let us break the rules again; this time, about margins. Usually young writers are advised to leave very wide margins, which is all folly. It uses a great deal of paper and makes a story rather hard to read. By leaving a margin of an inch at each side, a good inch, you allow the editor plenty of room for marginal notes or editing. If he needs more than this, the chances are that your story needs re-writing pretty badly.

Don't try to make your manuscript look "different," for the effect may be retroactive. I know one writer who illustrates his manuscripts with half a dozen sketches to each story, and breaks the typing around them; they're never used by magazines. Another spends a great deal of time illumining the heading and first initial of the story manuscript, and turns out some very fine work—all wasted, of course.

This sort of thing creates a prejudice in the editorial reader's mind, as a rule, and not in favor of the story, either.

On the other hand, some experiments are justifiable if not justified. For some years Allan Hawkwood wrote all his stories on a light brown bond paper, and used a clear green typewriter ribbon. His reason for this was perfectly sound, since this combination is probably the easiest possible on the eyes and he figured that the editors would like it. So they did, for his manuscripts were extremely easy to read. None the less, so many comments about it came to Mr. Hawkwood, so many people considered him a "nut," that he finally came back to white paper and black ribbon rather than be considered freakish.

How to determine the number of words in a story? Easily done. First set your typewriter to write a certain width on the paper leaving a good inch margin on either side; then leave the machine strictly alone! Write all your stories with

this same spacing, with an inch at the top and bottom of the page also. Write the same number of lines on a page. You can now count up a dozen pages or so, until you determine a fair average number of words per page that you write. Apply this average to each story, and you will not be far off. Never be anxious to get credit for all the words you write—under-estimate the amount if anything. Once the editor learns that your average is fair and dependable, your stock will rise a notch.

A machine with elite or small type will average fifteen words to the line, thirty lines to the page; to allow for short lines and dialogue, call this an average per page of 420 and you are probably safe, although this figures only a narrow margin. A machine with large type will probably write 350 words per page. The smaller type is just as acceptable to editors—if kept clean and legible—is much neater, and saves in the long run on postage, paper and labor.

YOUR MANUSCRIPT

William Wallace Cook, who is a finished craftsman in all details, has certain definite ideas about typewriters and finished manuscripts. He holds that a writer should, for his own sake, turn out a page of manuscript which shows not a blemish—a perfect page. Careful erasures and skill with your machine will do the trick. So will re-writing. Care in such matters goes to prove equal care in the writing of your story, and makes it attractive to read. For this reason, Mr. Cook—as do other writers—uses double quotation marks and other special characters on his machine. This adds slightly to his labor, but it also helps the print-style of his copy. He says, and rightly, that nothing helps an author so much with his editor, as to turn in immaculately neat copy. The editor reads that story in a joyful frame of mind.

It is worthy of note that Mr. Cook, Mr. Melville Davisson Post, and a few other writers are famous in editorial offices for turning in copy that seldom or never requires editing.

Naturally, special characters on the typewriter, like embossed notepaper, are not at all essential to good work. They are refinements which you may not care to use. At least one typewriter company, however, will equip machines with two letters on one key; which means that you can write words like "of" or "it" at one stroke. This is a small matter, but it helps to save labor in a day's work of ten thousand words. Such things, like the make of machine used, depend largely on your own preference.

Another thing in reference to your manuscript, is the making of carbon copies. You can never tell when you will need one. Money expended on good carbon paper and clear carbon copies is well spent.

For about fifteen years a writer religiously made carbon copies, and never had use for any of them. He never lost a story in the mails, and he had never heard of more than one ever lost by express. Then, a month or so ago, he lost a booklength in an express company's fire. He

found that he had become careless with his carbon copy, and this was lost—thrown out or destroyed heedlessly. He was quite unable to rewrite the story, and was simply out a month of solid work. I speak of this from experience, since I was the writer in question.

Well, my friends and brethren, you have now learned all there is to learn about writing stories, I presume—so far. Therefore, let us digress a trifle, tell one or two anecdotes, and look over the fiction market and what it wants. If this proves to your liking, I suggest confidentially that you read the next chapter.

CHAPTER X

The Fiction Market

"OF what does the fiction market consist? What are its needs and wants?"

There, my friend, you open up a broad subject, for the fiction market has many facets. There are many different kinds of fiction. Short tales for children, for example, have a wide field among the many Sunday-school magazines. Young writers may draw down a hundred per month or more for this class of fiction alone—but it takes work, as I know from dire experience.

However, you're speaking of the standard fiction magazines. I have no idea how many of these exist, and am too lazy to inquire. Probably thirty to forty in all. They spring up and die out like mushrooms—some more like

toadstools. Those which we might call the good ones, number in the rough a score; that is to say, those which pay a good rate. There are also fiction markets without number in general magazines. Plenty of small concerns will pay five or ten dollars for a story, regardless of length, on publication. You can hardly consider them as a market, however, except for "dead wood." And when you consider the number of fiction magazines, compared with the number of writers in this country alone, you'll begin to realize the sort of competition you're up against.

Did anyone ever tell you to "study each magazine for what it wants?" Sure, sure—they all say it, for it's the easiest thing to say. The official advisers all quote it, and so do the editors. "Study the magazine!" It's been the same old line of patter for years, and has even less meaning or value than the patter of the sideshow barker. It is, in plain terms, rather putrid garbage.

THIS FICTION BUSINESS

Let's sit down and figure it out for a moment. We may exclude from the discussion the few magazines that want only a specialized story, such as those which use "sex stuff." Now, no fiction magazine editor whose aim is to entertain his readers, is going to print the same type of story, month after month, unless his magazine has such a policy—which it hasn't. *Adventure* wants adventure stories, true, but this embraces a vast horizon; anything from historical novels to business tales. Every editor is always seeking something new, something that covers the old ground in a new way, something to amuse his readers.

Some years ago one editor announced that he wanted no more stories with women characters, and would positively run no "fact articles." He has never ceased using love stories and fact fillers. Why? Because he is a top-notch editor, and when he sees a good thing, he grabs it. All editors do, if they know their business. When a magazine gets into a rut, running

the same old line of stuff month after month, nobody buys it—and the editor will bust all rules and policies to avoid that danger, brethren!

Paste this over your typewriter: By the time you read the stories in a magazine, the editor is buying something entirely different, if he can get it.

And remember, there are no rules in fiction. L. L. De Bra wrote some stories of Chinese life, with all the characters Chinese. Nothing just like them had ever appeared. He was advised to play safe, to alter them to suit certain magazines, to put in American characters. Like a sensible man, he chucked the advice and sent the stories to *Popular*, which certainly appeared to offer no market for such stuff. *Popular* bought them, found them novel and refreshing, and delighted its readers with them. So there you are!

Many magazines like stories that run in a series, particularly if they are original and in-

genious in characters or in other ways. One original story will often prove the foundation of a series, although the writer had no series in mind when writing it.

Here is a tip—never send in the series, if you write one, all at once. Instead, say nothing about a series. Let the editor deduce that for himself when the second or third story comes in. If he gets all the stories at once, he will find some of them strong, some weak. If he gets them one by one, he loses sight of their faults and fails to compare them with each other—just as the reader does when reading them a month apart. It is extremely hard to plan a series, write it and sell it, as a whole.

To return to the market. You can sell almost any kind of story to almost any kind of magazine—if it is a good story. You can never tell who will consider it good, however; this is all a gamble. In connection with this, a word anent literary agents is in order. The novice in fiction is apt to think that an agent, especially one

who widely advertises past connections with publishers, can exert a "pull." This is wrong. Quite the opposite is true, in fact—some editors rather dislike to deal with agents.

Like the correspondence course, the literary agent is theoretically an excellent thing; and he fills, in practice, an important place. Many writers live in some far country, or in some far nook of this country; their agent handles all their manuscripts, saves them time and trouble, and charges a nominal commission. Certain agents have made themselves indispensable both to editors and to writers.

Most of the worth while agents have a limited clientele whose work they handle exclusively. They accept only writers of real ability for whom they perform real service. Several prominent writers today owe much of their success to the criticism and patient aid of the agent who perceived their innate ability.

Like everything else, agents differ in theory and practice, and there are very few in whom

I have any confidence. For a year, an agent peddled a book MS for me, with vain enthusiasm. I tried another agent. The first publisher he hit, signed a contract—yet the first agent had reported this publisher as rejecting the book! There you are.

In England, the use of an agent is a different affair, which will be touched upon in a later chapter. The agents who advertise that they can fetch you to fame and fortune, usually don't. As to gentry of this type, allow me to quote from the October, 1921, issue of the *Authors' League Bulletin*:

"Any advertiser who asserts that he can make an author or an artist out of you is a quack. . . . If our friend the editor is really particular, he will refuse that advertisement which just barely evades the actual promise and yet implies it to such a degree that the hard-earned pennies of elevator boys and street sweepers roll in, backed by the purchaser's confidence that he is buying a sure thing guide to literary success."

This is plain talk, straight from the shoulder talk! It speaks for itself.

Returning again to the fiction market. The editors themselves, many of them, have not the least idea of what they consider a good story. Once an editor told me exactly the sort of detective story he desired. It was duly turned in, according to specifications. He rejected it as being nothing short of putrid, and advised me to take it out somewhere and bury it. Instead, I sent it elsewhere. It sold on the first trip to *All Story* and made a tremendous hit. There you are!

Editors change their minds on short notice. A well-written story will make any editor change his mind, if it be at all suited to him. Otherwise, he would be a mighty poor editor!

Some years ago, historical tales were taboo everywhere. By dint of writing some which dealt with American history, I contrived to get a number printed; *People's Magazine* alone must have used half a dozen of them. Now they

are welcomed everywhere, and the fine stories by Hugh Pendexter in *Adventure* were for long a feature of that magazine. Of course, every type of story has its day, as one editor imitates another who has scored a hit. For several years past, there has been wild whoopee over western stories, which are now fading from the picture, being replaced by air stories and tales of the Great War. The magazine market shifts constantly. Probably by the time this book appears, stories of the Orient will be all the rage and the news stands will be all cluttered up with "*Oriental Tales*" and other such magazines.

The only sure thing a writer can know, is that his path is bestrewn with pitfalls of which the professors seldom or never speak. If you desire to know more about these, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER XI

Pitfalls

WHEN a magazine buys your story, do you consider that the matter is done with? Far from it, my poor erring brother! Let's look into the business end of it a little.

Your story is sold. The chances are that you receive a check, endorsement of which conveys to the magazine "copyright and all rights." If you are so glad to get the check that you go ahead and cash it, as all too many writers do, the odds are even that the magazine makes money off you. At least, the magazine may break even and get your story for nothing.

Most magazines are published by companies. Most companies maintain a "business department," whose aim is strictly business. This department, when the check is cashed, is informed

that the company owns all rights in your story. It sends marked copies of the magazine containing the story to its agent in England, who markets the English rights over there if possible. Marked copies go to other agents, who handle the second serial rights, or newspaper rights; also, the film rights and dramatic rights. In the case of a long story, there are also book rights in view.

Such, at least, is the general theory. It works well—for the magazine company. As a rule, writers in general are wise to this gentle graft. The Authors' League has done much to encourage virtue in the publishing business.

Some magazines go about it differently. They have a regular series of receipt forms. If a writer is foolish enough to sign away all rights, he gets that form to sign. If he sells only serial rights, as many do, then he gets a form which allows the magazine to recoup on the English and second serial rights. If he knows his business and sells only First American Serial Rights,

then he receives that form to sign and all is well.

Within the past couple of years the market has been flooded with "reprint" magazines. These publications buy the second serial rights to old stories, used ten or more years ago; they usually buy the rights from the magazine companies which first used the stories, but in some cases from the authors. One firm reprints its own stories, which it bought outright in the beginning, in its new magazines. For this reason most magazines now insist on buying all American Magazine Rights, and some include the Canadian. This is perfectly all right, because no magazine paying you ten cents a word wants to see your stories featured in reprint magazines which have paid perhaps a half-cent per word. It's unfair competition.

Nor can you blame an editor for exercising moral chicanery—which is perfectly legitimate business. Not long since, an editor blandly informed me that First American rights were of

course much less valuable than all serial rights. That is false, and he knew it to be false when he wrote it; he was merely playing the game as he was forced to do for the business interest of his firm. If he could induce me to accept less money, he was thus serving the business interest of his house. When his bluff was called, he had no more to say and all remained pleasant between us—he did not blame me, nor I him.

Recently, a friend of mine found to his surprise that he was very well known in the English market. Upon investigation, he discovered that one magazine which bought all serial rights from him, had got about half their money back from their English agents. He refused, thereafter, to sell anything but First American Serial Rights. The magazine had the effrontery to be quite hurt over his action in selling his own English rights, and threw a fine bluff of offended virtue! But the facts were patent.

I have no personal complaint to make on this score. Upon selling all rights, I have often had

occasion for bitter regret; but not for complaint. We cannot complain of our own folly. Let me detail certain of my own experiences, as lesson and warning.

Not long ago several syndicates suddenly made me offers for the newspaper rights on my past work. One of them desired to handle about sixty booklengths *en bloc*. For a number of years I had sold "all serial rights" or "American Serial Rights," not thinking the second serial rights of value.

I set about obtaining a release of these rights from several firms, even offering to buy back the rights. I discovered a few things. One firm answered as follows:

"Our business department doesn't feel that it would be possible to release to you the stories in which we own second serial rights. In one or two instances these have been sold, and in others they are contained in lists offered."

Now, refer from this quotation back to my remarks anent the business department of a

magazine. "Lists offered" is a significant phrase, brethren! What right has a magazine to offer your stories or mine to anyone else for sale? Every right. We can't complain, if we were fools enough to sign away our rights!

Another firm informed me that it was their policy to buy all serial rights, chiefly for the purpose of preventing the sale of the second serial rights to anyone; on the grounds that it cheapened a magazine, and that people bought a newspaper for the news in it, not for the features. They refused to release or to sell to me.

This appeared singular reasoning. However, I considered that I was not omniscient, and it was worth knowing about definitely. So I put up the matter to an editor of one of the largest newspapers in the country, and asked his opinion. His reply I shall quote in full, since it offers several points that writers may well bear in mind when they are considering selling "all

serial rights" to any magazine. Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest this:

"Instead of cheapening the magazine, the contrary is true. Not one-tenth of magazine fiction is worth syndicating in newspapers, and when a story is thus featured it reflects great credit on the magazine. The great newspaper syndicates today are handling the cream of the world's fiction, from O. Henry to Zane Grey and Ibanez.

"As to newspapers being bought primarily for news, it is obvious that these gentlemen do not know the circulation game. News is standardized, the same in all papers; it is the features that make circulation. If I were a magazine editor I should gladly see the syndicates thus advertise my periodical after I had 'beaten' them all to such fiction!"

So much for that experience. I afterward learned that the real reason behind the refusal to release my newspaper rights, was that the magazine company wanted to reprint the stories themselves in the new magazines they tried out from time to time—second serial rights.

How much money is there in syndicating? There is enough to make it well worth while, brethren. Each newspaper pays a small sum, say ten dollars; if twenty papers subscribe, there's two hundred berries in a lump. Edgar Rice Burroughs, I understand, syndicates his own stories, handling them from his Tarzana ranch; he is to be congratulated upon having retained all his rights.

As a general thing, it is possible to sell all magazine rights, and yet to retain or to have released the newspaper rights. In any event, never sell anything but these American and Canadian rights. No magazine has any *legitimate* use for any but the American magazine rights. If it cares to buy other rights, let them be specified and paid for, extra. Calmly to sequester the newspaper rights injures the author in purse and in reputation, unless they are bought and paid for.

The first page of your manuscript should contain a notice of what rights are offered for

sale; then the editor cannot well plead a "mistake." And watch everything to which you attach your John Hancock! Don't worry about getting your story back—this bluff of trying to buy "all rights" is only a desperate attempt to get something for nothing. The editor wants to know if you are green enough to fall for his game. If he likes your story well enough to buy it, he will not refuse it simply because you know your business. Not for a minute!

Jot down in your notebook that when a magazine wants to buy all serial rights, there is either a dog in the manger or a nigger in the woodpile, in the shape of an English agent. If a magazine offers a hundred dollars for all serial rights to a story, this means that they enter on their books a hundred dollars for the first American serial rights, as expenses. They should pay you an equal sum for the English serial rights, and half as much for the second serial rights. Call the bluff every time, brethren!

Yet, don't blame the editor for trying to run a blazer on you: Business is business; and if you care to hear something about the honesty of the writer himself, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER XII

Honesty and Suggestion

A SUCCESSFUL business man simply must have honesty, idealism, a grip on the spiritual side of his work. In these days, the business man who skins every sucker does not remain long in business. Just so with writers.

There is a certain deep mystery about every story you write; in the very turn and combination of the words, you show your character, what is inside of you. Now, then, what is at the back of your mind when you write—what is it that will come out and show on the paper, whether you wish it or not?

You cannot afford to clutter up your mind or your fiction mill with cheap sex thrillers and low ideals. The writer who has never written a "sex story," has something to be very proud of.

The wood alcohol in moonshine whiskey destroys the optic nerve of the drinker; just so, the poison in careless living and thinking is bound to destroy the more delicate mind's eye of the writer. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." That is horribly true of writing. What is in your brain is bound to show through all you write.

A case in point is that of a very brilliant writer, whose mastery of his technique is superb. His stories are magnificent. Yet through everything he writes, there runs a sinister strain. The thing is impossible to define; it simply shines through his work like some malignant, hidden vice. Writers and editors have mentioned it to me, and all say the same thing: "What's the matter with that man?" I know one editor who is absolutely afraid to buy his stories, although admiring them, because of this intangible something in them.

Curiously enough, the above paragraph was written a long time ago for the first and lim-

ited edition of this epochal work. One day a friend who had read the book, asked me as to the identity of the writer in question, and I told him.

"Oh!" he said. "I had just that suspicion, for I'm one of the few people who happen to know that he is a confirmed opium victim—has used the drug for years!"

I submit that this is a rather satisfactory sort of proof that there was something to my theory. No, don't blunt the most delicate tool you possess! Whatever you put into your brain will come out of it. Let the product come forth bearing a finer imprint than the milled edge of the dollar mark. And there's far more to it than this alone.

Just what is in your brain when you write? Perhaps you think: "This chapter is weak, or the editor won't like it, or it's not very well done." And it will be weak, and it will not suit, you may be sure! Why? Because your brain

telegraphs that thought through all you write. You cannot help it.

Don't suggest failure to yourself. It is not the amount of concentration you put on your story that counts, so much as the amount of concentration you put on other things while you are writing it. When you allow your concentration to scatter on your readers and their dislikes, you are lost. You must not stop to reflect; you must write your story in the sheer joy of creation. If your story never sells at all, you are fully repaid by this joy and mystery of creation.

I see your objection. You must write for a certain magazine, or with certain fixed ideals and limitations in mind. Yes; but did you ever have a story change itself as you wrote it? If you stop to reflect upon that change, if you deliberately force the story on into its original lines through your own timidity, you are bound to express that timidity in your pages.

In theory, you should not care about the

story's sale because in its creation you have your reward. In practice, you must have enough knowledge or experience to guide the story insensibly as you write it, without shutting off its freedom of action. The point is that if you worry over the sale while writing it, if you regard the end instead of the means, you are bound to fail. That is suggestion.

The more you give, the more you get; the more inspiration you get rid of, the more will flood into your mind. Other things being equal, the value of your story is in exact proportion to your own valuation of it. "Other things" means experience, technique, and so on. The joy of the writer is not in his check, but in the supreme faith that his story gives him. More than anyone else the hack-writer must have the sterling quality of confidence and faith showing forth in his work.

"There is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works," as a writer said nearly three thousand years ago. Write an

essay or article or story for some trifling publication that pays nothing, evolve one strong, new, *created* phrase and you have rich payment. Evolve one strong, new, created story and you will not need to worry about where it will land. That is sincerity.

It isn't money that counts in the writing game. You get money out of it, but you also get much more—in proportion as you put other things into it. A writer, as one editor wrote me, has his greatest asset in his reputation among editors for integrity. The same is true of himself. He is building, not for today or tomorrow, but for ten years hence—twenty years hence. He must be scrupulous above all other workers, as to the quality of his product. His reputation must be spotless. If it has any rotten spots, they will come to light; or else they will spread and make him so thoroughly rotten that he'll go under altogether. For you must look up if you would see the stars. Don't look down. The mud isn't worth it.

However, I find that I am again digressing from the fiction business, and I presume you're extremely annoyed at being lured into a lecture on ethics by a solemn old gentleman with a long white beard in one hand and a Bible in the other. So, if you're still interested in our original subject and would like to hear something new about the booklength—new, that is to say, if not quite original—then let me suggest that you turn to the next chapter.

CHAPTER XIII

Something New (?) About the Booklength

THE booklength novel, or as it used to be called, the serial, is probably the hardest thing for a young writer to tackle, and the easiest thing for an old hand at the game to achieve. It is entirely different from a short piece of work. The introduction must be more gradual, the characters must be more alive, the suspense must be sustained, and so forth. And naturally the rewards are in proportion.

Booklengths are in keen demand—nearly all the magazines use them, some use more than one in each issue. In these degenerate days, however, they are being mainly used as serials, and what the magazines now term a booklength novel, is only a novelette of about 40,000 words. However, we're speaking of the genuwine arti-

cle, brethren—real booklengths. The editors have a terrible time getting good ones. Plenty are written, of course, plenty are published, but many of them are very sad affairs, and few of them ever get between the cloth covers of book publication.

Why all this prelude of woe? Because the subject deserves it. Long magazine stories attain a deadly and sustained monotony; they're all alike, in the general run of things.

Nobody, apparently, has discovered any new way of telling the long story. The chance for originality seems very slender. Nearly all booklengths are mystery or adventure yarns, running along on the old stereotyped formula, between the same old grooves of thought, telling the story from the viewpoint of the hero. The hero, villain and the girl are introduced as swiftly as possible, the number of characters are kept down to the fewest possible, and so forth.

In reviewing the discovery which I here set

forth, please remember that at the end of the article you will get names, dates and facts as to its success. This is no theorist's dream, no wild fancy of a fictionist's brain.

My friend Brown, then, has invented or patched together a new kind of booklength, one written in a new way. At least, I believe it to be original with him, although he has borrowed hints from Conrad and Stevenson and others. The other day an editor was telling me about a new Oppenheim series he had just bought, and I perceived that Oppenheim must have been working out some system of originality himself, for certain of these details were used by him in the series.

Here we go, then, on the great invention!

The monotony of the average booklength depends upon two things; first, the unbroken smooth flow of action to the climax, and second, upon the same accursed paucity of characters. These two things are rules which have grown up through the desires of the editors, and of

course they are all very well—and the book-length is monotonous!

So, says Brown, break the rules. Smash up this smooth continuity of action, and above all, crowd your story with characters. Bring them on the stage for a little while, and lead them off; let each one definitely advance the story, and spend as much time and words on each character as though he were going clear through the story. This suggestion comes closer to the facts of life, too, than does the old fashion of running the same half-dozen characters all through the story and having a grand round-up at the end.

Now, how are these two very simple suggestions to be handled? It is a difficult matter, I grant, but it is also very enjoyable. It actually gives the writer a new zest with each portion of the story. Here is the recipe as Brown passed it on to me, and as I used it:

Let the prospective story be divided into four "books," each of a fairly equal number of

words. This is a general recipe, understand, to be altered or improved upon at will.

Book I introduces the hero and the heroine, with good sustained interest from the start. Let the reader understand clearly that the future action of the story depends largely upon other characters; mention them, describe them freely, but do not introduce them in Book I. Carry this book to a very good curtain. It ends, let us say, on August 1st.

Book II begins July 1st—that is, cuts back in time. The supplemental characters take up the action, perhaps in another part of the world. Paint them strongly, show the plot absolutely from their viewpoint. Bring out how what they say and do is ultimately to react upon the chief characters, the hero, heroine, villain. The last of these three is not yet introduced to the reader, although he may be frequently mentioned.

Let all of Book II follow these minor characters. One or two of them may exit. Carry one

of the stronger ones over into Book III. End with a strong curtain, on August 25th—carrying the action ahead from the end of Book I.

With Book III, cut back again in time to August 15th, and follow the villain. Brush him in strongly—make him a character, not a satanic doll. End this book with the last day of August. Into its final chapter bring the threads from the two former books—all neatly twisted into a single strand.

Ah! Your objection is well taken—How to keep the reader's suspense and interest? My dear brother, that is strictly up to you. If you want to know, go back and look into "Treasure Island." I believe my friend Brown was subconsciously inspired by that creation.

Book IV follows the single strand of plot to the grand climax, going back to the hero and telling the story from his viewpoint. Most of the supplemental characters have been eliminated, one way or another, along the road. An editor who can feed his readers with nothing

but pap, may cry: "Too many characters!" Let him cry. Do the work well, and it will sell.

General notes: Give the hero a rest; let the other characters pivot the story, until the last book at least. Forget about the movies. If the story is being written for a magazine, do it with the best in you for that purpose.

I hand on Brown's invention with no guarantee of its originality, but with full guarantee that it will work. It does remove monotony. The plot-climax of Book IV is being approached from different angles, the threads are being twisted by different hands, and what will come of it is unknown.

Besides, this general scheme of work is capable of an infinite variety of changes. I have written and sold a number of booklengths by this recipe, and only one of them followed it with any particular fidelity. As outlined, it may be adjusted to suit the individual whim of any writer. He may even make three parallel stories, synchronizing the action, and bringing them

all together for the concerted climax in Book IV.

No matter how you write it, the editor of the magazine will change it. Four of the book-lengths mentioned above were used serially, and the editor cut out all the main idea and ran each in continuous chapters. A fifth appeared as a real booklength, and here the editor did the same thing—rather spoiling the continuity and clearness of the whole, I fear, for the readers. But editors are editors because they can't write, usually. One or two others have appeared in book form; but not among the best sellers.

This scheme of things is not adapted to serials, certainly. Whether it will ever get far, is doubtful. At least, it is or was something out of the common run, and as such worth trying. The best recommendation of it is that editors bought the stories for hard cash.

Money has a louder voice than theory, brother scribbler! And if you're interested in some of the side pickings of the fiction business, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER XIV

Hack Writing

A GOOD deal of fun is poked at hack writing, and it is held in considerable scorn and contempt. We should worry! It provides, in one form or another, a great many writers with a meal ticket. It also provides a great many with their road to success. It is a stepping stone to higher things, and a pot-boiler after they are attained.

The field covered by the term hack writing, and the chances afforded by it, are wide-spread. The hack writer turns out a world of stuff for trade journals. Many a newspaper man adds to his salary in squibs for the hotel, drygoods, or other business periodicals. The pay is small, but everything helps. Many mickles make a muckle.

HACK WRITING

There are all kinds of branches to hack writing. It covers all fields of endeavor from writing learned papers for delivery by club-dowagers, to supplying articles for the dozens of periodicals published for various professions or trades. These trade journals require a lot of stuff. A good deal of hack writing consists of handling one interesting item in many different ways. For example:

Suppose that you take note of a concrete chicken house, built by some boys on a ranch. Get a photograph of it. You can write it up with emphasis on the ingenuity of the boys, and sell it to a boys' magazine. You can write it up with emphasis on the chickens, and sell it to a poultry journal or to farm papers. Thus you can sell the one item to many different publications. It is written in a different form for each one, and as their fields of publication are widely divergent, you are perfectly justified in the work; there is no infringement of copyright in such a case. You cannot, of course, sell the same

material in the same words to more than one publication.

In the fiction field, the term has several implications. If you care to turn out work at small pay, it can be done readily. There are dozens of small magazines which pay little, but which afford a writer the satisfaction of receiving small checks and knowing that his work is acceptable somewhere. Most of these are farm and home papers, or newspaper magazine supplements. In the old days, the hack writer could pull down many a check from the Sunday magazine sections of such papers as the old *Record-Herald* in Chicago; but the syndicates have applied the cloture rule to nearly all such openings.

In a class by themselves are the Sunday-school magazines, published in huge quantities for boys, girls, and smaller children—and also for adults. Notable are those of the D. C. Cook company at Elgin, which alone publishes, or used to publish, over fifty different magazines,

many of them weekly. In pre-war days this company used to furnish, and I believe still does, prospective writers with detailed accounts of what they want, and how they want it written. Most of them have special requirements, of course.

Many a writer, too, remembers the *Beacon* in Boston for its prompt checks and words of praise for small inspirations. In doing work of this character, the hack writer may and often does find himself satisfied to stick to this one field of endeavor and make it his own, for it is a large field and is comprehensive. I have written dozens and dozens of such historical stories for children, for instance. The pay is not large, but it is fair enough. And the experience is invaluable.

Much hack work must be measured in terms of experience, remember.

A business man in Chicago wrote some books for boys in his spare time. They were brought out by a publishing house in which he had an

interest. They attained such a huge success that his publishers insisted on getting more. Being a very busy man, he was unable to write more. So he called in a number of newspaper men and gave them the chance to write these books under his pen-name. He tried them out carefully, gave them each a book to write, and awaited results.

Out of several called, two men were chosen; they could duplicate his work excellently. He showed them just how to write the stories, as those of his own had been written, and put them to work. He paid them a hundred dollars flat for all rights in their manuscript, and for the sake of the experience they were very glad to accept.

One of these men, at least, turned out about a dozen of these books. The series became highly popular; perhaps the most popular books for boys published in late years, and attained a huge department-store sale. They still sell

fast, and more books have been added to the series by other writers.

Now, the real hack writers got no credit for their work in this case, but they did get extremely valuable experience. I know, for I was one of them. Many people have pitied me for all the money I lost by selling these books outright. Still, the experience gained was well worth the "lost" money—well worth it! And the hundred dollars per each came in mighty handy at the time, let me add. One of these books was written in two days, so the rate of pay was not so small after all.

And what about the magazines?

A man who has been writing for thirty years or so, whose name is familiar to readers of magazines and books, and who has made a fortune by his work, now does only hack writing. His work appears wholly in one magazine, under many different names. Not a fifth of it carries his own name—and all his pen-names are famous among the readers of the magazine!

He is paid a princely salary, and he earns it. With him, writing is a business. He does not regard it as an art, yet he has actually carried the business to a highly artistic point. He is one of the most truly artistic writers I have ever known. That is why he has managed to elevate hack writing to his own height.

Most of us are, in reality, hack writers. The hack writer turns out stories to order, or for a certain purpose. The "author" writes them from an inward urge, or inspiration. As a rule, he has inherited money and can afford to do so. We can't. We are in business for ourselves, and we are perfectly honest about it. We can't make it pay by despising hack work. The high-salaried cloth salesman may delight to display his imported woolens and Scotch tweeds, but he probably carries suspenders or cuspidors as a side line and makes his pocket money off them. We may be too proud to fight, but we can't be too proud to write, brethren!

We have our friends the enemy to deal with

always—the editors. And, since it occurs to me that this is an excellent place to say what I think about some editors, you will undoubtedly find the subject worth while; in which case, let us pass on to the next chapter.

CHAPTER XV

Are Editors Human?

NEARLY every writer, I suppose, has asked himself that question. After you begin to sell stories, you are certain to ask it. You will find yourself, as you think, deliberately cheated or tricked in some way. And then—what will you do? Once an editor handed me a raw deal, and I went with a howl to my friend Bill for advice. He was a writer of twenty years' experience, and a man of wisdom. He heard my howl, and then smiled.

"Remember one thing," he said. "Before you do or say anything rash, just reflect that the editor is the man who sends out the checks."

That was excellent advice, and I have remembered it many a time.

But you should look at the matter from the

view of the editor. You may feel that he has lied to you outrageously, has tricked you out of other than serial rights, or has somehow gouged you. And perhaps he has, but every matter has two sides. The editor must do things he does not like to do. He is given a certain amount of money to spend on his magazine, and must make it spread as thin as possible. It is his business to get everything he can for his magazine—and to get it in any legitimate way.

The editor, remember, is only a middleman. He is expected to serve the interests of his magazine. If he gets the better of a bargain, that is only business. It is the writer's place to grin and bear it, cherish no grudge, and keep on friendly terms with the man who signs the checks.

Do not understand, from this, that the editor is out to bilk everyone in sight! Far from it. The average editor makes a business of helping his writers in every possible way. He will

inform them of his needs, give them helpful suggestions, try to improve their work and thereby improve his magazine. If he is forced to quote "business is business," he will try to make it up in some other way. Sometimes, however, the editor is at fault.

Several years ago, for example, a certain firm was practically compelled to break a contract with me. They publish many magazines, and publish them on a platform of probity. In this case, one of their editors got things into a jumble, with the result that my contract was broken, and several other writers felt that they were badly treated.

Had I forced the issue, undoubtedly the firm would have made amends. Remembering my old friend's advice, I said nothing. Ever since then, however, I have observed that this firm has unostentatiously gone out of its way to throw business to me—and to these other men who thought they were wronged. In a financial way, I suppose they have made amends several times

over for any injury done me. As a consequence, you can imagine that my feelings toward this firm are extremely cordial.

An editor, of course, cannot undertake to aid and instruct the general mass of writers who submit unsolicited manuscripts to him. Once a writer shows that he can produce the stuff which that editor wants, he will find himself helped very gladly and willingly. And writers remember this. They know each other, by letter or personally, and all information in regard to editorial treatment receives an amount of circulation which would astonish most editors.

Many years ago, Gardner Hunting was editor of *People's Magazine*. Since his time, I suppose a dozen writers have mentioned to me their cordial relations with him, his very ungrudging assistance, his hearty endeavors to give them advice and help. Only yesterday a letter came to me from another writer, recalling Mr. Hunting's kindliness in the warmest

terms; yet this writer had not heard of Gardner Hunting for several years! Thus do the memories of good deeds live.

Many and many an author rises in hot indignation over the "impertinence" of some editor who sends him a copy of instructions on how to write for the editor's magazine.

Such an act is, of course, sheer presumption. Every writer turns out an individual product. The editor who tries to make all his writers work alike—and some do—who tries to make all writers supply him with a brain-product that runs between set grooves, is no doubt an egregious ass. The thing cannot be done with success, for there all entertainment is lost; and what the public wants, remember, is entertainment. What the editor wants is a pig-headed devotion to his little rules and gods.

So, at least, thinks the writer. But let us look at the editor's side of this same matter. Let us see how much truth lies in the above accusations.

ARE EDITORS HUMAN?

The editor is faced with a problem. He must produce a fiction magazine which, to meet keen competition, must have some style or individuality of its own. Some editors, to gain this point, publish a certain type of stories, such as stories of the west. Other editors try to gain it by making their stories of distinctive character.

Every editor has his own ideas of what will best suit the public; that is why he holds his job! To make his magazine distinctive, he sends out a pamphlet, perhaps, setting forth the kind of stories he wants, and how he wants them written. This is his ideal; it is also his little joke, because he knows that he can't hew to the line!

A few writers will honestly try to supply his wants; the majority will sneer at him and pay no attention. He must do his best to keep his own ideal, just as the writer must do his best to keep his own individuality. Both sides are justified. The editor has every right to line up the sort of stuff he wants; the writer has every

right to refuse to be bound down and trammeled.

I think the editor has much the harder row to hoe.

The editors are human; you may be sure of that. A great many of them have been successful writers. In the editorial chair, they are business men and look at their work from that angle. If you are fool enough to get hooked in a business deal by your own inefficiency, you have no basis for complaint. You cannot afford to be inefficient or incompetent in any business.

Remember, you may easily be mistaken in thinking the editor is taking advantage of you. Even though you may know that you are right, and the editor wrong, give him the benefit of the doubt. The editor has more right to a feeling of suspicion than you have; he is up against all kinds of confidence games planned by unscrupulous writers, plagiarists, and others. Also, he has purely mechanical problems to solve.

ARE EDITORS HUMAN?

Has the editor any right to interfere with your manuscript?

To this, a simple "yes" or "no" cannot be returned. One editor is famous — or rather infamous — for the way he mishandles a story without using the least spark of intelligence. On the other hand, the *Blue Book* often retouches a manuscript and greatly improves it, as I have found in my own experience.

No beginner, in any case, can afford to complain. There are certain editorial changes which are permissable. Any interference with the story, any omissions, most certainly are not permissable without the author's consent. As a rule, any beginning writer will be glad to have his MS edited, but it should not be done without telling him it is required. Any established author has even more right to be consulted in the matter. If a story appears over the name of John Brown, the public gauges John Brown by the printed word. If he is a beginner, the chances are that the editor will improve his story—yet

it is *his* story, and the editor has no right to alter it without his permission.

Many editorial alterations are the most asinine things imaginable. One firm has a fixed rule, apparently, that the Chinese pidgin-English "my" shall always be made to read "me," because they don't know what it means. Another magazine, in a historical novel, shuddered at the word "seduced," so they made a sentence read like this: "If Buckingham had bored queens, Catherine had bored emperors." Conceivably it might have been better with the other verb.

Despite changes, however, think twice, always. The editor has a reason, and he honestly believes he is helping the story, whether or not you agree. And once an editor feels that you approach him frankly, that you're glad of criticism, that you appreciate his efforts, he'll meet you halfway. So many writers consider themselves little tin gods that the editor is usually afraid of stepping on their toes. Also, a

certain class of writers affect to sneer at editors as desk-slaves, mere servants filling positions beneath the dignity of genius. When you hear this sort of bunk, go slow, brethren.

The editor is your best friend, if you'll let him be so. Like everything else, it depends on yourself and the material in you. Speaking of material, it is time we touched upon this aspect of fiction writing; so, if you're at all interested in continuing the subject, you'll find it set forth in the following chapter.

CHAPTER XVI

Material

THE gushing landlady exclaims: "I just know you'll find *lots* of material around here!" Her spouse wags his head sagely, and adds: "Yep. Lots of it, mister! I'd like to tell ye an experience I had once—it'd work into a great story, believe me!"

This "real life" stuff is the bane of a fictionist; it is fired at him from all angles everywhere he goes, and it means nothing in his young life. An interesting book that tells all about how to write, says: "Nine stories out of ten are suggested, in one manner or in another, by real episodes." I never saw any fiction that was written by the author of this textbook, however.

Where do you get your material? The answer to this question depends entirely on who

makes it. Undoubtedly, newspaper stories do suggest fictional work in many instances. Cases are known where several writers have taken the same news incident as a basis for fiction; and each has accused the other of plagiarism, although unjustly. For this reason, perhaps, a good many writers steer clear of real episodes altogether.

The material for a story comes entirely from inside of you. Your imagination pictures a scene, where another man's imagination can see no picture at all. I cannot repeat too often that there is no blanket rule in writing; it is so absolutely an individual profession that no laws can be laid down to cover it.

Knowing your subject is entirely different from using real episodes. Courtney Riley Cooper writes circus stories that are flavored with the sawdust, for he used to travel with a circus as press-agent. Captain Dingle writes sea-stories, for the sea was his profession during many years. But—are these stories founded on real

episodes? Usually not. Often a real episode may be introduced into a story, but it comes in awkwardly and limits the imagination.

What is here set down, comes from some years of experience and acquaintance with many writers who earn a living by their steady output. I can recall very few of them who can work successfully on real episodes; yet it largely depends on the nature of their work. Mr. Edwin L. Sabin, for example, who is an authority on the southwest and the early west and who writes largely in a historical vein, is one of the few writers who keeps scrapbooks and makes any use of them. He is the exception—but his work demands an accurate knowledge of names, dates, and frontier incidents. When it comes to fiction, he discards the scrapbook.

I can recall only two or three cases where my own stories have been suggested in any way by a real episode. To some people, on the other hand, it comes easier to found a story on some actual incident. Yet it is only once in a blue

moon that real life produces a good fiction story. A land fraud case in New Mexico was worked into a *Top Notch* story several years ago, requiring only a little elaboration to make it go over. Such cases are the rarest of the rare. If you depend on real life, you depend on a rotten reed—so far as commercial fiction, a steady marketable output, is concerned.

A story must come out of your head. You can introduce real life into it, but you cannot take it out of real life. This is speaking for myself only; I don't doubt that somebody can prove me wrong. That's the beauty of the writing profession—you can bank on nothing! I am not ironclad. There's a Monitor for every Merrimac.

Many a writer has found, in writing, that he visualizes the stories as he goes along. He sees them in his brain, scene by scene, like a moving picture, and jots down the picture in type. Some men deliberately picturize their big scenes.

Nine writers out of ten cannot say where

their material comes from. It comes from their experience, if you like; from their imagination, their common sense. They write a story without thinking of technique. Some use clippings, card catalogs; some do not. It is up to the man himself to answer, and no two answers will be alike.

Let me here prove to you the "individuality" of this business, and the flexibility of these remarks of mine!

Since writing the above paragraphs, there came to me by sheer chance a wonderful story out of real life—a story of business, which required only the whipping into fictional shape. It had a perfect hero, a perfect villain, and dramatic situations which built up steadily to a climax, with an ending of poetic justice. The whole affair made a complete fictional entity, and has since been published in book form—not over my own name, since there was entirely too much truth in the story.

Well, does this give the lie to all that I have said? Not in the least. It simply proves that

no general rule can be assigned. This case is the exception; it is one case in a hundred where in the writer can visualize a "story." And in turning this case into a novel, the writer is not producing fiction in an exact sense. He is taking real episodes and fictionizing them.

When he is writing pure fiction, his imagination is drawing scenes and situations out of nothing, as it were. Then, undoubtedly, real episodes interfere with and hamper his imagination. When he is turning real episodes into fictionized form, he is doing something entirely different; he is not creating, in the same sense. He is collaborating with facts.

In connection with this subject, a word on collaboration is in order.

Do not collaborate with anybody in writing fiction. If you cannot stand on your own feet and furnish your own material, quit the game! I offer this warning from dire experience, as the result of many collaborations with all sorts and conditions of men.

Let us give the devil his due, however—I have found one perfect collaborator—the late W. C. Robertson of Honduras. Many of our stories appeared in *Adventure* before his death. He sent along his stuff, and I turned out the story. He lived so far away that he had no chance to kick about what I did with his material, and if I ruined his artistic notions, he grinned and bore it like a gentleman. Success never spoiled his shrewd good nature, and I could mishandle his stuff with the perfect confidence that he would approve and cheerfully cash the check. I like to pay this belated tribute to his memory. God rest him! He was a far-away friend, and a far better one than most of those closer to hand.

This type of collaborator is extremely rare—the exception proved the rule. Never collaborate with anyone, unless he lives in Honduras or Timbuctoo. Even then, go mighty slow; he is only too apt to have notions about literature

which don't coincide with the product of the fiction factory. And if you want to know more about literature as it affects our business, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER XVII

Literature

If you read—and of course you do—the book review pages and the "literary" magazines, you find that most of the fiction magazines, and a great many published books, are regarded with serene contempt, with the same lofty disdain that our forefathers gave to the "thrillers" by that erratic Frenchman, Dumas. Now, what is the reason for the vast gulf which separates two magazines such as, for example, *Live Stories* and *The Atlantic Monthly?*

The ostensible answer is that certain circles of people read certain magazines. A select circle reads one magazine, and an entirely different set of people reads another. Indeed, many magazines are designed to appeal simply to one set of readers. In a sense this is the correct an-

swer; but there is another one which is perhaps truer, although it never appears in print.

Do you, in common with most literary artists, despise the books of Harold Bell Wright? On the contrary, you probably enjoy them. Do you, in common with "everyone of any moment," sneer at his tremendous sales and his vast popularity? No. You probably admire him greatly.

Good! There's your answer.

The fiction that is published in our popular magazines and in the standard novels commonly termed "trash," is turned out for the people at large. It is written for the average man in the street. It is democratic, carelessly so. It may be poor in art, in grammar, and in technique—but it has to tell a story, and a good story, or it would not be published. Its aim is to entertain, not to point a moral. And the people buy it hugely, or it would not be on the stands. They want it! In other words, our fic-

tion magazines, purely an American institution, are symbolical of democracy at its worst.

We don't give a hang for style. Few fiction writers know what it is, or care. What we are after, is the story. We like it simply told, but skillfully told. Regardless of the merits of his work, I believe that Harold Bell Wright should prove an inspiriting example to every young writer, simply because he delivered the goods. He divined what the great reading public wanted, and turned it out.

You, who write at home on hope and in faith of charity, doubtless wonder whether you will ever stand in the circle of the elect, acclaimed by critics, with the "great American novel" under your hat. I don't think you have a chance in the world, brother scribbler—not a chance! All you can hope for is independence and a few thousands a year. Is not that enough?

High grade literary ore, as usually considered, concerns itself much with motives—with what the movie people term "psychology." A

novel by Henry James probes deeply and exactly into the motive of an action, into what lies behind the doings of the characters. A novel by Conrad does the same thing, in more confused fashion. Conrad puts down the actual thoughts of a person in all their incoherence, puts down just what that person *senses*. Some readers like this. Such a story must be read thoughtfully, with great leisure, to appreciate its artistry.

Now, our people in America—that is, our average men in the street—have not very much thought or leisure to put into a story. They want to get thought and leisure out of it. They do not belong to the leisure class; they have to think hard enough to earn their bread. What they want is entertainment.

So the magazine story entertains. It does not attempt realism. It is not concerned with the shoddy, drab realism of painting people as they are. When the Japanese were assimilating western civilization, they made the same discovery

that the Athenians made—that true facts are ugly, that art consists in idealization. Thus with our magazine fiction. It does not present real people; it idealizes people, as all popular fiction does.

What we term "literature" is vastly different. It is written for and by a certain select circle of people. It is fine stuff, and we have no quarrel with it. This circle of people, however, set themselves aloft and pick a quarrel with "trashy fiction."

It is perfectly natural that the circle at the head of our intellectual life should sneer at "easy reading." They like the book which the man in the street cannot get anything out of or even understand. Unless we imitate their favorite English authors, unless we abandon the shimmering pearl of romance for the hard-glinting diamond of realism, they look down their noses at us. And, remember, with reason!

They like a higher class of reading matter. This liking, however, does not make them crit-

ics—although they imagine it does. It gives them no right to speak for the public. Our friends the New Thoughters say that there is no such a thing as evil—that evil is merely a lower plane of life as viewed from a higher one. Just so with literature and commercial fiction.

A good many years ago, Edgar Allan Poe turned his guns on the solemn bigwigs of contemporary English literature. Then, he was writing pretty cheap stuff. Today, his stories are literature. Never mind the critics—live and laugh and write!

How are we to know that our magazine fiction may not eventually constitute "literature?" It has happened, such a thing; it will happen again, for in such writing is the spirit of romance. What is termed "realism" does not endure in literature, for the pessimistic drawing of real life cannot endure anywhere, either in art or writing. If it could, our newspapers would constitute literature. Only when some

group of words grips that intangible something which is beyond life, does it endure.

Dicky Steele imitated his friend Addison, writing light and frivolous trash for the popular taste; his spirit now stands aghast to find it regarded as literature. Sheridan wrote some pot-boiler comedies in order to pay his bills and get into politics. True, he worked hard, re-writing and polishing them, but that was an end of it. For him, it was hack work, and he stuck to politics thereafter. None the less, posterity pronounced his work literature. And so it goes.

Twenty years since, the nickel novels about Diamond Dick and Frank Merriwell, which were very carefully written and censored, were regarded with utmost horror by every fond parent, and our best people blushed at mention of them. Today, our "sex" magazines and novels are welcomed into the homes of these same best people. How poor Diamond Dick would have blushed to read one of these abominations!

LITERATURE

In the "Autobiography" of Mr. S. S. McClure you may read how all Stevenson's friends despised the sort of story he wrote, and continually nagged him to turn his attention to "literature." Instead, he wrote to please himself, to entertain, and he certainly accomplished his real purpose. No rule-bound nickel novel writer ever dared to put into print such bloody feats as Stevenson put into "Treasure Island." This was an entertainment story pure and simple; had it come a few years later, *Popular* or *Adventure* or *Blue Book* would have run it serially. Now it is literature, and deservedly; yet it is no better written, apart from the charm of Stevenson's word-play, than many magazine stories which appear every month.

There is no dividing line between "literature" and commercial writing, except in the mind of the critic. Because a great deal of our commercial writing is written very carelessly, because some of it is poor, the whole output is unreservedly damned. Because a tale is a detec-

tive or adventure story, it is immediately regarded as something a little lower than good literature—no matter who writes it.

All this is really very amusing. What criterion is there? None at all. The book reviewer who can take a crack at "cheap writing" does so simply for effect, simply to impress his readers with his own superiority. So never get the idea that you have to "write down" in order to reach the fiction magazines, in order to make a living from them. You don't. Instead, get the idea that you are reaching out to thousands and hundreds of thousands of people. Don't worry about "literary fame." If you can produce the goods, you will be classed in literary circles soon enough.

Many of our biggest men, busy every day with great things, read stories that will entertain them—stories of mystery and adventure, fiction magazines. That's the kind of writing that lives eternally, like the "Arabian Nights."

When a man such as Burbank, for example,

tells me that he reads my stories for diversion —and enjoys them—then the critics may damn them all they please! Do you think it is a small thing to be able to divert the mind of Luther Burbank? If you do, then think again.

And after such thought, my brethren, choose which master you will serve. Into this choice, the question of payment enters largely. If you care to digress with me into this interesting matter, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER XVIII

Prices Paid for Fiction

SOME writers regard the price question as a delicate, hidden mystery to be contained in their own bosoms. Most editors would like to have it considered so, too; some swear their best-paid writers to secrecy. The majority of us, however, see no mystery about it. We are in business. We have wares to sell. There is no reason for secrecy—if we do not get as much as the other fellow, we have no reason to feel ashamed.

Many of us think that there should be a definite, standard scale of prices paid for fiction—I used to think so myself. This, however, is impossible from the very nature of things. No two writers write alike, no two turn out exactly the same stuff. It would be highly impractical for any magazine to have a standard scale of wages to writers.

PRICE PAID FOR FICTION

It is no secret that the rewards of some writers are fabulous. A famous name commands a higher rate than an unknown name, because it draws more readers. Magazines like the *Red Book* or *Pictorial*, with large advertising income, can choose the best work of the best men and pay well for it. The pure fiction magazines, on the other hand, depend to a less degree upon advertising. Some carry no advertising at all. It is to these magazines, which absorb a large amount of material, that the professional writer looks for his wage, while at the same time he is striving to reach the top of his profession.

What then do these magazines pay?

No more than they have to, usually. I know of but one magazine—though there may be others—which gives its writers voluntary raises. Let us take the concrete case of my friend Bill, whose experience corresponds to my own and that of many other writers.

Bill served a long apprenticeship and blos-

somed out in the fiction magazine about eight years ago. One of his early stories, a long one, caused a reprint issue of the magazine which used it, and this firmly established him with the trade. He had luck at the start.

He was then getting a fraction over a cent a word—a fraction looks pretty large to an editor. Unlike some of his friends, Bill did not get a big head and immediately tackle the editors for all the traffic would bear. Instead, he plugged away at his old rate and made himself solid with the reading public.

When Bill failed to sell a story to his accustomed market, he peddled it down the line, and unloaded it on a cheaper magazine. He took any price offered, and sometimes held frank bargain sales with editors—he even gave stuff away. His object, of course, was to get as wide a reading public as possible; and he got it.

One day he braced an editor and got two cents a word for his story. Now, Bill knew that he was card-indexed as a cent-a-word man.

Many editorial offices keep an index of their writers, with all such details noted down carefully. So, for a time, Bill stuck to the man who gave two cents a word, and ignored the other editors.

When they asked for stuff, he said that he was doing all he could do at double their rate. This, you see, did not hold them up at all; it simply brought an offer from them of two cents. So Bill managed the matter, quite diplomatically; a blunt demand from him would have brought the higher rate, but he wanted to make the editors offer it themselves. Bill handled his affairs like a good business man, year after year, and kept on turning out high class magazine fiction; with every "readers' vote" he was usually among the top three or four, and remained a prime favorite. Today he is getting ten cents a word.

Within the past couple of years, the whole payment situation has changed in the magazine field—it has altered upward. It used to be

that two or three cents per word was the top rate. Now, several magazines announce that their minimum rate is two cents; whether or not they abide by it in the case of new writers, I cannot say—I do know that one of them does not. The editors will all fight hard to get a story as cheaply as possible, naturally. The top rate paid by the best fiction magazines is ten cents per word. I know one editor who flatly denied this, saying with heated emphasis that no magazine could pay such a rate and that it was frankly impossible. I happened to know, having seen the check, that he himself was paying at least one of his writers this same rate. But why disillusion him? To prove yourself right is a costly matter and gets you nothing whatever.

If the new writer, then, cannot turn out three 5,000-word stories a month, he had better quit the game. If he sells two of them at one cent a word, he earns $100 that month. If not—not! The rewards of writing are extreme-

ly uncertain. Unless a man has no one but himself to consider, he should never throw up a steady job to take on writing, at least until writing is paying him twice as much as his regular work. When his spare time can produce twice the income of his work-time, he is justified in taking the plunge. I worked in a railroad office, among many other places of employment, and stayed there until writing brought me a bigger salary than my division superintendent received—then I quit.

It is a fallacy to think that any standard fiction magazine invariably pays high prices—however good it is. It pays some writers high prices, and evens up by paying low rates to other men. That is fair enough. Suppose *Blue Book* pays some well-known writer five cents a word, and accepts your first stories at one cent or less. You must consider that you are being introduced to the public. You are starting in at the game. You may argue that your work, if it appears beside that of the other man, is

worth just as much; but it is not—at least, to the editor!

Besides this, every time your stuff comes out in a magazine, your reading public is being increased. You do not get all your pay in dollars, by a whole lot!

Once you are established, once your stories are appearing regularly—then you are in business for yourself, and your troubles start. It's root hog or die! If your throat is not cut, thank yourself and nobody else—that's business, remember. An editor cannot be expected to be a philanthropist. He may be one in private life, but in business he is out for the coin like everyone else.

Under these circumstances, an editor is usually entirely willing to insult you by the offer of a very low price, accompanied by a plea of poverty or the fact that your manuscript must be cut down, or something of the sort. He expects you to come back and raise his offer, telling him to pay your rate or send back the

story. As a rule, he pays it. If you are a new man, a green hand, he will send back the story. A new man can't take chances.

Two cents a word, then, is a fair rate to expect. When a writer gets well known, the sky is the limit. It all depends on how well he knows poker—and on how the reading public likes his stuff. You can make the readers look for and like your stories, particularly if these are always of a certain length or kind; and if you're sufficiently lured by this detail to find out more about it, read the next chapter.

CHAPTER XIX

How Long is a Story?

THE various lengths of stories are classed in an elastic and arbitrary fashion, which is often extremely confusing to the amateur. No two magazines seem to have the same trade names or to apply them to the same length of manuscript. In the magazine fiction business, there are three general classes of story—the booklength, the novelette, and the short story. The booklength is any story of fifty thousand words and upwards; which means that it is of a length suitable to book publication. If used as a serial, it should have breaks at intervals—which, in effect, means a dramatic "curtain" at the end of every fifteen or twenty thousand words.

The novelette, or little novel, averages fifteen to forty thousand words. Everything under

fifteen thousand is a short story. All this classification, however, is loose in the extreme, depending entirely upon the magazine and the conscience of the editor, who wants to impress his readers with how much they're getting for their money. Accordingly, he may publish a "booklength novel" of forty thousand words, and he may call a long short story a novelette. His definitions have nothing to do with mine, however.

What is the best length for the amateur fictionist to tackle? The short story, obviously. For one thing, almost every magazine is a potential market. Then, a booklength or novelette usually requires a skilled hand, takes a good deal of time, and needs a large amount of thought. The short story may take a day or a week to write. If it fails to sell, the writer is not out much of his time, and small postage will carry the story to many markets—and back again.

The short story, which usually deals with

one incident or short series of incidents, is not a hard thing to write; it is, in fact, the easiest thing to write. The novelette, on the contrary, requires practically all the work of a book-length, and really amounts to nothing but a highly condensed booklength.

A word here about this condensation, this "paring to the bone" which is advised all beginners in writing. Must we say it again? "It's all nonsense!"

You are told to cut your story to the quick, rid it of all superfluous detail. In a way that is good advice enough, simply because most beginners are apt at rambling all around the universe to get at a point. In another way it is bad advice, for if consistently followed it leads them to do just that thing—pare to the bone! And that is a bad thing. No fine short story is rid of all detail.

The advice should be put in this fashion: Cut out of your story everything that is not necessary to the story itself. Don't pare it down to

bare skin and bone; expand all you wish, so long as you make the expansion essential to the story. In brief—do not *cut*, but *make necessary*! There lies all the difference between faulty instruction and valuable teaching. It is easy to destroy, to delete; it is hard to work over an incident until it becomes vitally necessary to the story. Yet this is the best way in which to learn.

For me personally, the short story was difficult, so I looked over the field and found the novelette growing in importance. Fiction magazines tend to cut the length of short stories, and to use novelettes more frequently; the readers like them. A novelette comes complete, yet gives the writer scope for character work and description, while it has no lost motion. It contains the elements of a booklength, draws the reader into an involved plot, and comes to a sharp end. Or it should.

Deciding that the novelette was the best bet, I tried to ride its popularity, and to a certain

extent have succeeded. I think many of them have gone over well because of their sharp ending. Usually they come to a big climax, then end as abruptly as possible; also, the twist ending can be applied to a novelette with good results.

More than once I have cut a poor booklength into a good novelette; no serial breaks are needed, permitting a smooth narrative, and there are no forced high-spots. A booklength demands a more gradual approach to the main action. If the scene be China, the reader must be led there. The novelette plunges directly ahead, with only a touch or two of local color, high-lighting effects. There is no padding, no superfluous verbiage, and this meets with the approval of the readers—the entertainment hits a good pace and keeps at it.

Editors also like the novelette, simply because they can often use two or three to an issue, padding the table of contents and giving the readers variety, and paying less than for

one booklength. Most editors have a standard novelette length which they prefer, but will consider a good one regardless of length. It gets a quicker decision than does a booklength, and perhaps a fairer one, since there is no tendency to skip pages.

A novelette demands special technique. It's chapters must be short and swift, and the story must move, not drag. Incidents may be given a paragraph which in a booklength would demand a chapter. For this very reason—condensation—it is hard for some writers to attain; the knack once learned, however, it does deliver the goods!

It is well to experiment, discover for yourself what is your own type of story; it is laborious, but pays. Stick to whatever length you can best turn out. Even if the editor buy none, he will have you tabulated when story after story comes into the office, all of an average length. He will remember it. In other words,

you standardize your output, which is good business if well handled.

The very short story sells like a shot, but must be well done. In a very short one, you can put the plot of a long one—but each word must be necessary, striking. So, at least, I hold. A friend of mine, who writes only from inspiration, states emphatically that no worth while story can be told in less than ten thousand words.

So—tell the story, and if the wall hampers you, jump over it! You can jump as far as England, if you like to pick up extra money, and if you care to hear more about this, read the following chapter.

CHAPTER XX

Selling in England

I GET a great many letters from other writers, asking for information about how to sell English rights, what they are worth, and so forth. They're worth a good deal, brethren—but not if you peddle direct. The only way to sell over there, is to use an agent; and the right one is not easy to find. Some of them are baldfaced liars, promising impossible things. One at least is notorious for selling anything, whether the author is his client or not!

None the less, the English editorial custom is to deal with agents, not with authors. What have you, then, to offer? Have you signed away all rights? I must now cover this point by a recent and most illuminating example.

My friend George has been writing for years,

but has never sold in England. He wrote me about a booklength and a travel book on which he was working, and I advised him to keep the English rights on both. The magazine who had the novel tried to jew him out of his rights, even to the extent of writing him absolute lies as to their invariable custom, the prices they paid, etc., etc. I happened to have some letters from the head of the firm which proved these lies to be lies, and I sent 'em along to George. He got his English serial rights intact, and within thirty days an agent had sold them in England for him, then landed the same MS with a book publisher.

Now for the travel book. It was accepted by a publisher here, who tried as usual to get all rights signed over, agreeing to split even with the author on everything sold—a very neat little graft for the publisher. George refused flatly, and within two months the agent had landed the book in England for him.

Years ago I landed a book here at home, and

the contract had this fifty-fifty clause in it. The publisher sold the book outright to an English firm, getting me about $100 net. The book is still selling over there, at no profit to me, and I was tied up with an automatic contract giving my next two books to that same English publisher—all because I let the New York gentleman argue me into his fifty-fifty clause.

But I forget—we are dealing with fiction magazines primarily. In a previous chapter I gave warning about selling the English rights to stories. These rights are growing more valuable all the time, because the English magazines are paying better prices and are now leaning more and more heavily upon American contributors. They have a very small circulation compared to our magazines, and the prices paid are not high—to the usual writer, a cent per word is good money. Once known to the English readers, however, you have fairly good sledding and will get better prices. Here is an

interesting yarn illustrating the English method of dealing with writers.

A magazine, in getting started, frankly applied for some of my stuff at a low rate. They said that in six months they would either be paying me high rates or would be bust, and that if I'd take a gamble with them, well and good.

"Nothing doing," I told my agent. "I've had that fish story handed me by a dozen magazines, and not one of them ever gave me a voluntary raise in rate. In my old age I've grown tired of editorial liars. Tell this chap to go find some other sucker."

The agent smiled. "Perhaps you don't know us very well yet, in England."

"I know this editor won't keep his word if he does make good," I said.

"On the contrary," said my agent, "he will keep it, or lose his job. You see, old chap, that's our custom over here!"

And to my astonishment, I found it was so.

Now, English-written fiction is as a rule poor stuff, and how! Also, the English know it. Much

as they hate the necessity, they must use American stories, for they don't pay the price necessary to attract their own best writers, who sell to American magazines. For those of us who sell over here in America, the English market is all velvet and not to be despised. A novelette that brings $1,000 here will fetch perhaps $200 over there—and it helps, brethren! Also, I've sold short stories in England for a better price than they brought here at home.

Here's a curious fact. The English agent knows to a penny how much his magazines can pay, and he extracts the very last farthing out of them—yet the editor prefers to deal through an agent! An agent is of course not imperative, but he helps a good deal, and this is partly because of the English viewpoint, which we seldom comprehend. I know an English writer who is also an editor. With the full approval of his firm he sells nearly all his stuff to himself, yet he sells it all through an agent! This may seem incredible, but it is the sober truth.

Again, the English editor will seldom buy

stories clipped from American magazines. He prefers a wretched carbon to a printed copy. A printed copy has presumbly been hawked for sale all through Fleet Street, whereas he likes to feel that he's getting the stuff fresh. And he likes to publish simultaneously if possible, or at about the same time as the story is appearing in America. He does not like old material, however. Because of their excellent contents by comparison with English magazines, there is a huge market in England for returns from our news-stands, old copies which are shipped over and sold for a few pence. So the English editor does not want a story that may already be old stuff to his readers.

What he does want is something fresh, and something with a thrill in it. That's exactly what our own editors want. And if you care to go into the elusive matter of thrill, proceed to the final chapter with my blessing.

CHAPTER XXI

Injecting the Thrill

JUST what constitutes the vital "thrill" in any story? Suspense, you'll say. No, no, brethren; it just ain't so. Get away from that text-book bunk.

Having been attempting to settle the question for myself of late, I pass on the results to you. Experiments have been in the making for some time. As I have written everything from nickel novels to historical monographs, I thought I knew something about thrills, but have discovered my ignorance.

Called upon for a thriller, I produced a sea story of the most lurid type. Some luckless male or female was murdered in every chapter, pirates ran riot, the entire crew was ham-strung —but the result was not thrilling. It sold, yet

was a distinct failure. So I tried to find out about this business of getting "thrill" into a story. The effort was in the next case made objectively on the body and plot of the story. The editor bought it, but he wrote me as follows:

"We feel as if the excitement of the yarn made us lose our better judgment. Why? Hard to tell. We certainly don't want to lose the excitement of the story. What's the answer?

"Add quiet relief scenes? They slow up the action of the yarn, lose its good sweep and rush. Fuller characterization would help a good deal, but would also slow up the action. You might choose more probable material and situations. Yet, hasn't the bizarre and unusual its own peculiar charm? My best guess is to add more detail in one spot, and less in others—that is, don't have so many crisis-incidents in one story. If you agree that there is any trouble, maybe the two of us can eventually unravel the mystery."

This was a good bit of criticism, but it did not solve the problem of what constitutes salable and probable thrill, holding the illusion of

the reader. It was only a step in the right direction.

Then another critic got busy. He said I was working the wrong way. Instead of going about it objectively, I should be subjective—that is to say, depend less on the plot incidents, and more on the universal appeal of the theme. When queried as to what he meant by this last, since I have a very poor and limited comprehension of technical terms, he wrote:

"I mean by that, some element of theme that will appeal universally. To put the old textbook stuff in another way—inject into each story an element which is deeper than the mere excitement. Inject a character who hates another character vividly, for example. Instead of motivating the story by a hunt for buried treasure, let the treasure be incidental, and motivate all the action by the hatred of this character for another man. Get the idea?"

Sure, and it was a good idea, but it did not reach the heart of things. It was like a critic

who, not recognizing the quotation as used, once said that my use of the words "full, perfect and sufficient satisfaction" was a horrible example of tautological English.

So, after much delving and groping on the subject, I have reached some conclusions in the matter of what constitutes thrill in a story. They probably are not right, yet they may be of some interest; they may not satisfy anyone else, but they'll have to serve me for a while until I reach some newer and later conclusions. And they are not offered as any definitive *dicta* on the subject either. They flatly contradict some of my previous opinions and remarks.

I got a clue on thrill from a man who has read dozens of my stories. Yet, every time I meet him, he mentions as the best, one that appeared in *Blue Book* about eleven years ago—and a story with an unhappy ending, so called. So I looked that one up. In it, probably by accident, I had managed to identify the reader very strongly with the hero of the story; so

strongly that his final sacrifice of life carried the reader successfully over the whip-snap of the last paragraph.

There was a clue—identify the reader with the hero. Old stuff, of course, but no matter. The real thrill comes from inside. The most real thrill comes when the reader is merged in the identity of the person about whom he is reading. This effect is gained simply by a manipulation of words. The reader can get as much thrill out of walking across the street as he can out of fighting a gang of pirates, if the wording is right.

Then there is the quality of surprise—the unexpected. Not, mind, as regards plot and incident, but as regards the hero of the story. Write a story that contains a surprise ending, let us say. The surprise may be worked in a number of different ways without gaining any thrill; but by identifying the reader with the hero, by making the surprise come to the hero with a genuine thrill, you bring it to the reader

also. And you do it without making the machinery creak, without the effect of a trick play. In other words, the reader follows the mental processes of the hero so closely, that he receives all the thrill of surprise.

Then, again, a quality of real thrill lies simply in appeal—in some elemental emotion whose sincerity reaches the reader. A great many stories, including many of my own, depend upon the glamour of odd settings; perhaps they are written around certain localities. They cannot be re-written and placed anywhere else on earth. Yet, if they are to evoke any thrill from the reader, they must work from emotions, not from scenery. They must depend on the emotions rather than on the setting. That is, of course, to get the thrill. A story may be a perfectly good story without any thrills at all, but we happen to be talking about thrills.

Many of us, by the word "thrill" mean excitement, danger, creepy horror. The above remarks apply equally well. If your hero moves

like a stone man amid a graphically described series of horrors, the reader will also be stone-indifferent. Let the hero's nerves *jump*, and those of the reader jump. That is simply identification.

My friend Bob used to write nickel novels and long-drawn-out stories where every incident was milked dry of detail; where, if the hero stole second base, he took half a chapter to do it. Bob tried to work up in his trade, and abandoned this manner of writing in the effort to get over snappier stuff. He succeeded, but did it by putting in too much incident—by going to the other extreme. His hero stole second almost incidentally, in a single sentence. Bob's stories were crowded with all sorts of happenings, until he got to the point where, if he did not have a fight or a murder on every other page, he thought he was falling off. Then he had to readjust his viewpoint. He perceived that, after all, the old nickel novel manner of writing was not so bad, since it carried the

reader along through every mental working of the hero. Bob finally effected a compromise in his work, and has been getting along famously with it. Almost the same thing occurs in the editorial criticism first cited above.

Put the idea, generally, in other words: Film the story as you write it. To visualize a story exactly as though seeing a motion picture, while you are writing it, is a tremendous help toward attaining the thrill element or any other element. I'm not talking about selling film rights. I'm talking about filming the story as you write it—in the imagination. That's another thing entirely. The story unfolds like a film, it's pictured in your mind, and transfers itself almost automatically to the paper in the machine. The element of thrill is bound to be in that mental picture, unless the picture fails to impress you; and in the latter case, it's a failure.

I think the whole matter, then, boils down to this: The writer must feel intensely the thrill

which he puts into the story—and he must be able to carry that thrill from his own mind to the paper, and thence to the mind of the reader. The latter half of the formula is, of course, a matter of experience, training or knack. Tools of the trade. The former half is a question of imagination, of the ability to picture a scene and visualize it in all five senses. Such, at least, is the general formula—but what's a formula in writing? Less than the dust. To write any story by formula is a mighty hard thing, or so at least I submit.

THE END