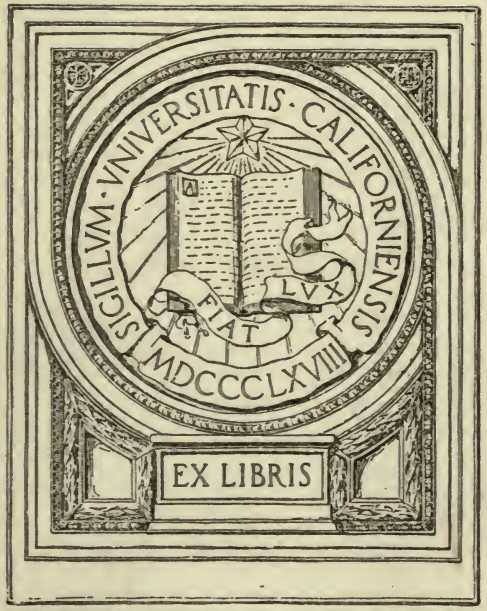
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THE CONTEMPORARY SHORT STORY

A PRACTICAL MANUAL

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To

Professor C. T. Winchester

WHO HAS MADE THE STUDY OF
ENGLISH LITERATURE
A DELIGHT TO MANY GENERATIONS
OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

PREFACE

A DISTINGUISHED British critic, Professor Hugh Walker, remarks: "There is no other form of literature in which America is so eminent as in the writing of short stories." This dictum alone is sufficient justification for introducing a course in this subject into every college in the land. Not only is a better understanding and appreciation of the finest short stories fostered by such a course, but not a few students find themselves able to write tales that are accepted by reputable American periodicals — if not during their undergraduate years, at any rate shortly afterward.

Writing fiction for the magazines is both an art and a business. This volume accordingly aims to teach promising young authors, whether in or out of college, how to write stories that shall be *marketable* as well as artistic. It attempts to state succinctly, and as clearly as may be, some fundamental principles of short-story writing. These principles are based upon somewhat extensive reading of short fiction in English, both classic and contemporary; of a pretty large number of manuscripts submitted to important periodicals; and of most of the critical works on the short story. Many of the pages are written from the editorial standpoint. I have not attempted to set up an impracticable ideal on the one hand, nor to concede too much to the lower range of popular taste on the other.

Preface

No apology need be offered, even in a university classroom, for the better sort of contemporary short stories. They justify themselves as worth-while studies of human life and character. They cannot be written without an adequate first-hand acquaintance with life. A good many lack polish of style; but a surprising number possess it. Surely, when so original a genius and so great an artist as Kipling devotes himself chiefly to the short story, no attitude of timidity is necessary in proclaiming that this form of literature has come into its own; and our best magazines will see to it that it does not decline. The short story can no longer be dismissed, with a lofty wave of the academic hand, as "mere entertainment." It must be taken seriously.

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Mr. W. W. Jacobs, Mr. Melville Davisson Post, Mr. Julian Street, Mr. Charles G. D. Roberts, Mr. Freeman Tilden, Mr. Donn Byrne, Mr. Thomas Grant Springer, Miss Fannie Hurst, Mrs. Gertrude Atherton, Mr. Ward Muir, Mr. Harry Leon Wilson, Mr. Herbert Quick.

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CHAPTER I

ORIGINALITY: KINDS AND METHODS

> Mr. Hawthorne's distinctive trait is invention, creation, imagination, originality—a trait which, in the literature of fiction, is positively worth all the rest. . . . The inventive or original mind as frequently displays itself in novelty of *tone* as in novelty of matter. Mr. Hawthorne is original at *all* points.
>
> —Edgar Allan Poe.

> It ought to be the first endeavour of a writer to distinguish nature from custom; or that which is established because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established.—Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler.*

It is surely not unreasonable to expect that a writer who wishes to have his short stories accepted by a certain magazine shall familiarize himself with some of the fiction previously printed in that magazine — and in a good many others. Yet would-be contributors are constantly offering to patient editors tales whose plots are so threadbare that to print them would be to invite ridicule from a majority

of subscribers. The first duty of a fiction writer is to read fiction widely, in order to avoid the hackneyed and the trite. Ask any magazine editor what kind of story he wants, and he will tell you, in effect, that he wants the story that is "different," that is separated by something fresh and original — whether in plot, character, dialogue, or atmosphere — from the mediocre manuscripts that deserve nothing better than a printed rejection slip. Such originality does not mean, of course, a plot original in its entirety, for such plots were exhausted long ago. It means permutations and combinations of old material such as shall result in an *impression of originality*, especially at the close of the story — the place where, in short fiction, the real effect on the reader is almost invariably produced: in Maupassant's *The Necklace*, for example.

Dr. Samuel Johnson declared, somewhat unjustly, that even *Gulliver's Travels* reveals no striking originality of plot; that, granted the dwarfs and giants of the first two parts, everything follows as a matter of course. There is, however, nothing very like *Gulliver* in literature, especially in its last two parts; and that is the main thing; that is, to speak colloquially,

"the answer." Nobody has succeeded in writing very much like Jonathan Swift; and few have had the temerity to try. That unforgettable picture of those luckless immortals, the Struldbrugs — as vivid, says Leslie Stephen, as anything in Dante or Milton — is alone enough to attest Swift's profound originality in the realm of the creative imagination.

The originality of Shakespeare evidently did not lie in invention of plots, which he "lifted" with a royal hand, but in creation of characters — where, unlike so many popular novelists and short-story writers of to-day, he never repeats himself — and in associative imagination, in comparison by metaphor and simile. Scott's title to eminence now rests almost entirely upon his "colossal creative power." Even Poe reveals inability to do more than a few things well — chiefly the horror story and the mystery tale. In the latter his invention and ingenuity are certainly noteworthy.

Examples of essential originality in recent magazine stories by various authors might be multiplied; but a few will serve. John Taintor Foote's *Opus 43, Number 6* [1] turns upon a famous pianist's pretence of ignorance of his

[1] *Saturday Evening Post*, Feb. 13, 1915.

art — a pretence skilfully maintained in order that he may enjoy the company of the young girl whom he loves, by taking piano lessons from her. The revelation at the close is deftly managed and the total effect is highly pleasing. Yet there is no attempt at a completely original plot. What is revealed is simply a new "twist" in an old situation:

He moved across the room and stood uncertainly by the piano.

"Lezzon?" he suggested timidly.

Miss Hicks wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. She remained behind the table.

"Where were you last night?" she inquired.

The guilty Leopold grew scarlet.

That restored her courage. He was not the old Scarecrow when he blushed — not the wonderful though mad being who turned a piano into a choir of heavenly voices. She came part way from behind the table.

"Why have you been coming here?" she demanded.

"Muzeek lessons," he offered weakly.

Miss Hicks laughed him to scorn. She withdrew altogether from the protection of the table and confronted him.

"Music lessons — your grandmother!" she said. "I was at Carnegie Hall last night. Now, why have you been coming here?"

Leopold met her level glance and quailed to his marrow before it. He could deceive her no longer! Where was he to find words to tell her? It would have been a terri-

fying task in warm Hungarian. In his limping, contemptible English it was sacrilege to think of it. He looked in dumb hopelessness about the poor, dear and now familiar room. He was about to be swept out of it forever. His eyes came at last to the piano. They widened slowly.

"Seet down!" he said with an imploring gesture.

She did so, wondering. Leopold sank to the piano bench and gathered a great sheaf of golden notes in his hands.

Outside, the plumber's washing danced in the cold March wind. Over the court wall Miss Hicks could see a bare and lonely tree. Its forlorn background was a wind-swept tenement house.

She had one desolate glimpse of all this — then it was gone. . . . Rich meadows, velvet green, stretched on and on before her. Her nostrils were filled with the breath of newborn violets. Brooks laughed. Birds sang. Butterflies flashed in the sunlight. A million lovers met and kissed — for Leopold had called on the magic of the Scandinavian gentleman.

Miss Hicks was stirred by nameless longings, sweet beyond words or thought. They made her heart flutter and surge. They filled her throat and eyes.

And now the sun went down and a yellow moon hung above the breathless trees. . . . Leopold had done it. Technically he was improvising on the theme of Opus 43, Number 6.

In reality he took Miss Hicks by the hand and led her to a moonlit glade. Then he whispered — whispered to her, while nightingales sang. He was no longer funny. . . . He was dear beyond all earthly things — her own! Her very own!

Suddenly black terror seized her — he was leaving — he was gone! . . . She looked up to see him standing by the piano, back in her own room.

"Zat, deer von," he said, "ees vy I kom!"

Miss Hicks raised one hand to her throat — tiny hammers were beating there. Her eyes were no longer frank and boyish. They had become deep pools of mystery.

"I'm — glad — you — came!" she breathed, and flushed into a pink glory.

Leopold discovered that his arms could do more than sweep from end to end of the keyboard.

A similar new "twist" is visible in a powerful and moving tale by Henry C. Rowland, *The Copy-Cat*.[1] Here a man of unusual strength but feeble courage, who has sunk to the level of a beachcomber, suddenly gains the necessary fortitude to win a fist fight by seeing his recently acquired dog snarl defiance at a former owner and their common enemy, a brutal sea captain. The animal, a thoroughbred, imparts the same quality to his new master. It is a vivid moment and the memory of it remains with the reader:

A sudden weakness sapped their life from Bill's great limbs. His knees tottered, his arms hung limp. He looked hopelessly at Matey, and then his hanging jaw

[1] *Saturday Evening Post*, May 18, 1907.

came slowly up and his eyes grew fixed and staring, while the swaying legs slowly stiffened and the big hands closed.

For the dog, his first panic over, had pulled himself together — as Bill had tried to do, and failed. Now, as the man's eyes fell upon the hound, they read in the bulging muscles, bristling hair, and bared, glistening fangs, not fear, but rage and a savage and stubborn defiance. Even as Bill watched, Matey sprang forward in a series of short, stiff-legged bounds, then stood with his strong neck rigid, his bristling tail straight out — and as the captain, awed for the moment by the ferocity of the animal, paused, Matey filled his deep chest and roared out a booming defiance at his master's foes and his!

A fierce glow of exultation set Bill's pulses throbbing. In a flash the mantle of fear fell from him. He had needed only the impulse, the example, the suggestion, and Matey had furnished it, and again, as his clarion war-cry bugled forth, Bill felt a thrilling impulse to voice his own defiance in a roar that should rock the lofty palms. . . .

The attack, when it came, was swift and terrible. With the scream of a panther, Bill leaped upon his foe. He was met by a crashing blow which glanced from the side of his head and flung him to the sand, but almost as he struck he was up again and had closed with another rush. This time the captain's blow fell short, and the next moment Bill's great hands had found the captain's throat and the huge, bony fingers sank into it until the sailor's breath came in whistling gasps. In vain he tried to tear loose the terrible grip. The tense, bulging muscles were like the weather shrouds of a ship. He struck out wildly, dealing short, heavy blows, and presently these

had their effect, for Bill loosed his hold and sprang clear again. But the captain's head was reeling and there were black flashes before his eyes. He tottered slightly, gasping for breath, and then the huge, springing figure was upon him again, this time as a human flail which dealt crushing, devitalizing blows on head and face and body, until the captain, groping and striking blindly, reeled, tottered and fell.

It is probable that he might have lost his life beneath the terrible chastisement had there not come a diversion. Seeing the champion overthrown, the rabble began to stir and mutter as if forming for a concerted attack. The movement caught Bill's lurid eye, and in a transfiguration of Olympic wrath he whipped up a stake which was lying near and descended upon them. Fortunately, his cudgel was of no great dimensions or the mortality might have mounted high. As it was, all escaped alive, the burden of the punishment falling on the shipping agent, Mendoza.

If in some one element a story is thus memorable through originality, that is enough. It will satisfy the reading public; and this means that it will satisfy the editor. A fiction magazine lives to please and must please in order to live. The editor merely feels the public pulse. "You can kill your magazine," says a prominent editor, "by one poor issue." If his circulation drops, he knows that his contributors' short stories have not shown enough freshness and

originality to induce readers to keep on buying his periodical at the news stands. The old-style millionaire's attitude, "the public be damned!" has nothing in common with the attitude of a successful editor. He must be a barometer of the changes in public taste and must alter his plans at the first symptom of those changes.

In the best short stories of the day there is not only essential originality but also something more than brainless entertainment. There is a solid kernel of thought, often a big idea, back of the narrative. Such a short story is much more likely to deserve preservation in a volume than the "whipped syllabub" of the extremely light entertainer — the modern descendant of the Court Fool. A good short story must indeed be entertaining, but it may be something more without degenerating into a sermon or a treatise. In his early work, Henry James was entertaining, though in his later period he was an excellent example of how not to write fiction for popular consumption. Even what Matthew Arnold said of the Greeks is not inapplicable to the modern short story:

> Their theory and practice alike; the admirable treatise of Aristotle, and the unrivalled works of their poets,

exclaim with a thousand tongues — "All depends upon the subject; choose a fitting action, penetrate yourself with a feeling of its situations; this done, everything else will follow.[1]"

Ward Muir's *Sunrise*[2] furnishes an almost extraordinary illustration of this doctrine of the subject. A beautiful girl in China who, having lived always underground, has never seen the sun, is taken out of her surroundings by her lover, at night, and the next morning beholds her first sunrise. She believes that she has looked upon the very face of God; and the shock causes her death. She dies happy, however, though her lover is left distracted:

I raised my eyes from Kima's kneeling figure, and saw — the sun.

It was a burnished ball, emerging, as I looked, from a bed of fog. Moment by moment it grew more distinct, more and more fiery. The clouds were furling off from it like ornate curtains drawn from before an immense and inconceivable furnace. Its rays were drinking the vapors from the abysses, like steam. And then I saw the sun as an Eye.

I stood, staring and dizzy; and beside me I heard a movement. Kima had risen from her knees, and was standing too, confronting the sun. Her body was strung taut and quivering. The light, beating upon us ever brighter and brighter, was round her like a halo.

[1] Preface to Poems of 1853. [2] *McClure's*, Oct., 1914.

"What is this?" The words burst from her in a cry of awe. "*What* is this?"

The sun swam clear of the clouds. Its full force rained upon us. And suddenly I heard Kima again:

"*I must look!*"

With a gesture at once sublime and despairing, she tore the bandage from her brow.

I was paralyzed. I knew — knew — that Kima was lost to me; but I could not move.

She gazed, entranced, for one tremendous moment, full into the face of the sun, then fell on her knees, and in an abandonment of adulation prostrated herself to the ground, her hands outspread in abject reverence. . . .

At last, with an effort that was pain, I bent down and touched her.

She paid no heed.

I tried to raise her.

She was inert. She slipped sideways in my hands, and I saw her face.

It was the face of one who had beheld in the firmament a radiance unimaginable. Its dazzling and calamitous grandeur had stricken her to the earth, and stunned her in her adoration of its peerless majesty. She had lifted up her eyes to the glistering portent of the risen sun; she had rested them upon that stupefying blaze; she had seen the light ineffable. She had looked upon the sun's magnificence, and the luster of its flaming was too dire to be borne. In that unendurable splendor she had thought she saw God. And, in the terror and bliss of that revelation, her soul had been set free.

Kima was dead!

A strong contrast to this story, in subject, is to be seen in Freeman Tilden's satirical tale, *The Defective*,[1] which turns upon a supposed defective's discovery that presumably sane people who were tango-mad, bridge-mad, and so forth, were in reality worse off mentally than he. In despair, he finally takes refuge again in the asylum from which he had been discharged as cured! The originality here lies quite as much in skilful treatment as in the subject. No outline can do justice to this uncommonly humorous tale. It has, in a high degree, both spontaneity and sophistication.

Corra Harris' *Justice* [2] is a story whose originality depends upon a powerful arraignment of the man-made equity of law-courts. A woman kills her husband, under circumstances such that she is acquitted — after being ably defended by a woman lawyer who intuitively divines all her wrongs and lays them before the jury. It is a suffrage story, and Mrs. Harris' thesis is: "Men are lawless, and always will be, to a certain limit which they determine themselves, and our system of law, which is fictitious,

[1] *Smart Set*, March, 1914; reprinted in *That Night, and Other Satires*.

[2] *Good Housekeeping*, May, 1915.

is the only one they'll stand, because it is fictitious!"

Gertrude Atherton's unusual and thrilling character study, *The Sacrificial Altar*,[1] portrays an intellectual young novelist who is trying to inject some passion into his work. He fails to fall in love with a beautiful girl whom a friend has selected for him, but suddenly conceives the idea of stealing upon her in sleep, defying her scorn "for a few poignant moments" when she awakes, and then rushing forth, "repulsed and quite mad, to weep upon his floor until dawn!" When he sees her asleep, however, he does not feel any thrill. He is profoundly disappointed. Then he decides to give her a little fright. He places a pillow over her head, intending to release it quickly. But a madness of homicide seizes him. At last his emotional nature is aroused! He holds the pillow over the face of his victim and represses her struggles. After she is dead, he calmly returns to his rooms — and starts a novel, the best that he has written. When he has finished it, he confesses his crime to an intimate friend, who will not believe him. So, in expiation, he commits suicide in the tomb of his ancestors. In outline,

[1] *Harper's*, August, 1916.

the tale does not sound plausible; but Mrs. Atherton's art in the complete story is fully adequate to her task. The originality lies in the psychology, in the portrayal of an eccentric but gifted artist nature seized by an obsession and hurried to tragic consequence. The depth and power of this story justify Mrs. Atherton's high place in American fiction.

Kipling's tales are full of original ideas — *William the Conqueror*, *The Man Who Would Be King*, *They*, and so on almost *ad libitum*. A very suggestive title, which fully justifies itself, is William H. Hamby's *A Big Idea in the Backwoods*.[1] The story grows out of the solution, by an alert young man — aided by the advice and encouragement of a pretty girl — of the problem of a bond issue authorized by three county court judges in Missouri but never paid for by the county. The promise of a railroad had been the lure — also a bribe to each of the three judges. The voters had declined to authorize the payment of either principal or interest, and the matter had dragged on for thirty years, the original amount, $400,000, having been increased by the interest to $1,500,000. The alert young man went to New York, induced

[1] *Saturday Evening Post*, Nov. 9, 1912.

the purchaser of the bonds to compromise for $400,000, then announced to the county an offer of $500,000, succeeded in winning enough votes at a special election — and thus made for himself the tidy sum of $100,000 minus expenses. It was good business both for him and for the voters, since he had been able to show that refusal to settle, during the period of thirty years, had cost the county a loss of $7,400,000 in farm values and $1,600,000 in business values. "A county, like an individual," said the young financier, "cannot always go on not paying its debts. The only way we have done it so far is by keeping our assessments so low we barely have money to carry on in a poor way the county's business. The only way we can hope to avoid it in the future is by remaining so poor there is no revenue left for the courts to seize." So the voters bought back their self-respect. This is virtually a business article served up in entertaining fiction form. It is a type of story peculiarly characteristic of the *Post* and reflects our American absorption in commercial affairs.

A very different sort of originality is shown in Joseph Conrad's notable mystery tale — for nearly everything that Mr. Conrad writes is

notable — *The Shadow Line*.[1] A young captain takes charge of his first vessel. His initial feeling of joy, in which he thinks of the ship as an enchanted princess waiting for him to deliver her, gives place to some slight foreboding when he learns that the previous skipper died in strange circumstances and that the crew seem to be under some spell of fear. The impression which the chief mate leaves upon him is powerfully indicated in the following passage:

Suddenly I perceived that there was another man in the saloon, standing a little on one side and looking intently at me. The chief mate. I was vexed and disconcerted. His long red mustache determined the character of his physiognomy, which struck me as pugnacious.

How long had he been looking at me, appraising me in my unguarded day-dreaming state? I could not have been in that cabin more than two minutes altogether. Say three. . . . So he could not have been watching me more than a mere fraction of a minute, luckily. Still, I regretted the occurrence. But I showed nothing of it as I rose leisurely (it had to be leisurely) and greeted him with perfect friendliness.

There was something reluctant and at the same time attentive in his bearing. His name was Burns. We left the saloon and went round the ship together. His face in the full light of day appeared very pale, meager, even haggard. Somehow I had a delicacy as to looking

[1] *Metropolitan*, Sept.–Oct., 1916.

too often at him; his eyes, on the contrary, seemed fairly glued on my face. They were greenish and had not much expression.

He answered all my questions readily enough, but my ear seemed to catch a tone of unwillingness. . . .

There was a sort of earnestness in the situation which began to make me feel uncomfortable.

In this story, atmosphere and style count for much. Mr. Conrad, like Poe, has an almost hypnotic effect on his reader. The impression produced by his most somber masterpieces recalls Whitman's phrase, "the huge and thoughtful night." They are quite unlike those of any other living writer — stamped with personality and with literary quality of the highest order.

Such stories are not turned off every week, even by an expert. A short-story writer is fortunate if he gets three or four really big ideas for a tale in a year; his other stories, if he writes, say, one a month, will have to depend more upon execution than upon conception. The ambitious young writer should remember that, particularly during his first three or four years of apprenticeship, only his exceptional tales are likely to find editorial favor. Moreover, most authors under twenty-five years of age had better not be writing short stories at all — for magazine

publication. At one-and-twenty they can hardly have enough knowledge of life to produce worth-while fiction, can hardly have developed enough personality to be really individual — which, after all, is what it means to be original. Guy de Maupassant did not begin to publish until he was thirty. Kipling, an important exception, "broke into print" at twenty-three with *Plain Tales from the Hills* and, if one judges him by a single volume, reached his highest point as a short-story writer at twenty-six in *Life's Handicap*. Many a successful writer of short fiction — for example, Charles E. Van Loan — has not attained success until he was nearer forty than twenty. Mr. Van Loan was for many years a sporting editor on a newspaper, and his excellent baseball stories are an indirect result of that training.

Just as many a minor poet is famous for a single poem, so many a short-story writer achieves fame by only a single tale. Edward Everett Hale's name is coupled with *The Man Without a Country*. In some cases this one story has perhaps contained the author's only truly original idea, his contribution to the none-too-extensive list of stories that are "different." Any reader who follows for several years every

issue of a highly popular magazine like the *Saturday Evening Post* will note that some writers appear frequently, others rarely, and still others only a single time. In the case of the authors who appear oftenest, a distinct falling-off in originality may every now and then be discerned. Irvin S. Cobb once started a series of mystery tales in the *Post*, with the scene in New York City, the general title of the series to be *The Island of Adventure*. The first two tales went very well; but the series was cut off in its prime. Mr. Cobb ran out of ideas. He himself humorously said that it was because he knew too much about New York. Inventiveness cannot be forced; and it is only a real genius, like Kipling in his prime, who can be both highly prolific and highly original. The unevenness of the Sherlock Holmes tales is recognized by everybody save the blindest worshipper; and Arthur B. Reeve's ingenious tales of Craig Kennedy, "scientific detective," creak audibly now and then in their machinery.

From the standpoint of immediate popular success, there is, of course, such a thing as too much originality. Even Kipling and Conan Doyle bombarded editors in vain for more than

one year. Their daring imagination produced stories so individual that editors hardly knew what to make of them.[1] The fact is that your editor is generally a timid creature. If he has convictions — and not always does he possess strong ones — he does not invariably have the courage of his convictions. He may be afflicted with what Saintsbury calls *kainophobia* — fear of the new and strange. But Kipling, with the persistence of genius, finally made editors and book publishers see that tales of India, if sufficiently well written, were not anathema to the multitude; and when, after disappointing experiences with other kinds of stories, Conan Doyle got *A Study in Scarlet*, the first of the Sherlock Holmes series, accepted he instantly had the public at his feet. "It's dogged as does it." In the *Strand Magazine* (October, 1915) a well-known author says of his early struggles:

> As some slight encouragement to those writers who find their days of success somewhat tardy in arriving, I might mention that I was writing for five years and longer before I ever earned a dollar with my pen. I wrote continuously and determinedly, and though my stories came back to me with a promptness that was almost bewilder-

[1] "Every author, so far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed." — Wordsworth.

ing, I was not discouraged. I had made up my mind to be an author, and an author I knew I should become — one day. It is rather surprising that during the whole of those first five years I never received the faintest hint of encouragement. I just went doggedly ahead, and as soon as a manuscript came back I took it out of its wrapper, threw the inevitable rejection slip into the waste-paper basket, re-enveloped the story, and sent it on its travels once more. During those years I must have written hundreds of stories which I should have been very glad to have sold for a few dollars each. After I had achieved success I disposed of all those stories for very excellent sums. So the years of rejection were not so unprofitable after all.

The writer who becomes downcast after a few rejections should find out how his betters, like Conan Doyle, fared during their apprenticeship. If he is sure he has talent, and not merely egotism (he can decide this by offering his manuscript for criticism to some one besides his intimate friends), let him persist; he will "arrive." But it is only occasionally that an author, as in the case of Myra Kelly, has her first story accepted by an important magazine. Even decided originality must be supplemented by technique.

Anyone who peruses carefully Horace Fish's vivid story of conscience, *The Inward Empire*,[1]

[1] *Everybody's*, February, 1914.

will perceive that its author possesses, for story purposes, too much imagination rather than too little. His task will evidently be to harness that imagination to editorial requirements. He is too fond of the psychic, of dwelling upon phantoms not dreamed of in the philosophy of the average magazine reader — who is not, after all, a very intellectual person. He or she is quite likely to be a shoe-clerk or a shopgirl who never heard of Ibsen but knows a good deal about those naughty serials by Robert W. Chambers. But even such a reader is likely to enjoy a splendidly original story of action and "the bright face of danger," such as Donn Byrne's *Superdirigible "Gamma-I,"*[1] an imaginary episode of the European War. Suggestive of Kipling in its brilliant handling of technicalities and its vivid choice of words, it shows what a daringly original young writer can do when kindled by a congenial theme. The commander of an English dirigible similar to the German Zeppelins decides to bombard the railway station, bridge, and forts of Mainz by night. The description of the trip and of the accomplishment of its object reveals an imagination and style which place the young

[1] *Scribner's*, August, 1916.

author far above an average magazine level. Its accuracy of detail and its astonishing vision of the possibilities of air warfare indicate talent which carries on a literary tradition and adds to it a distinct individuality and method. I quote a short passage which illustrates the author's fine use of comparisons:

The navigator swung over the river. Four thousand feet below, the bridge showed over the black ribbon of the Rhine like a plank over a rivulet. Meriwell watched it with the eye of a cat ready to spring on a mouse. . . .

"Heave on!" he yelled suddenly.

The dirigible lifted violently like a canoe struck by a great wave. There was a loud whirring in the air as the bombs dropped downward. Meriwell felt his heart jump to his mouth. He peered over the edge breathlessly, his hands gripping the rail with sudden fear. Mechanically he opened his mouth to protect his ear-drums from the report, and as he did a vast wave of orange flame, like discolored sheet lightning, seemed to flick along the river. For a moment, soundless, the river rose in its bed as if struck by a mighty hand. The great stone bridge disappeared as if kicked away.

"My God!" said Meriwell hoarsely, "my God!"

Then suddenly noise struck him between the shoulder-blades, noise such as he could hardly believe possible — an infinitude of sound that rocked him like a crashing blow, a sound as of two planets meeting in mid-course, a gigantic forbidden thing, that only gods should make.

"The bridge is gone," said Meriwell stupidly.

Among dozens of war stories read in manuscript and in current magazines by the present writer, this stands out as one of the two or three really powerful and memorable tales. It is the work of an artist rather than a mere journalist. Such young men may go far if they remain true to the traditions of Kipling and Stevenson and Hawthorne and Poe.

Wait for an idea. That is the starting point of any good story. And it is quite as likely to come during a walk to the postoffice, or in a wakeful hour at night, or over the dessert and cigars, or (in the case of the ladies) during the powdering of a nose, as after much pondering and much knitting of brows. Having snatched the idea out of the reluctant ether, jot it down at once. It is often fatal not to have a notebook at hand. Like time and tide, plots wait for no man. "Be good and you will be lonesome," reflected Mark Twain; and the chances are that he put it down in his little book — though I believe he never used it for a story. In his hands it would have made a hugely entertaining one.

The peril of putting off is illustrated in the case of O. Henry. In a conversation with Freeman Tilden one day, he said, "Sometime

I'm going to write a story about a boy spoiled by good influences." He died before he carried out the resolution. So Mr. Tilden, borrowing merely this vague outline of a story idea, wrote it himself,[1] with a racy originality that would have delighted the heart of O. Henry. A young baseball hero whose mother supports him is induced by a fashionable lady "uplifter" of the village to take a regular job. What happens is tragi-comedy of the most entertaining sort. It is full of Mr. Tilden's personality and quite unlike anybody else. You may spell its originality with a capital *O* and not be far wrong. Its kernel of Yankee philosophy is as solid and convincing as a league baseball. I quote two passages that illustrate the character drawing and the technique of the close:

Duff's father was a hard-working man. His stepfather was a loafer. In some strange manner which the exponents of the theory of heredity will no doubt explain satisfactorily, Duff inherited from his stepfather rather than from his sire. At any rate, Duff was a born loafer. He was the kind of loafer that is prevented from working by sheer excess of vitality. He was the loafer premier of the neighborhood around Jackson Park. He was so utterly accomplished that, after a few misdirected at-

[1] *The Good Influence: Smart Set;* reprinted in *That Night, and Other Satires.*

tempts to seduce him from this occupation, the tradesmen and employers ceased to dream of him as a laboring factor.

Nature had fitted Duff to be captain of the Rusty Dippers; or, in fact, leader in any unproductive diversion.

Nature had not thought of Duff Cassidy as a useful, moral, or intellectual citizen.

In his sphere, Duff was a constant and consummate success. Unless you realize this, you will not understand his downfall, which began on the last day of May, 1911, with the appearance of Mrs. de Ruyter in the vicinage of Jackson Park.

The Rusty Dippers and Shiny Cups still play ball every pleasant afternoon in Jackson Park, but Duff Cassidy is not there. I think he is working for a grocer over on Hastings Street; that is, working sometimes. He has all the primitive vices, and some others; but he has lost all the primitive virtues. He does not loaf any more; he does not know how; he does not dare to; he just sneaks a few minutes now and then furtively. He is ruined for life.

I accuse nobody in particular of Duff's downfall. I suppose it may be attributed to chance. But I think it rather excessive, rather superfluous, for Mrs. de Ruyter to say, as she said when she returned from Europe and learned the facts:

"*It's really too bad, after all I did for that young man.*"

The art of this story, like most good art in satire, is a little over the head of the average

subscriber to the *Post;* but it is a fair question whether there is not enough pure story interest, and humor as distinguished from satire, to hold even Mr. Average Subscriber. One of Mr. Tilden's stories, at any rate, was published in *Collier's*,[1] which has a circulation of more than 800,000. As Mark Twain and O. Henry have proved, satire can be adapted to the average man; only, you must be cautious in handling it. Certainly you must beware of delicate irony. Defoe, who could write plainly enough when he wanted to — in *Robinson Crusoe*, for example — wrote a religious pamphlet, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, so ironical that his political opponents took it for a serious argument in their favor. They were so enraged when they discovered the joke that one of their influential leaders had Defoe jailed for the offense. Some of the New York *Nation's* ironical editorials are nearly as difficult for the non-elect to understand.

One of the highest kinds of originality — typified, in the novel, by Jane Austen and Thackeray and in the drama by many a realistic scene in Shakespeare — is that which gives an impres-

[1] *Artistic Temperament*, May 1, 1915; reprinted in *That Night, and Other Satires.*

sion of real life by (apparently) treating common things in a common way. It is one of the most difficult of tasks and, when well done, one of the surest indications of genius. Burns did it supremely well in poetry. Crabbe, a contemporary, proved a dismal failure. His real life bores where that of Burns enchants. All ambitious story-writers would do well to read a good deal of Burns — and of various other modern poets likewise, such as Tennyson, Keats, Browning, and Wordsworth. It would stimulate their imagination and their ability to express emotion, as well as lend polish to their style; for good poetry is, as some critic has said, "the most perfect speech of man." Many a successful writer has found the reading, for an hour or so, of a congenial author who is a little better than himself a useful preliminary to immediate composition. To a mind that has not a "self-starter" it often supplies a serviceable crank. But everyone to his own method. David Graham Phillips worked best standing at a high desk, like a bookkeeper; and he was highly individual in other respects.

In a letter to the present writer Frank Goewey Jones, author of the Bigelow and Judkins stories in *McClure's*, modestly said that he couldn't

just see why editors wanted his tales, for they seemed to him to treat ordinary things in a very ordinary way. Ah! that is one of the great secrets of good writing — not to be too pretentious, not to attempt "fine writing" and ultra-romantic atmosphere. He who "sees life steadily and sees it whole" may tell what he sees, in very simple language, yet with profound effect. Something of this Mr. Jones has accomplished in his true-to-life stories of the stenographer, the office boy, and the self-important, irascible employer. Show us life as it is, people as they are, and you are always original; for no section of this absorbing human life of ours is quite like any other. When a writer stiffens into conventionalities, he is no longer rendering his own view of life. He has become a decadent. But so long as he avoids it — as Charles E. Van Loan and Booth Tarkington avoid it — editors will wear a path to his door. You will always find at least two or three claiming the honor of having first discovered an author who afterward attained fame — O. Henry, for example.

Myra Kelly's stories of school children on New York's East Side have this loving fidelity to life, this treating common things in a com-

mon way. There is selection, of course, and heightening of certain effects; but the impression is a true one. Really original realism is never purely photographic. Miss Kelly left out a good many uninteresting items in her daily routine; but she proved once for all that a teacher's life is not necessarily humdrum — that there are stories everywhere, crying to be written or waiting patiently for the seeing eye to observe them.

One of the most imaginative of English poets says:

> "Life, like a dome of many-colored glass,
> Stains the white radiance of eternity."

And no one sees things uncolored by his own brain. If, conventionalized by school and college and by imitation of famous writers, the young story-teller loses the colors of his own vision of life, he loses originality. It is the strong man like Kipling who makes us revise our little pedantic code of literary rules to admit him to the circle of acknowledged masters of narration. Originality is a man asserting *himself* — completely, clearly, and convincingly. But it is something quite different from mere egotism, of which amateurs who send manuscripts to *Harper's* or the *Saturday Evening Post* often have

more than enough. Having read, for certain magazines, a good many stories and the unconsciously humorous letters that accompany them, the present writer is prepared to support his assertion by documentary evidence. It is astonishing how many persons think it must be easy to write a story for the magazines, regardless of special training or special ability. A good ditch-digger is more to be honored than a poor story-writer. But persistence is a great virtue; and it must be confessed that sometimes a most unpromising tadpole later develops an extraordinary jump.

Originality, at any rate, is not mere vaudeville cleverness, of which men capable of better things, like Irvin S. Cobb and Samuel G. Blythe, have given the public an unconscionable dose. Mr. Cobb in his war articles, however, has analyzed something more important than "tummies" and seasickness. Moreover, in his short stories he has never exhibited the straining after theatrical effect in phraseology which marks those anatomical articles. The difference between forced-draft humor of this sort and real art may be seen if one turns to the remarkable short stories of W. W. Jacobs. These have not only originality of the most indubitable

kind but also a deftness of method and of characterizing phrase, an economy of means and a compactness of effect that put to shame the windy discursiveness of some of our American "journalese." Mr. Jacobs reveals a trait of a character in a single stroke; and the whole character in an astonishingly small number of such strokes. Mr. George Horace Lorimer, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*, has an admiration for W. W. Jacobs which some of his "star" contributors might well emulate.

It is to be feared that something of this mere cleverness is due to the influence of O. Henry. In too many of his tales he stands emphatically for feats of verbal and structural legerdemain, startlingly clever phraseology, akin to keeping a dozen glass balls in the air simultaneously. He is up to date in slang and colloquialisms; the mark of the ultra-modern is upon him — or was, at the time of his death. And his ingenuity is indeed bewildering. But such a method of attaining originality is as showy and vulgar as a second-grade chorus girl. Here is a fairly typical passage:

I suppose you know all about the stage and stage people. You've been touched with and by actors, and you read the newspaper criticisms and the jokes in the week-

lies about the Rialto and the chorus girls and the long-haired tragedians. And I suppose that a condensed list of your ideas about the mysterious stageland would boil down to something like this:

Leading ladies have five husbands, paste diamonds, and figures no better than your own (madam) if they weren't padded. Chorus girls are inseparable from peroxide, Panhards and Pittsburgh. All shows walk back to New York on tan oxford and railroad ties.[1]

We still have too much admiration for the juggler and trickster of literature. A short-story writer who can keep up a continuous vaudeville performance of astonishing feats often attains temporary popularity — just as does the horseplay of one Charles Chaplin in the "movies." But in order to retain the respect of his public he must have something more than the virtues of the mountebank; he must have nature and sincerity. And O. Henry generally had these. His faults of style do not obscure his searching analysis of human nature. Some of his little excerpts from life have a vividness and truth that call for the most cordial admiration. They hold the mirror up to nature.

The moment, however, that a writer without O. Henry's genius attempts to rival his eccentricities — for his virtues are inimitable — he

[1] *Strictly Business.* Doubleday, Page & Co.

is likely to come to grief. A whole series of such imitations, by a fairly well-known author, came under the eye of the present writer in manuscript. They possessed a certain sparkle, but their attempt to convey the atmosphere of the Broadway "white-light district" just escaped success, because they were obviously "manufactured." They did not ring true. One's criticism was, instinctively: "How hard he is trying to be clever!" But all his taking of thought failed to add one cubit to his literary stature. *Moral:* Don't imitate O. Henry — or anybody else.

The best advice ever given to a short-story writer was probably that which one great Frenchman, Flaubert, gave to another who was destined to become equally great, Guy de Maupassant:

> Everything which one desires to express must be looked at with sufficient attention, and during a sufficiently long time, to discover in it some aspect which no one has as yet seen or described. In everything there is still some spot unexplored, *because we are accustomed only to use our eyes with the recollection of what others before us have thought on the subject which we contemplate.* The smallest object contains something unknown. Find it. To describe a fire that flames, and a tree on the plain, look, keep looking, at that flame and that tree

until in your eyes they have lost all resemblance to any other tree or any other fire.

This is the way to become original. . . .

When you pass a grocer seated at his shop door, a janitor smoking his pipe, a stand of hackney coaches, show me that grocer and that janitor — their attitude, their whole physical appearance — embracing likewise, as indicated by the skilfulness of the picture, their whole moral nature; so that I cannot confound them with any other grocer or any other janitor. Make me see, in one word, that a certain cab horse does not resemble the fifty others that follow or precede it.

He who has learned to individualize in this fashion has exhibited not only talent but also a capacity for hard work. The apprenticeship of the average short-story writer who attains success is a long one — two or three years at best. During this period, however, he may sell a number of stories to minor magazines whose circulation and rate of payment are small. It is often quite possible to earn while you learn. A certain author's barren period of five years is not typical — unless one begins, as he perhaps did, at an extremely early age. There are more than seventy American periodicals that print fiction; and most of them are eagerly looking for new writers. In such conditions no real talent can long remain undiscovered.

In the fiction world of to-day there are no mute, inglorious Kiplings. Everybody has a chance. In most magazine offices all manuscripts are read carefully enough to make sure that nothing of merit is sent back without a word of encouragement. It must be remembered, however, that not even an editor can squeeze more than twenty-four hours out of a day; and he must therefore devote his attention to promising material only. After you have had a few stories printed, you will generally find it easy to get an interview with almost any editor and to secure suggestions from him—particularly as to the policies of his own magazine.

It is astonishing, by the way, that the same public which demands originality in the short story and the novel should tolerate the trite and commonplace melodrama served up to it in motion pictures. Better films are gradually being offered — some at regular theater prices — but so far the "movies" are little more than a return to the infancy of the English drama in the Middle Ages. There is the same crude plot, the same crude horseplay. A good short-story writer may easily ruin his inventiveness and technique by devoting himself to writing motion-picture scenarios for a few months.

The present writer knows of one such case. On the other hand, the more novels and short stories — provided they are highly original — are turned into motion pictures, the better for the future of this still somewhat doubtful field.

Often the originality of a short-story writer is shown by his choice of a fit and striking title. In many cases, however, it is the editor who, in newspaper fashion, hits upon the best "headline" to attract his public. The finest stories do not need ultra-clever or pretentious titles — simply something that is a true index to the theme and that awakens some curiosity. *The Red-Headed League*, one of the Sherlock Holmes tales, fulfils these requirements; and so does its companion, *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, a remarkably dramatic and original piece of craftsmanship. *The Three Godfathers*, by Peter B. Kyne, is simple and satisfying. Edna Ferber's amusing and penetrating story of hotel atmosphere in a large city, *The Hooker-up-the-Back*, is unusually well introduced by its title. So also is *The Queen of the Graveyard Ghouls*, by Barry Benefield, a humorous-sentimental love tale which found a place in *The Ladies' Home Journal*. Fannie Hurst's "*T. B.*," a happy-ending story of a young girl threatened

with tuberculosis, is striking but of questionable drawing power. Attempts at mere cleverness in titles are found more frequently in the minor magazines, where it sometimes seems necessary to bolster up a mediocre tale by a "snappy" title. It is related, by the way, that a book publisher once asked an author to write a "bright, snappy life of Jesus!" The volume, however, was never penned.

Kipling often manifests real genius in a title. *They* is perhaps too vague, but at any rate it provokes curiosity. So also does *.007*. *The Brushwood Boy* is highly original. *The Man Who Would Be King* is less striking but entirely adequate. In articles, quite as much as in fiction, moreover, the good title commends itself. Compare, for example, *Permanent Soil Fertility* with *The Farm That Won't Wear Out.* Titles are much more journalistic nowadays than in the period of Hawthorne and Poe. A sensation-loving editor would be pretty sure to change *Rappaccini's Daughter* to something like *The Poisoner's Daughter.* But of course the best title in the world can do no more than introduce a story. It must make its way on sheer merit. The somewhat puerile fashion of prefacing a tale by an editorial note of explanation and

praise — aptly called a "blurb" by Gelett Burgess — has little to recommend it. It insults the intelligence of the better class of readers and is of doubtful aid even to the other class.

The man who really has something to say — this is the man for whom the world is always looking, whether in short story, novel, article, sermon, or social prophecy. Commonplace folk need the few pioneers to do their thinking and inventing for them. It may be Kipling in fiction, Edison in electricity, Darwin in evolution; but in all cases it is originality which is honored; it is the man of imagination who leads the van — "and by the vision splendid is on his way attended."

EXERCISES

1. Make an outline of the plot of Conan Doyle's *The Red-Headed League* (in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*) in order to study the original elements in it. Are there any improbabilities in this story? In *The Adventure of the Speckled Band?* Are these improbabilities, if present, likely to affect the enjoyment of the average reader?

2. Kipling's *They* (in *Traffics and Discoveries*) is highly original in many respects. It is a good test of a student's ability to understand in full an obscure but masterly story. Write such an outline as will show what the tale means to you. Mention any details or main elements

which you fail to comprehend. Why would the *Saturday Evening Post* probably refuse such a story?

3. The cleverness of Stockton's *The Lady, or the Tiger?* (in Sherman's *A Book of Short Stories*) lies chiefly in the problematic ending. Set down the reasons for each of the two solutions proposed. Are we told enough about the character of the princess to enable us to guess what she would probably do? Is a problem-close used in any contemporary magazine stories which you have read?

4. Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (in Jessup and Canby's *The Book of the Short Story*) is original and pleasing; but it is in several respects old-fashioned. Show why it is unlike most present-day stories. Is the didactic element strong in modern magazine stories? What magazines favor it, if any? Compare *The Birthmark* with Kipling's *Without Benefit of Clergy* (in *The Book of the Short Story*) with respect to didacticism.

5. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (in Cody's *The World's Greatest Short Stories*) evidently did not gain its success by originality. Write a brief appreciation of this story which will show its elements of popular appeal. What is generally required in a Christmas story which is not so often present in others? Some magazines no longer print typical "Christmas stories," the editors declaring that their sophisticated readers find such tales too elementary.

6. Mary Wilkins-Freeman's *The Revolt of "Mother"* (in Mikels' *Short Stories for High Schools*) is an example of an uneventful life lighted up for a moment by an unusual act of daring. Test this for plausibility and

compare it with *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, both in this respect and in any others which occur to you.

7. Katharine Fullerton Gerould's *Vain Oblations* (in the volume bearing that title) has much more plot and much more originality of plot than most of her stories. Outline this and compare it with a similar outline of any other tale from this volume. Generally Mrs. Gerould depends too much upon subtle and complex delineation of character without any strong plot effect. Hence her stories do not appear in the magazines of largest circulation, which demand that something shall happen. Her originality lies mainly in her psychology. She is not a good model for young writers who wish to sell stories to the average magazine.

8. Point out, among ten stories in current periodicals, the one that you consider most original, and tell why. Give some indication of the plot of the one that seems least original.

9. In O'Brien's *The Best Short Stories of 1915*, which tales are founded on a really worth-while idea? And what, in each case, is the idea? Are there any stories in this volume which seem to rely upon skilful treatment rather than upon any genuine originality of subject? (Mr. O'Brien's selections, for various reasons, do not constitute a list of the best short fiction of 1915; but the volume is useful, nevertheless.)

10. Briefly describe, in H. G. Wells' volume, *Thirty Strange Stories*, three that are too daringly original to be acceptable to a periodical of large circulation, whose readers are for the most part commonplace people. (You

can find, also, one or two such tales in almost any of Kipling's volumes.)

11. Find one story in a current magazine which shows the vaudeville cleverness popularized by O. Henry — a sort of vulgar "smartness" which, in his case, was generally redeemed by worthier qualities. Look first in the periodicals of largest circulation.

12. Find five story-titles in *Scribner's*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Metropolitan*, or other magazines, which seem to you to show unusual skill and fitness; and tell why.

13. Which of the following stories contains the most original character? The most original plot? The most unusual setting? And which seems to you the best story? — Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*, Balzac's *A Passion in the Desert*, Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, Hawthorne's *The Minister's Black Veil*, Stevenson's *Will o' the Mill*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

14. Compare the stories in an issue of *Harper's* with those in an issue of the *All-Story Weekly* with respect to the *kind* of originality shown.

15. Among recent magazine tales which you have read, describe one that best illustrates Flaubert's statement: "The smallest object contains something unknown." (Many seemingly trivial incidents become important when handled by a real artist.)

CHAPTER II

COMMON FAULTS

> It is not the object of a really good novelist, nor does it come within the legitimate means of high art in any department to produce an actual illusion. . . . A novelist is not only justified in writing so as to prove that his work is fictitious, but he almost necessarily hampers himself, to the prejudice of his work, if he imposes upon himself the condition that his book shall be capable of being mistaken for a genuine narrative.
>
> — LESLIE STEPHEN, *Hours in a Library*.

THE most frequent criticism,[1] probably, that an editor has to pass upon a short story otherwise good is, "Unconvincing." A tale may be unconvincing either in total effect or in a particular feature or features — in which case it is possible to revise it and make it acceptable, make it one of the short stories that sell. Young writers would be surprised to learn in how many instances famous authors thus alter a story in accordance with an editor's suggestion. In one case an admirable story needed, and received,

[1] One of the commonest and most serious faults in short-story writing, the weak ending, is treated in the chapter on structure. See pages 103–106.

a slight revision because of a courtroom scene and verdict. No jury with a conscience would have been likely to let even a fine fellow — such as the hero was — off scot-free on the purely extra-legal grounds which the author described. We may have sympathy with a hero who kills a villain, but in a law court we expect justice. This was an unusually fine magazine story and, when revised, made a profound impression. Courtesy to the writer forbids giving its title; but it may be said that the author, a woman, is in general an admirable craftsman.

Maupassant's familiar tale, *The String*, is convincing because the central character, though he tells the truth about the bit of string that he picked up, is known to be tricky. Hence he is believed to have picked up and concealed a pocketbook that had been lost. He suffers unjustly in this instance, but suffers because of his previous acts. Maupassant was too good a psychologist to make a mistake in probability of motive or action.

In another story that came to the present writer in manuscript, the fault lay in too open a use of the supernatural. A bearskin or lion-skin rug—memory refuses to say which—suddenly becomes animate and threatens the life

of the hunter who had long since added it to his collection. Though skilfully told, by an author who had many published tales to his credit, this proved too much for the editor to swallow. Yet Kipling's *Wireless*,[1] in which the spirit of Keats enters into a modern poet and directs his pen, was not adjudged a failure. The only workable test of the supernatural is this: Does it convince the reader's imagination momentarily? Does it throw his reason into a hypnotic slumber? H. G. Wells does it in most of the tales in his volume, *Thirty Strange Stories;* but the average story writer should keep away from the supernatural. It is not a popular magazine topic; it presents, therefore, a handicap that only great imaginative power and vividness of expression can overcome.

When we say, then, that a story is unconvincing we consciously or unconsciously pass a verdict that things would not happen so in real life; or that, granted extraordinary circumstances, a man would not act so in those circumstances. A genuinely inspiring story, however, is always a trifle better than real life. Its people are perhaps kinder and more disinterested. They are like Turner's sunsets. "But,

[1] In *Traffics and Discoveries.*

Mr. Turner," said an old lady as she stood before one of his famous canvases, "I never saw such a sunset." "Ah! my dear madam," replied the painter, "but don't you wish you could!" The success of optimistic tales, tales designed simply to make people happier, shows the wisdom of Turner's defense. The *Peggy-Mary* stories in *Good Housekeeping*, by Kay Cleaver Strahan, which have since been collected in book form, show how a new author may emerge into some prominence by thus spreading happiness through a delightful young heroine. A good many people are always willing to be deceived — if this be the right word — into thinking for the moment that life is a rose-garden idyl [1] rather than a prosaic piece of business.

"People wouldn't act so in real life." One of the commonest reasons for this criticism, passed by many a reader of an essentially unconvincing tale, is that amateur writers and even seasoned professionals are too fond of using "plot-ridden characters," people who are made to act unnaturally because the ingeniously planned outcome of the plot demands it. The

[1] See Margaret Widdemer's *The Rose-Garden Husband.* It is an excellent example of this theory applied to a short novel.

plays of Beaumont and Fletcher are full of such characters; but only in the final reconciliation scene of certain comedies will you detect an example in Shakespeare. It is always bad art to construct a plot which forces the characters to act with absurd unnaturalness. A writer may commit this crime in the second or third degree and be pardoned by an indulgent public for his virtues of inventiveness and skilful structure; but he should not often strain the credulity of his readers. Anna Katharine Green often sins in this respect in her detective stories, which are therefore markedly inferior to the short mystery tales of Melville Davisson Post, or G. K. Chesterton, or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

A second common fault, briefly mentioned in the opening chapter, is a threadbare plot or situation. No one who lacks inventiveness can go very far in short-story writing. One young woman submitted to the present writer at least half a dozen successive stories all of which, from the standpoint of technique, were well written but all hopelessly familiar to the average reader — familiar not merely in one feature or element but in their entirety. It may be that this was due to lack of wide reading

on her part. At any rate, she failed to inject any of her own individuality into her work.

Another young woman ingenuously confessed that she had read very few short stories. What with social activities, *et cetera*, she had never found time! Yet she had time — and temerity — to attempt the *writing* of several tales. Needless to say, they were not successful. This airy assumption that story writing requires no special preparation or hard work is responsible for many worthless manuscripts submitted daily to fiction magazines. Some candidates for a place in a prominent periodical, for example, were not even aware that a manuscript should never be sent rolled; and others apparently had never discovered the existence of that useful invention, the typewriter. The fact that amateur writers should submit such manuscripts to any magazine illustrates once more that hope springs eternal.

Even a trained and successful story writer not infrequently falls back into the rut of the too familiar plot. One of those praised in the previous chapter for originality wasted some beautifully finished work on such a plot. A rich young man and a rich young girl chanced upon a poor young couple in a grove whither all had

gone on a nutting expedition. The contents of the two lunch baskets were shared and an atmosphere of genuine democracy prevailed. Then two rough characters strolled by, insulted the two ladies, and were promptly pummeled by the escorts. All very pretty and very wholesome; but altogether too reminiscent. There were admirable passages, yet as a whole it was not a "different" tale. And friendly editors hardened their hearts and rejected it. The present writer is not going to be indiscreet enough, however, to mention the title of the story or the name of the author; for some day, despite its familiar plot, it may be printed.

Whatever this story lacked, it had charm. The worst of all story faults is dullness. The recipe for perfect dullness is difficult to state, since tastes differ — and especially from one generation to another. Books that we now pronounce insufferably boresome were once pretty widely read. Even Defoe is now known almost entirely by *Robinson Crusoe*, and Bunyan by *Pilgrim's Progress*. Any one who will take the trouble to look into a history of English literature, however, will discover that these two men composed various other works.

Longueurs is the French for dullness.

Although, as Byron observed, we haven't the word,

> "We have the thing:
> An epic from Bob Southey every spring."

We still have the thing — in some of Henry James' later work, and in at least a few of the short stories printed in thirty-five-cent magazines. This dullness most commonly arises from total lack of action. After perusing two or three thousand words of a story in which nothing happens or seems likely ever to happen, the average reader throws the offending periodical into the farthest corner and proceeds to express a vigorous opinion of the editor as well as of the writer. Which is as it should be. A story should have story interest. Shakespeare, who knew his audience so well, knew this; and in his middle and later periods he fairly crowded his plays with action. This was what the average person wanted; and it is what the average person wants to-day. Let there be no mistake about that. You couldn't make a volume equal in interest to Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* out of Ben Jonson's plots. There is not enough story in them, not enough complications in the plot. There is not enough story in some of the short tales of Katharine Fullerton

Gerould, a writer much praised by a small cult. The truth is that Mrs. Gerould sometimes loses her way in a thicket of psychology and a thicket of phrase — but not always. Probably she could get into the fifteen-cent magazines if she wished, instead of merely *Harper's*, *Scribner's* and the *Century;* for the American woman is, as foreigners have observed, a very adaptable creature.

When one says that story interest is necessary, it must not be assumed that a story which possesses action is necessarily a slam-bang, breathless production — or what is known in the trade as a "red-shirt" story. The true recipe can hardly be better stated than in Hamlet's famous advice to the players:

> Do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. . . . Be not too tame, neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty [*i.e.*, moderation] of nature.

This advice needs a little adaptation in order to apply to the short story; but the general purport is clear enough. Action in narrative

does not mean melodrama or the rapidity of a motion-picture film. It simply means that something interesting must happen.

You may open your tale with a little essay, as several good writers sometimes do, but you must then proceed to business. Some stories are nearly all essay; and their authors ought to be writing essays rather than fiction. Hawthorne's *The Great Stone Face*, admirable as it is, betrays rather too much of the sermon. A man must be a born story-teller rather than a manufactured one, in order to portray action naturally, easily, and abundantly. Of such was Chaucer in verse; and of such was Stevenson in prose, as evidenced by the title given to him by the Samoan islanders — *tusitala*, "the teller of tales." To them he told his stories orally, after the good old Homeric fashion; and they recognized in him the true narrative genius.

A fourth common fault in story-writing is lack of acquaintance with one's material — with the locality, for example, or the habits and characteristics of the people. This fault may be dismissed briefly, for it should hardly be necessary to warn writers with honesty of purpose not to treat things of which they are partly

or wholly ignorant. So well known a short story writer as Edna Ferber, however, attempts fields unfamiliar to her in *Broadway to Buenos Aires* [1] and with not very happy results. The indefatigable Emma McChesney takes a business trip to South America; but the local color of that continent seems to have been very imperfectly assimilated by the author. A man who has been there informs me that, contrary to Miss Ferber's belief, it is Portuguese, not Spanish, which is chiefly spoken in Rio Janeiro. The call for a South American story tempted Miss Ferber to write of something which was partly or largely outside of her own experience. The moment one compares *Broadway to Buenos Aires* with Beatrice Grimshaw's stories of the South Seas, one can perceive the richness of local color in the latter and the intimate familiarity of Miss Grimshaw with all her materials — a familiarity which Miss Ferber also exhibits in her best tales of American business, such as *Roast Beef Medium* [2] (the title story of a volume). This familiarity is what has given vogue to many a writer who has confined himself to a small section of country. Joel Chandler Harris made

[1] In *Emma McChesney & Co.*

[2] First published in the *American Magazine*, Dec., 1911.

Georgia his canvas; Thomas Nelson Page, Virginia; George W. Cable, Louisiana; Mary Wilkins, New England; and H. C. Bunner, Richard Harding Davis, and O. Henry are perhaps most famous for their tales of New York City.

Some tales of high society by young persons — and a few older ones — who have evidently never moved in that society illustrate by various ingenuous betrayals how perilous it is for an author to step outside his own experience. Some little *faux pas* at a critical moment is almost certain to reveal him to those who really know the atmosphere which he pretends to know. Honesty and sincerity are at the bottom of all good literary work.

Writers of short stories who are ambitious to get into good magazines should remember, further, that certain subjects are in themselves undesirable, regardless of the merits of the story. Very few periodicals admit anything sordid or depressing. An excellent tale of a New York gunman, by an author who knew his atmosphere well, proved unacceptable because few readers care to become acquainted with anyone so revolting as a professional gunman — the Becker case to the contrary notwithstanding.

Sordid murder cases seem to be much more popular in the newspapers than in magazine fiction.

With the permission of the author, Thomas Grant Springer, I quote a passage near the opening of the story mentioned, *The Gun*, and another near the close:

Pug Bradley was a killer, but there were no notches on his gun. Pug was born on the East Side, not in the West, and the record of his victims was an open book to the neighborhood, though the police blotter gave him no positive mention. Murder was part of his day's, or rather his night's work, for Pug was a nocturnal animal, brother of the feline prowlers of the city, as vicious if not as noisy. His pride in his achievements was a quiet one — not, however, from any sense of modesty — and though his fame was circulated in awed whispers, he looked with disfavor on a press agent. He was known and feared for what he was and gloried in his reputation. At certain Second Avenue cafés the slinking waiters slid up to the cashier with his unpaid checks which the house always stood for. At various corner cigar stands the score for his cigarettes was wiped secretly from the slate without comment.

Pug made his way straight to the Cosmopolitan Café. He took a table across the room where he could watch the door of the dressing room, and ordered a meal. The place was comfortably filled and the cabaret was in full swing. Mame was nowhere in sight, but the reserved

table had a chair leaned against it. Pug noticed this with dissatisfaction. He shifted his position slightly so as to bring the vacant chair into a straight line with him and, when his order appeared, attacked it with relish.

Once or twice during his meal he caught sight of Mame hovering about the dressing room door, evidently waiting. As Pug pushed back his plate and lit a cigarette, Billy the Bloke turned back the chair and, sitting down, glanced toward the dressing room door. In an instant Pug's cigarette dropped from his fingers. He shot a speculative glance about the room and noted the quickest way of retreat toward the street door.

His hand shot into his pocket. Just at that moment Mame started toward the table. Billy rose to greet her. A shot rang out. On a line an inch from Billy's head the plaster cracked on the wall where the bullet had lodged. Before Pug could fire again Mame had flung herself in front of Billy, facing the direction from which the shot had come, and Pug, afraid to risk another try with that shield between him and his intended victim, was rushing toward the door, the frightened diners scrambling out of his way.

Into the street he bolted, cleared the sidewalk at a bound and, tearing open the door of a taxicab standing on a line with the door, he shoved the gun against the back of the startled chauffeur with a curt command, "Shove th' juice into her an' drive like hell!"

This is so well told that it is pretty evident that the only reason for its rejection was the undesirable subject.

The topic of insanity is another which is generally too unpleasant to find a place in periodicals. Poe's tremendous story, *The Telltale Heart*, would probably gain entrance by sheer merit; and it is frequently used by public readers and elocutionists. But editors do not call for such subjects, because the average reader cannot sink his dislike of the unpleasant in admiration for the art with which, in Poe, the unpleasant is depicted. Appreciation of art, of the beautiful in technique, and of beauty in its widest sense, is sadly lacking in most American magazine readers. And so the story writer must remember the commonplace advice of the photographer, "Look pleasant, please." If he writes as he likes on what he likes, editors may finally fall down and worship him; but he is taking long chances. He may build up a reputation as a literary craftsman; but meanwhile the wolf may steal up to his door.

There are encouraging exceptions, however. Irvin S. Cobb's gruesome tale, *The Belled Buzzard*,[1] probably the best he has written, was featured on the first page of the *Post;* and W. W. Jacobs' equally gruesome and even more artistic story, *The Monkey's Paw*, was printed

[1] In *The Escape of Mr. Trimm.*

in *Harper's Magazine*.[1] But both of these stories are so vividly dramatic that they enthrall the reader more than the subject repels him. And it is worth noting that both writers are known chiefly for rollicking humorous tales.

The closing passage of Mr. Jacobs' story shows his art at its best. A dried and withered paw is reputed to be a talisman the possession of which makes possible the fulfilment of three wishes. The possessor wishes for money. It comes, but brings the death of a son with it. The mother then wishes for his restoration to life. What happens is told as but few could tell it, in the following climax. Note the skill with which the suspense is prolonged — by at least half a dozen separate strokes:

His wife sat up in bed listening. A loud knock resounded through the house.

"It's Herbert!" she screamed. "It's Herbert!"

She ran to the door, but her husband was before her, and catching her by the arm, held her tightly.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered hoarsely.

"It's my boy; it's Herbert!" she cried, struggling mechanically. "I forgot it [the cemetery] was two miles away. What are you holding me for? Let go. I must open the door."

[1] September, 1902. Reprinted in *The Lady of the Barge*. Dodd, Mead & Co.

"For God's sake don't let it in," cried the old man, trembling.

"You're afraid of your own son," she cried struggling. "Let me go. I'm coming, Herbert, I'm coming."

There was another knock, and another. The old woman with a sudden wrench broke free and ran from the room. Her husband followed her to the landing, and called after her appealingly as she hurried down stairs. He heard the chain rattle back and the bottom bolt drawn slowly and stiffly from the socket. Then the old woman's voice, strained and panting.

"The bolt," she cried loudly. "Come down. I can't reach it."

But her husband was on his hands and knees groping wildly on the floor in search of the paw. If he could only find it before the thing outside got in! A perfect fusillade of knocks reverberated through the house, and he heard the scraping of a chair as his wife put it down in the passage against the door. He heard the creaking of the bolt as it came slowly back, and at the same moment he found the monkey's paw, and frantically breathed his third and last wish.

The knocking ceased suddenly, although the echoes of it were still in the house. He heard the chair drawn back and the door opened. A cold wind rushed up the staircase, and a long loud wail of disappointment and misery from his wife gave him courage to run down to her side, and then to the gate beyond. The street lamp flickering opposite shone on a quiet and deserted road.

It should be observed that the effect of horror is relieved by the theme of mother love. The

contrast between the mother's conduct and the father's is admirably brought out; the former has that perfect love which casts out fear.

It is, after all, a legitimate demand of readers that they be given entertainment and, if possible, inspiration. Writers like Thomas Hardy, who have a dreary, hopeless outlook on life, are not welcomed in popular magazines, however deft their literary art. The sex interest of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, however, would probably have made it desirable as a serial for some erotic periodical, had it been written in 1916 instead of in 1891. But unrelieved tragedy is seldom desired by any magazine. It is only Ibsen's wonderful dramatic craftsmanship, his sense of effective construction in playwriting, that keeps him on the modern stage. The end of Shakespeare's gloomiest tragedies leaves us with something noble and inspiring to wonder at; but in Ibsen and his school — which has penetrated the short story as well as the drama — there is nothing to relieve the pessimism. A defiant rebel against society, Ibsen busied himself with drawing up indictment after indictment against human life. But this is not the way to build up a magazine circulation of half a million or a million copies. The spirit of

any successful periodical will be found to be optimistic.

That an unfortunate choice of subject is often responsible for the rejection of a story is suggested by the following extracts from letters written by editors of prominent magazines:

The story which you kindly sent us is one which ordinarily we should be inclined to take. Just at present, however, we have a large supply of fiction of this type and do not feel like buying more. We are looking for something in a lighter, more humorous vein.

In this case there was no serious fault in the subject — merely a failure to fit the need of the moment. But the following criticism of another story indicates how loath is the average editor to print anything that may arouse the prejudice of conventional readers, readers from the great American middle class:

It is such an out-and-out slap at churches from beginning to end that I am afraid of it. I don't mind a little slap, but this whole story seems to have been written for that purpose.

The tale referred to was far above the average and, but for its subject — the hypocrisy of church members and their pastor in a case of a fallen woman — would easily have sold for a high price.

The third example was a sex story, rather well written but in its utter frankness much better suited to a French than to an American public. The editor's comment was merely: "This is Boccaccio without Boccaccio's art." It pays, therefore, to find out in advance what American editors dislike. Based upon years of experience, this dislike will generally be found to represent accurately the feeling of the average subscriber.

A magazine editor declared, not long ago, that most of Poe's tales would be refused by popular periodicals to-day. And the statement is probably true. The chances are that if Poe had been writing from 1900 to the present date, he would have developed in a different direction. There would have been a public clamor for more detective stories like *The Purloined Letter* and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue;* and Poe, waxing fat and prosperous, would have forgotten the morbid fancies embodied in his gloomiest masterpieces, such as *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Telltale Heart*, and would have turned his amazing ratiocinative faculty to financial account. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle has acknowledged his debt to the detective stories of Poe. Certain it is that, if he had had our

modern popular magazines to write for, Edgar Allan Poe would not have languished in poverty. Probably he would not have become so great an artist, but he would have had fewer financial worries.

Editors of safe-and-sane family magazines object to stories, however well written, that have criminals as heroes. The dashing highwayman must not be exploited as a model for the younger generation. A prominent magazine declined a good story not long ago, partly on this ground, although it has printed a long series of "crook" tales by George Randolph Chester — the *Get-Rich-Quick-Wallingford* stories. Here the humor is so prominent, however, that one almost dispenses with moral judgments. This genial rogue may be compared (at a vast distance) to Falstaff, in that he is felt to be in an unreal world where everything is a jest. It is questionable, however, whether *Everybody's* or the *American Magazine* would find Wallingford desirable for their class of readers. Some readers of the *American* even objected violently to Inez Haynes Gillmore's serial, *Angel Island*, on the ground that it was a seductive sex story! If this be seductive, what shall one say of — but discretion bids us pause.

The unpleasant was manifested, in a manuscript read by the present writer, by events leading up to the marriage of a white woman to a low-caste native of India. Her poverty and the pleas of the native, a widower, for his motherless children, finally broke down her resistance; and she was depicted as finding happiness in her surrender. It was a well-told tale, but the strong human appeal would not quite overcome the prejudice of a fairly large minority of readers against such a plot. Kipling triumphed over a somewhat similar situation in *Without Benefit of Clergy*, but only by extremely poignant pathos. Readers ought not to be so conventional; but they are. And the editor must reckon with things as they actually exist, not as they should be. It is quite conceivable that even Kipling's story would have been rejected by a popular periodical, if it had been offered by an unknown writer.

One admirably written story was refused by several magazines because the heroine had a slight taint of negro blood. The pathos of the close was so effective that a well-known editor exclaimed: "That author certainly can write!" Yet he could not bring himself to accept it. A second editor wrote that his staff

was so divided over the story that he did not venture to cast a deciding vote in its favor. And a third said that his rejection was based entirely on the subject.

Another manuscript that came to the present writer was objectionable because it described, with vividly realistic details, the washing of some extremely dirty school children. It was humorous, but it would have proved too much for weak stomachs. The following is a passage in point:

"Tony Crito, come here, dear," said the teacher.

Out stepped a pair of man's amputated breeches. Six inches of suspender over the shoulder of a dirty, ragged green sweater held the nether garment up under the armpits of a frowsy, beady-eyed Italian urchin of seven. . . . She hastily directed the tenant of the trousers to a front seat and addressed her remarks to him there: "Tony, I fear you have not taken a bath."

"Yes-a ma'am," whined Tony, frightened by her severity.

"But you are still dirty," declared the teacher. "Did you get into the bath-tub?"

"No can use-a der tub," declared the youngster.

"Why not?"

He hung his head. Johnnie, who had started inquiries of a surprisingly clean urchin in a front seat, paused to explain behind the back of his hand, "Lots o' de Ginneys use de tub for a coal-bin;" and Tony's silence was a confession.

"Tell your mother to use a basin," suggested Helen.

"No got-a de basin," blubbered the child.

"Use anything," said teacher desperately.

Johnnie's confidential low tone broke in, while he pointed to the pale specimen he had just interrogated. "Angelo says his mother washed him wid de dinner-pot."

The pretty lady was saved the necessity of commenting on Angelo's bath by Tony's loud wails of "Smell-a me! Smell-a me!" which invitation she and Johnnie both accepted, only to find the child's head reeking with cheap perfume, a poor substitute for kerosene.

One of the most hopeless kinds of short stories is the one that makes a feeble impression throughout, that lacks what in the trade is called "punch." Perhaps most modern editors would put Jane Austen's novels under this classification; but Jane Austen is probably the most interesting writer about uninteresting things, about humdrum human existence in drab little villages, that English literature has produced. The truly colorless tale is the one that you can't remember forty-eight hours after reading it. Five tests of the emotional effect of literature, discussed by Professor C. T. Winchester in his excellent volume, *Some Principles of Literary Criticism*,[1] are the following: the justice or propriety of the emotion;

[1] Pp. 81 ff.

its vividness or power; its continuity or steadiness; its range or variety; and its rank or quality. The second test is the one just referred to. In discussing it, Professor Winchester says of Cowper, the poet: "He had nice sensibilities, a quick eye for beauty, a graceful humor, a delicate gift of phrase; but he lacked power. He seemed not fully alive."

A writer without strong personality is as good as beaten at the start. Among manuscripts submitted by amateurs to the magazines this colorless type, the one that makes no definite impression, is the most common. In looking over a card index of the titles of a good many such tales, I find that in most cases I cannot recall the faintest outline of the stories themselves — although I experience no such difficulty in the case of a strongly written story, no matter how faulty in details. Hazlitt somewhere refers to those persons "who live on their own estates and other people's ideas." There is a large number of such persons in the world; but they ought not to be writing short stories.

Stories that are too intellectual — *i.e.*, either too hard to understand or too destitute of red blood — get scant attention from busy editors of fifteen-cent monthlies and five-cent weeklies.

No magazine with a circulation of more than 150,000 can have a highly intelligent audience. I recall a beautiful short-story manuscript entitled *Pippa Makes a Journey.* It could not be enjoyed to the full except by a person familiar with Browning's dramatic poem, *Pippa Passes.* The heroine spread happiness and turned people away from evil in much the same manner as did Browning's heroine, although the plot was substantially original. To accept such a story would be to overestimate the familiarity of magazine subscribers with the great English poets.

The tale which is too intellectual in the sense of being emotionally arid and lacking in human sympathy finds, as a rule, no place in any popular periodical. Unlovable authors like Walter Savage Landor are unpopular because they did not care enough for their fellow men. Maupassant's art seems rather cold to the average reader; it is the lover of technique who best appreciates this great Frenchman. Some of his masterpieces seem, in their remorseless analysis of the human soul, to be a kind of literary vivisection; and they arouse an actual resentment in a commonplace reader. This is not true, however, of all his stories. If you dislike Maupassant, your literary taste needs

to be educated. But it must be admitted that a periodical with a large circulation can undertake only a very limited amount of education without danger of losing subscribers.

Charles Lamb tells us that (unlike Maupassant) he was almost moved to tears, as he used to stroll down the crowded Strand in London, by the privilege of seeing so much humanity. Few authors to-day are so well beloved as Lamb. If he were living in the present age and if his genius lay in fiction rather than in the *Essays of Elia*, he could command almost fabulous prices from magazine editors. For stories that touch the heart are, after all, the most popular.[1] Read Lamb's *Dream Children*, which comes very near to being a modern short story, and judge for yourself. I quote only the climax:

> Then I told them [the children] how for seven long years, in hope sometimes, sometimes in despair, yet persisting ever, I courted the fair Alice W—n; and, as much as children could understand, I explained to them what coyness, and difficulty, and denial meant in maidens — when suddenly, turning to Alice, the soul of the first Alice looked out at her eyes with such a reality of re-presentment that I became in doubt which of them stood there

[1] One of the finest stories of pathos in recent literature is Mary Wilkins' *The Little Maid at the Door* (in *Silence and Other Stories*).

before me, or whose that bright hair was; and while I stood gazing, both the children gradually grew fainter to my view, receding, and still receding till nothing at last but two mournful features were seen in the uttermost distance, which, without speech, strangely impressed upon me the effects of speech: "We are not of Alice, nor of thee, nor are we children at all. The children of Alice call Bartrum father. We are nothing; less than nothing, and dreams. We are only what might have been, and must wait upon the tedious shores of Lethe millions of ages before we have existence, and a name" — and immediately awaking, I found myself quietly seated in my bachelor armchair, where I had fallen asleep, with the faithful Bridget [his sister] unchanged by my side — but John L. (or James Elia) was gone forever.

An objection that will seem curious to some writers of fiction is the editor's objection to stories that are "far from home" — that have an unfamiliar foreign setting. For the fifteen-cent periodicals, American themes for American readers has become almost a formula. Exceptional tales, especially those by distinguished British authors, are admitted to all American magazines, wherever their scenes may chance to be laid, but a tendency toward the geographically remote is distinctly discouraged. The most successful of American periodicals, from the standpoint of circulation, the *Saturday Evening Post*, is probably the most typically

American. It is significant that no attempt has been made to market a large edition of the *Post* in England. *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and the *Century* all issue important English editions. The American edition of that highly successful British periodical, the *Strand Magazine*, however, had only a small sale; and it has recently been discontinued. Evidently middle-class British taste in fiction differs markedly from American. The *Strand* prints a good many old-style sentimental love stories which strike the sophisticated American stenographer and shoe clerk as amusing. The whole atmosphere of the *Strand* is certainly almost as British as that of the *Post* is American. The best British writers of fiction, nevertheless, are much sought after in this country — and rightly. The genuine master may place his theme where he will, and editors will have to come to him: witness Kipling and India.

In a symposium in the *Bookman* (May, 1916), several prominent magazine editors tell why manuscripts are rejected. The commonest reason seems to be simply that they are not interesting enough. The editor of the *Cosmopolitan*, Mr. Edgar G. Sisson, says: "The mediocre story compares to the real story in the way that

the tailor's dummy compares to a man. It may be clothed in fair words, but it isn't human." The editor of *Ainslee's*, Mr. Robert Rudd Whiting, states that the rejection of a well-written manuscript by his magazine "is in most cases due to its lack of what in people we call 'personality.'" Mr. Mark Sullivan, of *Collier's Weekly*, thinks that, speaking of manuscripts generally, "it is largely like the phrase that was used either by or about 'Maggie' in Barrie's play, *What Every Woman Knows:* it is all a matter of charm. If you have it, you need not have much else. If you have not got it, nothing else will do." But one may safely assume that Mr. Sullivan insists, as a rule, on good technique and attractive subjects.

At all events, there is little or no favoritism. An editor does not accept a story because he knows the author; he accepts it solely because it will help to sell his magazine. Any other policy would cost him his position. Mr. Arthur T. Vance, of the *Pictorial Review*, gives a convincing instance in point: "There was a man in my office yesterday who has written and sold more than two million words of fiction and special articles. His work has appeared in various magazines of standing, including *The*

Pictorial Review, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Woman's Home Companion*. Yet this was the first time he had ever been east of the Mississippi River; the first time he had ever been in a magazine office; the first time he had ever seen an editor." And Mr. Vance adds: "The country is full of writers who are selling their work without knowing the editors." So much for the myth of personal "pull."

Of all amateur fallacies the most amusing, if not the most common, is the assumption that a story gains interest and value from being founded directly on fact. On the contrary, such a story seldom succeeds, for real life does not fall into well-ordered plots. Furthermore, real life contains numberless superfluities that must be pruned away. Good fiction is not photographic; it *represents* life accurately, but after the method of the painter. A trained writer sees or reads about a real incident or series of incidents that illustrate the fumbling incertitude of nature. He says to himself that it will not be difficult to change that fumbling incertitude into the swift, unerring certainty and satisfying finality of art. Real life is often more improbable than art, more bizarre, more lawless and unclassifiable. Some newspapers

make a specialty of odd items that seem incredible. *But fiction must be more convincing than actual life.* Such an item as the following, clipped from a newspaper, would make an unconvincing basis for a short-story plot:

> Miss W—— L——, while dreaming and walking in her sleep, cut off her hair. She dreamed there were burglars in the house and that they told her if she would cut off her hair and give it to them they would take nothing else. When she awoke she found that she had left her bed, gone into another room, and cropped her hair close to her head.

I recall a story written by a young man (who afterward got into some of the best magazines), about a locomotive engineer whose sweetheart lived in a house near the railroad track. One day she and a girl companion were walking on the track at a point beyond a curve or a covered bridge, where they could not be seen by this engineer in time to stop his train. What would he naturally do? The young author, declaring that he took his story from real life, made the engineer increase rather than decrease the speed of his locomotive, in order that the death of the two girls, which was inevitable in any case, might be an painless as possible! True or not, this is not credible to the average

reader and is therefore not good character-drawing in fiction. Nature does what art dare not do.

In dialogue, too, one should represent rather than transcribe real life — the talk of real people. Natural and convincing dialogue is exceedingly hard for some writers of fiction to acquire.[1] The talk of their characters sounds stilted, artificial, often futile. It is just talk — and not in character. Good dialogue characterizes, advances the action, or explains past action. There is no further recipe for success in it, save that it should admit no superfluities. It should condense and heighten the talk of real people. Some one has said that good dialogue in fiction is like the real talk of clever people in their best moments. This is true of the amusing small-boy dialogue in Booth Tarkington's *Penrod* tales and of the society chat in the stories of Edith Wharton. The commonplace and the dull are eliminated. But only the dramatic faculty — the faculty of putting yourself in another's place — can result in excellent dialogue.

An obvious lack of this faculty is discernible in the following passage from an unpublished

[1] A useful model is Anthony Hope's *Dolly Dialogues.*

manuscript. The dialogue is "wooden"; it is unconvincing. It fails to give an impression of real life. Instead of ease and naturalness, there is stiffness and awkwardness:

"If you refuse to believe it," she said, with her infectious laugh, in which there now hovered a slight hint of constraint, "you cannot at any rate refuse to try the experiment."

He did not notice the constraint. "Certainly I won't refuse," he replied, with a provoking slow smile. "I've committed a thousand worse follies during the past year."

"You are the perfection of frankness," she rejoined. "But as a mathematician you are of course devoted to exact truth."

"And my exact opinion of you, Mrs. Worthing, is that you are a congenial companion raised to the *n*th power."

"How devoid of romance!" she cried, with a flutter of pretended dismay. "Your awful sense of reality and exactness quite upsets me. I wonder if there isn't some reason why I should quarrel with you for it."

"Let us not search too long, for we might find one," he returned, half seriously. "Please allow our friendship to rest in peace."

"Ah! that is ominous; it suggests the Latin inscription."

In a passage from another manuscript there is, on the contrary, at least a fair attempt at characterizing dialogue, although complete naturalness is not attained here, either:

When, a few days later, Ayrton saw his genial publisher, he found a shock awaiting him. Harding placed a severe hand on his shoulder. "Meddler!" he said, only half in jest, "you have robbed me of my stenographer, philosopher, and friend. Take your novel and go to the devil!"

The famous author grew white. He stammered: "What — why? —"

"Yes, just so," assented his tormentor. "Miss Morris is threatening to resign — got sick of us. Her father declares that the work's too much for her; that she mustn't return. And the surprising thing is that she tamely submits. It's not like her. She's a fighter — and a good girl, too. Never been tired before. Must be her helping you with your confounded novel. Looks to me, my boy, as if you had messed things up generally."

The publisher looked keenly at him, and chuckled. His chuckle became a laugh, then a succession of spasms of contagious mirth. The walls reverberated.

Ayrton flushed, thought better of a desire to show anger, and capitulated. "Well, have I got a move left," he demanded, "or am I already checkmated?"

"You've got a move, all right; but I can't tell you. You must play the game yourself. It wouldn't be fair for me to interfere. And with your microscopic knowledge of the feminine heart I must say you have about one chance in — let me see —" He paused, and emitted a seemingly endless succession of chuckles.

So nearly perfect is Shakespeare's dramatic faculty that one speaks, quite properly, of his characters as real people and of their talk as

absolutely in character. But the language of Shakespeare, except in some of his prose scenes, is pitched at a level far above that of ordinary mortals in the real world. The following passage, however, differs only in degree, not in kind, from some of the talk in the best of our modern short stories. But who to-day could create a Falstaff or a Prince Hal?

Prince. Thou say'st true, hostess; and he slanders thee most grossly.

Hostess. So he doth you, my lord; and said this other day you ought [owed] him a thousand pound.

Prince. Sirrah, do I owe you a thousand pound?

Falstaff. A thousand pound, Hal! A million. Thy love is worth a million; thou ow'st me thy love.

Hostess. Nay, my lord, he called you Jack, and said he would cudgel you.

Fal. Did I, Bardolph?

Bard. Indeed, Sir John, you said so.

Fal. Yea, if he said my ring was copper.

Prince. I say 'tis copper. Dar'st thou be as good as thy word now?

Fal. Why, Hal, thou know'st, as thou art but man, I dare; but as thou art prince, I fear thee as I fear the roaring of the lion's whelp.

Prince. And why not as the lion?

Fal. The King himself is to be feared as the lion. Dost thou think I'll fear thee as I fear thy father? Nay, an I do, I pray God my girdle break.

Prince. O, if it should, how would thy guts fall about thy knees! . . . Charge an honest woman with picking thy pocket! why, thou impudent, emboss'd rascal, if there were anything in thy pocket but tavern-reckonings, and one poor penny-worth of sugar-candy to make thee long-winded, if thy pocket were enriched with any other injuries but these, I am a villain. And yet you will stand to it; you will not pocket up wrong. Art thou not ashamed?

Fal. Dost thou hear, Hal? Thou know'st in the state of innocency Adam fell; and what should poor Jack Falstaff do in the days of villainy? Thou seest I have more flesh than another man, and therefore more frailty. You confess, then, you picked my pocket?

Prince. It appears so by the story.

Fal. Hostess, I forgive thee. Go, make ready breakfast; love thy husband, look to thy servants, cherish thy guests. Thou shalt find me tractable to any honest reason; thou seest I am pacified still. Nay, prithee, be gone.

The dialogue of a good many modern novels and short stories — that of Robert W. Chambers, for example — often fails to convince because it is more flippant, inconsequent, and trivial than that of real life. Mr. Chambers writes good dialogue when he wishes, however. The trouble is that in a good deal of his work, and in that of many other magazine entertainers, there is often a lack of elevation, of nobility.

Their dialogue, like their sentiment and their moral tone, is at a low level. It was said of Goldsmith that he "wrote like an angel, but talked like poor Poll." It may be said of some of our modern authors that their characters talk like poor Poll; but it can hardly be said of them that they write like angels.

EXERCISES

1. Even in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories there are many minor details which are unconvincing. Make a list of these in three or four of the tales in his volumes: *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. You will find that the third volume is, as a whole, inferior to the first two. In which stories? Or in what respects? Are the unconvincing elements sufficient, in any case, or cases, to affect the plausibility of the whole story?

2. Give at least two examples of "plot-ridden" characters in recent magazine stories. You will find plenty of these in some of the minor periodicals, where a clever twist of plot is more desired than truthful delineation of character; but you will probably have difficulty in discovering many such characters in *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, the *Century*, or the *Atlantic*.

3. On the other hand, you will find in the four magazines just mentioned not a few examples of stories which lack action — enough action to satisfy the average reader

of more popular magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Pictorial Review*. Make outlines of three such stories and suggest, if possible, how more action could be introduced. Can you find any such stories in any of Kipling's volumes? Stevenson's? O. Henry's?

4. If you know some of the types of character in the remote small towns of New England, test several of Mary Wilkins-Freeman's stories (in the volume, *A New England Nun*, for example) for credibility of character portrayal. Persons unacquainted with New England have often charged her with drawing grotesque and impossible people — people too eccentric and unreasonable to exist. Do you discover any evidence of this?

5. Find, in a good magazine, at least one example of a story with an unpleasant or tragic subject. What is the effect of the story upon you? Upon some of your friends?

6. Briefly describe five stories by Poe which would probably not be accepted by any high-class modern periodical on account of their painful or disgusting subjects. On the other hand, describe five in which the art of the narrative atones for the unpleasantness of the subject. In which division would you place *The Cask of Amontillado? The Case of M. Valdemar?*

7. Give an example, taken from a newspaper or from your own experience, of an actual occurrence too incredible to make a good subject for a fiction story.

8. Copy two or more passages of dialogue which seems to you to be artificial in any respect — too "high-flown," or too clever, or (in the case of an uneducated character)

too nearly correct. Then copy two passages which seem to you to represent dialogue at its best; and tell why. (You will find O. Henry decidedly uneven as to the quality of his dialogue. Try Henry James' later novels and short stories for involved sentences and, in general, lack of simple, straightforward expression.)

9. Is the following newspaper item a good subject for a story? Why, or why not?

> Miss Mary ———, an assistant in the city library, died today from the effect of terrible burns inflicted with suicidal intent last night. The young woman poured kerosene oil over her head and shoulders and then thrust her head in the furnace. Miss ——— was thirty-five years old and was well known in musical circles.

10. Stevenson's *The Sire de Malétroit's Door* (in *A Book of Short Stories*) would obviously be improbable in a present-day setting. Show why. Also indicate why it would be especially improbable in an American setting.

11. Give an example of a story with a happy ending which fails to convince you — one whose ending would logically seem to be tragic or at least somber. On the other hand, would it be possible to supply logical happy endings for any of Poe's gloomy tales? Why, or why not?

12. Find a story, either in a magazine or in volumes by writers of reputation, which to you is hopelessly dull; and tell why. (If two students disagree on a particular story, the discussion can often be made highly illuminating to the class as a whole.)

13. Describe two stories of contemporary life which show very close acquaintance with the subjects they treat — baseball, society life, seafaring, lumbering, hospital routine, a particular city or section. And find, if possible, one story which reveals obvious ignorance of some details which it attempts to portray.

CHAPTER III

STRUCTURE

How few are willing to admit the possibility of reconciling genius with artistic skill! Yet this reconciliation is not only possible, but an absolute necessity.
— EDGAR ALLAN POE, *Essay on Bryant.*

Scribe used to say that "when my subject is good, when my scenario is very clear, very complete, I might have the play written by my servant; he would be sustained by the situation; — and the play would succeed." From Scribe, who was only an ingenious mechanician of the drama, this may not surprise us; but his saying would not be greatly objected to by any true dramatist, poet, or prose-man, for it is only an overstatement of the truth. Menander, the master of Greek comedy, was once asked about his new play, so Plutarch tells us, and he anwered: "It is composed and ready; I have only the verses to write." Racine's son reports an almost identical remark of his father's in answer to a similar inquiry. And there is no dispute possible as to the elevated position attained by Racine and by Menander when they are judged by purely literary standards. — BRANDER MATTHEWS, *A Study of the Drama.*[1]

A FIRST-CLASS writer of short fiction must be a lover of technique; he must be an artist.

[1] Houghton Mifflin Co.

For the structure of a good short story is a thing of architectural beauty. One of Hawthorne's best tales, *The Artist of the Beautiful*, may almost be taken as an allegory of a lifelong ambition to create a perfect plot, "a thing of beauty and a joy forever." It is actually a mechanical butterfly which the artist in the story creates, but the delicacy of workmanship required is much the same as that which confronted Hawthorne himself in his highly imaginative narrative and which confronts any conscientious workman to-day. Kipling, like so many short-story writers nowadays, is artist plus journalist; but in his case the artist is undeniably present.

Since the ascent from the third-rate and the second-rate magazines to the first-rate is quite as much a matter of mastery of structure as of any other one thing, it is important that the problem be put clearly before the ambitious beginner. Poe, who was one of the greatest artists that have used the short-story form as a vehicle of expression, declared (borrowing some of his thunder from Aristotle) that in his time plot was very imperfectly understood. "Many persons regard it as mere complexity of incident. In its most rigorous acceptation, it

is that from which no component atom can be removed, and in which none of the component atoms can be displaced, without ruin to the whole."

Above all else, moreover, the short story as Poe wrote it aimed at unity of effect. In a passage which has become classic, he says:

> A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents — he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. As by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel.[1]

This type of story is still frequently found in the best magazines. Deficient as many modern tales are in finish of style, most of them are astonishingly good in technique, in effective-

[1] *Graham's Magazine*, May, 1835.

ness of structure, and in economy of means. The short story as Poe wrote it may, purely by way of useful suggestion rather than prescription, be defined as *a tale which, purposing to convey a single effect, or an impression of a situation, sets forth to secure this effect by an introduction which strikes the keynote* (*the opening of* The Fall of the House of Usher *is a model in this respect*), *by skilful touches of suggestion which hint at the outcome without revealing it, by maintenance of atmosphere and unity, and by progress toward a climax which is unexpected and dramatic, and which, with the addition at times of a few words to restore a quieter tone, abruptly ends the narrative.* This implies, certainly, that the construction of a notable short story is no child's play. It must have a design as definite as a geometrical figure.

A short-story writer is not necessarily a good novelist; and *vice versa*. There is really little in common between the two literary forms. Professor Brander Matthews stoutly affirms: "It cannot be said too emphatically that the genuine Short-Story abhors the idea of the Novel." [1] The rich complexity of a great novel (*Vanity Fair* contains about sixty characters)

[1] *The Philosophy of the Short-Story*, p. 26.

is and must be absent. The utmost compression and accuracy of aim are essential. Frequently the short story fulfils the three unities of the drama — those of time, place, and action. Hawthorne's *The Ambitious Guest*, Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, and Stevenson's *The Sire de Malétroit's Door* are confined to one day and one locality. On the other hand, one of the greatest of modern short stories, Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*, covers two years — chiefly, however, by two exceedingly vivid contrasted scenes. And Maupassant's *The Necklace* covers ten years! Here again, nevertheless, the story consists chiefly of two contrasted scenes.

Maupassant, in this as in many of his masterpieces, succeeded in keeping far below the 5,000-word standard. Some of his best work was done within 3,000 words. For masterly compression and directness he is probably the best author to study. The average story, when accepted by an editor, is promptly condensed by him. Sometimes, in the case of a new writer, from 1,000 to 2,000 words are removed, with the result that the story becomes more craftsmanlike and effective. The commonest and most salutary correction, in any form of

written composition, is amputation. In many stories there is too much beginning and too much ending — and some superfluous tissue in between. Walter Pater's dictum on this point of brevity is suggestive: "All art does but consist in the removal of surplusage."

In verse, Browning succeeded in telling a remarkable story, *My Last Duchess*, in about 450 words. In his dramatic monologue, a first-person method of narration (with a silent listener) makes possible the utmost brevity of skilful suggestion; and suggestion is always more forcible than direct information. Gossips have known this from time immemorial.

In *My Last Duchess*, however, an intelligent reader is required to get all the subtle suggestions, both of character and event. So much brevity is probably not quite consistent with perfect clearness. Those who are interested in the dramatic and narrative effect obtained in Browning's monologues will do well to consult also *Andrea del Sarto*, a very modern "marriage-problem" story. One need no longer fear the "high-brow" stigma that used to attach to the study of Browning; for Mr. William Griffith has discovered rich motion-picture possibilities in him! The present writer

can testify to this, after seeing Mr. Griffith's film adaptation of *Pippa Passes*. The fact is, of course, that pantomime — and motion pictures are only a subdivision of pantomime — is always the skeleton of any good play or dramatic poem; frequently, also, of a dramatically constructed short story. Maurice Hewlett's *Madonna of the Peach Tree* [1] is a series of vivid scenes in which a beautiful young mother whom the superstitious Italian peasants believe to be the Madonna appears to various groups of people and causes them to fall down in worship. It is an extraordinarily effective and sincere example of craftsmanship in which the structure is so simple that a child could analyze it. Much the same method is to be seen in Fleta Campbell Springer's excellent story, *In Step*,[2] which was starred by the Boston *Transcript* as one of the notable short stories of 1914. Mrs. Springer's own account of the working out of the structure of this tale is as follows:

> The story is an attempt to portray an entire life and personality by means of four pictures snapped, so to speak, at long intervals in the life of the central character, but at moments which light up the spaces between. This method grew naturally out of the fact that the story

[1] In *Little Novels of Italy*. [2] *Harper's Magazine*, July, 1914.

was itself suggested to me by just such a detached picture — the picture which afterward became the third one of the four.

I was sitting one day in the park when a woman with her baby and nursemaid came and settled themselves on the grass not far away. The instant I saw the woman I knew that she had never been meant for a mother. The word "counterfeit" presented itself immediately in connection with her attitude toward the child. And with that faithfulness to truth with which our senses sometimes reject their own evidence, I seemed to see this woman in her rightful sphere — a rigid little schoolmistress, the kind of schoolmistress children both fear and despise. A nature made up of elements chemically antagonistic to the rest of mankind — a nature, when I had finally analyzed it, "out of step" with life.

"It was not," to quote from the story itself, "the idea of her having a child that struck me as incongruous; it was the idea of a child having *her* for a mother. She was absorbed in the baby, putting on its little jacket, tying the little kid bootees more snugly — and all the while going on in that absurd baby talk that is such a pretty officiousness in very young mothers. Could it be possible that it was not her child, I wondered — and then I saw the fierceness with which she held the little body close to her own, as if she would clutch its naked spirit in her two thin hands. There was no longer any doubt. . . . Yet I had that same impression of falsity, of acting, that I had felt that day in her house a year before."

In a story of this kind the thesis must precede the plot, and my thesis was that no person of one type can *consciously* become another type.

Briefly, then, my plot was this: A cold, selfish woman, entirely lacking the maternal instinct and all the normal feminine impulses, sets out consciously to become like other women. She leaves her profession of teaching, bends all her efforts to making herself attractive to one man, achieves marriage, has a child, the child dies inevitably, leaving the husband aged and saddened, while she looks younger, better, at the end of the story than at the beginning.

Obviously there were no dramatic moments to record. Whatever drama there was took place in the mind of the central character. Seeing the woman with her baby in the park that day had not been a dramatic incident; it had, on the other hand, been most undramatic and casual; and I realized that it was that very thing which had made the incident so illuminating and eloquent.

I put the story in the mouth of an entire outsider, a stranger with no "story" connection whatever, except that the "pictures" are seen through her eyes. The first picture must show the woman in her original and real character. Therefore I put her in the schoolhouse, and devised a brief incident or two to show the children's fear of her, and her lack of sympathy for them.

The next picture was "snapped" in her home in New York after she had become Mrs. Branson, and after she had deliberately changed herself as to dress, manner, speech, and mode of life so startlingly that the reciter of the story fails to recognize the figure seen in the first picture.

The third picture is the one first quoted, the one which suggested the story. And this picture, in which the death of the child is foreshadowed, is as obviously the climax

as would be, say, a murder committed by an unscrupulous character in a story of dramatic action — leaving for the fourth and last picture merely the presentation of the final effect of the experience upon the character. Therefore I chose for the last picture a mere passing glimpse of Mrs. Branson in her mourning black, walking down the Avenue with her husband. Her expression, her appearance, as well as the changed appearance of the husband, make plain the effect of the experiences through which they have passed.

For brevity (about 1600 words) and strict adherence to the three unities, Arthur Morrison's admirable little cameo of realism in the East End of London, *On the Stairs*,[1] will repay careful study. The action, as indicated by the title, all takes place on the stairs of a tenement building, the kind of tenement "where the front door stood open all day long, and the womankind sat on the steps, talking of sickness and deaths and the cost of things." Three flights up, on the landing, an old woman tells a companion about a dying son. When the doctor comes out, he gives the mother five shillings to buy medicine — which she saves for the (to her mind) inevitable funeral! Nothing leaves the room all night, "*nothing that opened the*

[1] In *Tales of Mean Streets;* also in Cody's *The World's Greatest Short Stories.*

door." Next morning the two old women reappear on the stairs and the mother says that she must be stirring, to make arrangements for the funeral. There is unusual power of atmosphere in the story, partly due to the perfect unity and great compression. It is not pleasant, but one feels its truth to the life which it aims to portray. To the student, its structure is its most interesting feature.

Ward Muir's account of the genesis of his unusual tale, *Sunrise*, and of his general methods of composition is commended to every young author. It shows the ambition, and in this case the achievement, of the real artist:

> In this story [*Sunrise*] I departed absolutely from all my usual rules. To begin with, it was built on what I call a theoretical plot. These I very seldom bother about. You hit on a theoretical ethical situation, then invent people and a place to express it. For example, you say to yourself: "Suppose it was possible to prevent a war by murdering a baby in cold blood, should it be done?" and then proceed to build the situation in actual drama.
>
> I got the idea: "Suppose it was possible for a grown-up person never to have seen the sun, what would he or she think if suddenly presented with the phenomenon of the sun rising — a phenomenon which we see without the slightest emotion?"
>
> It seemed a dramatic notion. I cast about me to make it practicable, and naturally thought first of a blind man

restored to sight. Old. Besides, he would have felt the sun on his face, and heard about it. Therefore some sort of cave dweller. To be more effective, a woman, not a man. And so on. Where? Some queer part of the earth: such a thing is unthinkable in a civilized country. China, for various reasons. Here I broke another rule of mine — never to write about a place I have not personally seen. This I regard as important. Nevertheless, I had to let it go. I have never been in China, but have talked with very many who have.

You see how the thing was built. All quite deliberate, every single touch chosen for a reason. It was only as I looked into it that I saw that a spiritual adventure ought really to follow the course of the physical one, to make it subtler. Hence the missionaries.

The story was written straight ahead, at great length; then ferociously cut: then typed and then most minutely worked on. The mere correction of this story took me at least a month — I mean the polishing and refining of it. In case it is of interest I may here say that I never send out a serious story (by which I mean a story to a really good magazine — of course I do lots of journalism) without going over it with a microscope some twenty or thirty times: this not so much for re-writing purposes as for the choice of words. My typescripts (I write either on the machine or with a pen) are covered with altered words — altered sometimes for the sake of sound and sometimes to sharpen the precision of meaning — and also I cut and cut and cut and boil down. Then the whole thing is retyped, and this final typescript requires no alteration whatever. If I get a proof I scarcely ever have to alter a single word, because my final original was

as perfect as I could make it. This I personally count to be an important feature of our craft: I think that some authors do not spend enough pains on their vocabulary in any given story. I admit it doesn't "pay," at least not at first glance, though in the long run I have the faith to believe that it does. But it is an essential drudgery of craftsmanship.

Mr. Muir adds that the tales of his own which he himself likes best are his very short ones, such as *Motives*[1] and *Behind the Windows.*[2] "They get a drama into about 2,000 words — which I flatter myself is an exceedingly difficult (and artistically self-denying) thing to do. If I may say so, the American short story is apt to spread itself and not sufficiently study economy of words, etc., in getting its effect, and is too fond of dwelling on local color and introducing unnecessary characters."

W. W. Jacobs modestly describes his methods thus: "I start with an idea, or the beginnings of one, and then let it develop. That is all that I can say about it." But those of us who have read Mr. Jacobs' stories know that the process is not so simple as this sounds. His development of a narrative idea is always a revelation of art, and of highly painstaking art. Like many of the best short-story writers,

[1] *McClure's*, June, 1914. [2] *McClure's*, Aug., 1913.

he comes very close to the drama in his technique.

There is much more in common between the short story and the drama than would at first be supposed. The only kind of novel that can readily and properly be dramatized is, as Professor Brander Matthews has pointed out,[1] one which is "inherently dramatic," one in which "the central figure is master of his fate and captain of his soul." "Action in the drama is thus seen to be not mere movement or external agitation; it is the expression of a will which knows itself." Brunetière made it plain, adds Professor Matthews, that "the drama must reveal the human will in action; and that the central figure must know what he wants and must strive for it with incessant determination." This assertion of the human will is the secret of the success of many of the greatest short stories. It applies, at the climax, to Henry Rowland's *The Copy-Cat*, mentioned in the first chapter. It is the entire theme of Mr. Foote's *Opus 43, Number 6;* also of Mary Wilkins' *The Revolt of "Mother,"* and of the story which Poe himself regarded as his greatest, *Ligeia.* To this tale he prefixes a remarkable

[1] *A Study of the Drama*, p. 95.

quotation from Joseph Glanvil, which shows that he had meditated deeply upon the subject, for narrative purposes, of the power of the human will:

> And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigour? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.

Peter B. Kyne's series of tales [1] about Captain Matt Peasley, of Thomaston, Maine, and old Cappy Ricks, his employer, from the same shipping port, reveals also this naked assertion of human will, and the clash of two opposing wills — in a much more wholesome, if less artistic, way than the morbid *Ligeia*. It is this assertion of will, sweeping aside all obstacles, that makes possible the directness and brevity of so many excellent short stories; and a clash of wills makes possible the series by Mr. Kyne.

It is assertion of will that makes possible the struggle which in some form must be the theme of nearly all good short fiction — and long fiction as well. It is evident that real

[1] In the *Saturday Evening Post*. Published in book form under the title, *Cappy Ricks*.

life is a continual struggle; in terms of evolution, a struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. The conflict may be, as Professor W. B. Pitkin[1] has pointed out, between man and the physical world, between man and man, or between one force and another in the same man. The most forcible illustration of the last is perhaps Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The first is shown in almost any story which portrays the pioneer or the outdoor man. The *Popular* and *Adventure* are full of such tales. The *Post* is full of stories of the second class, particularly the struggle of man against man in the business game. War stories are a subdivision of this class: the struggle of nation against nation. Wherever there is conflict, there is material for a story, whether in the great events of the French Revolution or in the pranks of small boys. There is a decisive moment that forms a climax; and there is some driving power, some strong motive, that spurs men on to this moment.

When a story drags, it is often from a lack of definiteness of purpose. The novelist, as in the case of Dickens and Thackeray, frequently used to let his narrative shape itself as it pro-

[1] *Short Story Writing*, p. 74.

ceeded. He made no preliminary outline of the plot. But woe to the short-story writer who consistently pursues such a method! He might better have a millstone hung about his neck and be dropped into the middle of the sea. The dramatist Dekker, a contemporary of Shakespeare, was an "inspirationist"; that is, he trusted to inspiration rather than to hard and methodical work. And the result was that his latest plays were just as slipshod and ineffective in structure as his first — though excellent in certain other respects. The present writer knows of a successful novelist who has essayed several short stories without success because she puts pen to paper without a clear idea of how her story is to be developed. She has failed to visualize its geometrical design. Harold Bell Wright is a man too commonplace in inventiveness, too destitute of story ideas, to produce an effective short story. His effort in the *Ladies' Home Journal* (*The Girl at the Spring* [1]) was nothing beyond the commonplace.

Owen Wister's trenchant article [2] on *Quack Novels and American Democracy*, would have lacked material if he had treated the American

[1] Sept., 1912. [2] *Atlantic Monthly*, June, 1915.

short story. More real brains are required for the construction of an excellent short story than for a hundred pages of many a novel. A writer of successful historical novels was once heard to remark that he wished some one would teach him how to write a short story. He had tried it several times, but had not the remotest idea of the recipe for success. It is significant that most short-story writers succeed at the novel, if they try after the age of thirty, whereas many really notable novelists have failed to achieve anything beyond mediocrity in the brief tale. It is mainly a matter of technique, a matter of structure. Leisurely methods do not suffice. The writer of marketable short stories must know precisely — not hazily or lazily — what he wants to do. And he must go direct to his goal. As for reading, let him get by heart (literally, if he wishes) the best of Maupassant, the best of Poe, and the best of Kipling. And, for style, let him study Stevenson, who has many pupils among well-known writers of to-day. Maupassant, says Professor Matthews, had "a Greek sense of form, a Latin power of construction, and a French felicity of style." What more can any amateur desire in a model?

One of the short story MSS. examined by the present writer was faulty in structure because of its handling of the time element and of the conclusion. A blind woman was taken into a house by a sympathetic man who had seen her stumble and fall. She told him that fourteen years before, when she was twenty, she had been happily married. A year afterward her husband was badly injured in an automobile accident, his face being horribly disfigured. Morbidly fearing that she might shrink from him on account of his appearance, she deliberately blinded herself. After a few months, however, his scars healed and he was nearly or quite as handsome as ever. Finding his wife something of a burden, by reason of her blindness, he became unfaithful to her. She learned the facts and left his house without telling him or any of her relatives where she was going. They had never discovered her afterward. Upon the conclusion of her tale, she left her auditor, asking him not to try to find her.

Obviously, even if well constructed, this would be too sentimental and unconvincing; but the structure at least could be improved. The story should begin at the point where the husband is brought home after the accident.

Then the previous circumstances of their married life could be briefly introduced. The telling of the story to the sympathetic man fourteen years afterward should be discarded. It loses in dramatic force by this indirect method. The closing scene should be that in which the blind wife confronts her husband and charges him with infidelity. And the tale should perhaps end with a mere sentence or two describing her flight — for example, with this passage, quoted almost directly from the manuscript:

> Then she left him and went upstairs. She departed in the middle of the night. He didn't believe that she would go. But she did.

The common fault, and the fatal fault, in structure is the weak ending. The great short story, as Poe implied, should be written backward: the climax should be conceived first and the whole story should be built upon that, should lead up to it and subserve its purpose. An excellent example of a fine story injured, though not ruined, by a weak ending that trails off ineffectively is *The Assault of Wings*, by Charles G. D. Roberts.[1] An aviator starts out to explore a "bottomless" lake on the

[1] *Smart Set*, May, 1914.

top of a mountain. Some eagles oppose his venture and make things very interesting for him. The battle with them is evidently the climax; and Mr. Roberts describes it vividly. After that, the reader is not likely to care much about the aviator's original purpose to explore the lake. A well-constructed short story should end very quickly after the climax. But the author has added this long passage and thereby injured his effect:

MacCreedy watched them [the eagles] go, and dropped his weapon back into the kit. Then he went over his precious machine minutely, to assure himself that it had sustained no damage except that slit in one wing, which was not enough to give serious trouble. Then, with a rush of exultation, he ran over to examine the mysterious pool. He found it beautiful enough, in its crystal-clear austerity; but, alas, its utter clearness was all that was needed to shatter its chief mystery. It was deep, indeed; but it was certainly not bottomless, for he could discern its bottom, from one shore or the other, in every part. He contented himself, however, with the thought that there was mystery enough for the most exacting in the mere existence of this deep and brimming tarn on the crest of a granite peak. As far as he could judge from his reading, which was extensive, this smooth, flat granite top of Bald Face, with its little pinnacle at one end, and its deep, transparent tarn in the center, was unlike any other known summit in the world. He was contented

with his explorations, and ready now to return and tell about them.

But if content with his explorations, he was far from content on the score of his adventure with the eagles. He felt that it had been rather more of a close call than it appeared; and there was nothing he desired less than an immediate repetition of it. What he dreaded was that the starting of the motor might revive the fears of the great birds in regard to their nests, and bring them once more swooping upon him. He traversed the circuit of the plateau, peering downward anxiously, and at last managed roughly to locate the three nests. They were all on the south and southeast faces of the summit. Well, he decided that he would get off as directly and swiftly as possible, and by way of the northwest front — and by this self-effacing attitude he trusted to convince the touchy birds that he had no wish to trespass upon their domesticity.

He allowed himself all too brief a run, and the plane got into the air but a few feet before reaching the brink. [Here evidently is a sort of secondary climax or moment of excitement.] So narrow a margin was it, indeed, that he caught his breath with a gasp before she lifted. It looked as if he were going to dive into space. But he rose instead — and as he sailed out triumphantly across the abyss the eagles came flapping up over the rim of the plateau behind. They saw that he was departing, so they sank again to their eyries, and congratulated themselves on having driven him away. A few minutes later, at an unprovocative height he swept around and headed for home. As he came into view once more to the anxious watchers in the automobile, who had been worried over his

long disappearance, the car turned and raced back over the plain to X——, ambitious to arrive before him and herald his triumph. The fact that that triumph was not altogether an unqualified one remained a secret between MacCreedy and the eagles.

There is no big dramatic moment very near the close, nothing for the story to rest upon securely. It "just ends"; it does not really conclude. But Mr. Roberts is not often guilty of so feeble a terminal effect. In most of his work he is a good deal of an artist.

Most short stories that come into the busy editor's office can be judged rapidly and yet justly by a glance at the introduction and the conclusion. If there is no effective climax, there is no story — no matter how much "fine writing" may have been wasted on the intervening pages. Few beginners who have not made a study of structure have any idea how important it is to get an effective and to some extent original closing scene, and then build the tale upon it. Even after conscious study, if a writer masters short-story structure in three years he may consider himself fortunate. His masterpieces, if he produces any, are likely to be the result of a process similar to that ascribed to the creative force of Nature by Robert Burns:

"Her prentice han' she try'd on man,
An' then she made the lasses, O."

If he can finally attain a beauty of structure resembling the beautiful lines of that sculptured Venus in the Louvre before which generation after generation has bowed to worship, he may write himself down an artist. Colors without lines, "purple patches" of brilliant writing without structure, will never make anyone a master of the short story.

The most effective close is that which has some tinge of the unexpected. A complete surprise, such as Maupassant achieves in *The Necklace* and Aldrich in *Marjorie Daw*, cannot always be hoped for; and editors do not expect it. But how artistic and poignant is the effect in *The Necklace!* The poor wife has toiled like a common drudge through ten cheerless years. And for what? To pay, by the most sordid economies, for a silently purchased substitute for a borrowed and lost necklace, the diamonds of which, as she finally learns from the friend who had lent it, were paste! It all comes upon the reader like a flood; and there, without an added word, ends the story:

"You remember that diamond necklace that you lent me to wear at the Ministry ball?"

"Yes. What then?"

"Well, I lost it."

"Lost it? Why, you brought it back to me!"

"I brought you another just like it. And it has taken us ten years to pay for it. It was not easy for us, you will understand, since we had next to nothing. At last it is done, and I can tell you, I am glad!"

Mme. Forester divined the secret.

"You say you bought a diamond necklace to replace mine?"

"Yes. You didn't notice it, did you? They were so like!"

And she smiled with a proud and naïve joy.

Deeply moved, Mme. Forester took both her hands.

"Oh, my poor Mathilde! Why, mine was false. At most it was worth only five hundred francs!"

O. Henry is famous for his surprise endings, often humorous ones. As Professor Stuart P. Sherman has well phrased it,[1] "His plots are very craftily premeditated, and are notable for terminal surprises, which, like an electric button, suddenly flash an unexpected illumination from end to end of the story. His surprises, furthermore, are not generally dependent upon arbitrary arrangements of external circumstances but upon shifts and twists in the feelings and ideas of the human agents."

A remarkably dramatic surprise is flashed

[1] *A Book of Short Stories*, p. 334.

upon the reader at the close of Conan Doyle's very brief tale, *How It Happened*,[1] which is told by a "medium." The theme is a motor-car smash:

Going at fifty miles an hour, my right front wheel struck full on the right-hand pillar of my own gate. I heard the crash. I was conscious of flying through the air, and then — and then —!

When I became aware of my own existence once more I was among some brushwood in the shadow of the oaks upon the lodge side of the drive. A man was standing beside me. I imagined at first that it was Perkins, but when I looked again I saw that it was Stanley, a man whom I had known at college some years before, and for whom I had a really genuine affection. . . .

"No pain, of course?" said he.

"None," said I.

"There never is," said he.

And then suddenly a wave of amazement passed over me. Stanley! Stanley! Why, Stanley had surely died of enteric at Bloemfontein in the Boer War!

"Stanley!" I cried, and the words seemed to choke my throat — "Stanley, you are dead."

He looked at me with the same old gentle, wistful smile.

"So are you," he answered.

The Uncle Abner tales of Melville Davisson Post, which have been printed in the *Saturday*

[1] *Strand*, October, 1913.

Evening Post, the *Metropolitan*, and the *Red Book*, and later collected in book form, are also good examples of the unexpected and highly dramatic ending — which is usually demanded in all mystery and detective stories. Mr. Post's studies of the workings of conscience and of Uncle Abner's almost uncanny insight into these workings are sometimes quite worthy of Hawthorne. The Sherlock Holmes tales are, of course, even more familiar examples of suspense and surprise, particularly that remarkably dramatic and horrifying narrative, *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*, in which a serpent figures. As a "thriller," this is a model.

A mastery of atmosphere contributes greatly to the success of Mr. Post and of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Stevenson, apropos of atmosphere, said:

> There are, so far as I know, three ways, and three ways only, of writing a story. You may take a plot and fit characters to it, or you may take a character and choose incidents and situations to develop it, or lastly . . . you may take a certain atmosphere and get actions and persons to realize and express it. I'll give you an example — *The Merry Men*. There I began with the feeling of one of those islands on the west coast of Scotland, and I gradually developed the story to express the sentiment with which the coast affected me.

Poe had a fairly hypnotic power of atmosphere. Impressionable young persons are warned not to read his most creepy tales just before going to bed. They seem fairly to photograph themselves upon the brain. Once in his atmosphere, you are never out of it until the end of the story; he maintains perfect unity of mood.

From the viewpoint of structure, the opening of a story is worthy of considerable attention. It may be an essay-like opening, as in some of the tales of O. Henry and Kipling, or swift and direct, as in Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado:*

> The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who know so well the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitively settled — but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity.

This perhaps gains vividness from being told in the first person; but no general rule can be given as to the comparative advantages of first and third person — nor as to the letter method and various others. Some authors are fond of a particular method and work most

easily and naturally in it; but the beginner had better beware of clinging to one exclusively. Experiment will determine how much variety is wise — or possible.

Here is the first paragraph of *The Man Who Would Be King* — reflective, yet coming swiftly to the point:

> The Law, as quoted [in a prefatory line, "Brother to a Prince and fellow to a beggar if he be found worthy"], lays down a fair conduct of life, and one not easy to follow. I have been fellow to a beggar again and again under circumstances which prevented either of us finding out whether the other was worthy. I have still to be brother to a Prince, though I once came near to kinship with what might have been a veritable King and was promised the reversion of a Kingdom — army, law-courts, revenue and policy all complete. But, today, I greatly fear that my King is dead, and if I want a crown I must go hunt for it myself.

The opening of Stevenson's *Will o' the Mill*, a character story, is very leisurely and descriptive, as befits its subject. That of O. Henry's *Phoebe*[1] is in dialogue and states the theme in very few words:

> "You are a man of many novel adventures and varied enterprises," I said to Captain Patricio Maloné. "Do you believe that the possible element of good luck or bad

[1] In *Roads of Destiny.*

luck — if there is such a thing as luck — has influenced your career or persisted for or against you to such an extent that you were forced to attribute results to the operation of the aforesaid good luck or bad luck?"

The following beginning is unusually abrupt but effective — from *Without Benefit of Clergy:*

"But if it be a girl?"

"Lord of my life, it cannot be. I have prayed for so many nights, and sent gifts to Sheikh Badi's shrine so often, that I know God will give us a son — a man-child that shall grow into a man."

Freeman Tilden's story, *Prison-Made*,[1] describes the activities of a "prison poet" who got into a penitentiary in order to gain publicity. He came from the Greenwich Village colony in New York City, and so the tale opens appropriately with a humorous characterization of that region. Anyone who reads the entire story will see that the introduction, although it is almost a little essay in itself, is not superfluous.[2]

The Latin Quarter has been called "the Greenwich Village of Paris." There is a considerable similarity between the two neighborhoods. In both is to be found a curious intermingling of petty shopkeeping and the

[1] In *That Night, and Other Satires.* Hearst's International Library Co.

[2] For a similar introduction, see the quotation from Fannie Hurst's *The Spring Song*, pp. 219–220.

arts. They are both incubators of genius — chuck full of eggs.

American tourists should see Greenwich Village first. In the quantity of artistic effort, it rises superior to its French rival. Here in this little corner of New York, stowed away between Sixth Avenue and the Hudson, is the center of the magazine industry of America. It has been estimated:

That the amount of $8\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 typewriter paper consumed in Greenwich Village every year, if piled up, would mount to the astonishing height of seven and one-third miles.

That the total foot-pounds of energy expended in hitting typewriter keys in Greenwich Village in a year would be sufficient to light New York, Paris, Berlin, and London with electricity.

That if one day's manuscripts were withheld from the Greenwich Village post office, half the entire postal employees of New York would be thrown into idleness.

It has been said, though without much foundation, that when good Americans die they go to Paris. It can be said, with far greater conviction, that when American manuscripts are rejected, they go back to Greenwich Village.

As an example of an introduction which plunges *in medias res*, this is a good one, from Donn Byrne's prize-fight story, *A Man's Game:* [1]

They might have kept their eight thousand dollars, Doran thought bitterly, as he went back to his corner

[1] *The Popular Magazine.* Reprinted in *Stories Without Women.* Hearst's International Library Co.

after the first round; they might have kept their eight thousand in their pockets. If he hadn't agreed to lie down in the twelfth round, he would have been put out in the eighth. Good heavens! Couldn't they have left him at home in peace, and not have brought him back to shame and humiliation tonight?

The amateur can almost always be distinguished from the professional by his clumsiness in opening a story. His introduction will lack distinction; it will generally be either too colorless or too ambitious. In any case, it will not strike a sure note. Often it will be too long and will not be an integral part of the story. The athlete who displays "form" in the hundred-yard dash, who runs so gracefully that it is a delight to watch him, has acquired this form by long practice under good coaching. The same must be true of the short-story writer. Distinction, in any art, is not to be acquired overnight.

One successful writer of magazine stories tells me that she often rewrites a tale three or four times — not merely for changes in phraseology, but structural changes which involve the whole skeleton of the story. She sees a new twist at the climax which improves the surprise, or a more effective way of starting the

tale, or a swifter and surer method of developing the theme. Since this author, Miss Dana Gatlin, has had stories in the *Cosmopolitan*, *McClure's*, the *Century*, *Collier's*, and the *American*, it is evident that her painstaking pays. Robert Burns said of his poems that they were the result of easy composition but laborious revision. Their ease and naturalness are the product of careful art, not of a rapid and careless pen. "Easy writing," as the English orator, Fox, remarked, "makes damned hard reading!"

Although in any good short story there must be incident — action — there must not be too many incidents. A common mistake of amateurs is to crowd into one story enough happenings to serve for two or three. I recall one manuscript, good in many respects, which contained at least four important incidents, two of them easily separable, because not essential to the main purpose of the narrative. They were random incidents, illustrating the mischievous habits of schoolboys. The story was a mere assembling of materials, not a structure. No unified impression could be produced. Another writer, who has had stories in important magazines like the *Metropolitan* and *Collier's*, finds it difficult to get within a 10,000-word limit,

largely also for the same reason — that he has too many incidents, an *embarras de richesse.* He has not learned how to remove surplusage.

A successful novelist wrote a short story in which two important incidents of about equal value divided the reader's interest near the close of the tale. Either would have made an effective climax. And they did not depend on each other. In one a little girl did something to her own hair to produce a comic effect; in the other she told to a reporter over the 'phone a frank but humorous story of an engagement. When the second incident was removed, unity of effect resulted and the story was structurally successful. The trouble with many efficient performers who do not know the rules of the game is that, in football parlance, they don't stop and touch the ball down when they have crossed the goal line, but like Ole Skjarsen in one of George Fitch's most diverting stories, they keep right on running wild across the country.

There may legitimately be several incidents in a short story, provided they are related. In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which despite its length is essentially a short story in purpose and effect, one can clearly perceive this relation of

incidents. The tale depicts what any good story depicts — a struggle in which every happening has an influence on the final outcome. All that is needed to make a good plot, as Aristotle pointed out, is a tying of the knot and an untying — a complication and a *dénouement*. In a drama or a novel there is room for elaborate complication, as illustrated in *Othello*, the best constructed of Shakespeare's plays; but in a short story simplicity of structure must prevail. In Hawthorne's *The Ambitious Guest* there is, if we except the arrival of the stranger at the house, only one incident. Yet this is one of the best of Hawthorne's tales.

The lack of clearness which many readers complain of in Kipling and other notable story writers is not due to faulty structure. It is due to the use of suggestion rather than direct information; and suggestion is a necessity in the short story. Without it there can be no suspense. Much as the short story has been decried by cloistered critics in universities and in the New York *Nation* on the ground that it requires no exercise of mentality from the reader, it is nevertheless true that disputes over the meaning of a good short story are frequent. Behind the best tales of Kipling and Poe and

Hawthorne there is good hard thinking. Kipling's *They* is not understood in its entirety by one reader in ten. Yet it is almost a perfect story. People absorbed in material things, especially in the making of money, are likely to find such masterpieces difficult. Founded on a blind and childless woman's intense love for children, this story *They* proposes the astounding theory of her ability to gather around her, on her wonderfully beautiful English estate, the visible ghosts of dead children. A motor-car plays a very realistic rôle in the plot, and a father who had lost a child is concerned in an especially touching incident. For such a story a reader with unusual imagination and sympathy is required. But, once understood, no story of Kipling's is more moving.

Another exaggerated example of short-story obscurity — and an exaggerated example always makes a point clearer than does an average one — is Kipling's *The Brushwood Boy*. A young English soldier, of good family, falls in love at first sight — or hearing, rather — with an English girl who, as he is passing through the gardens after a muddy tramp in the country, is singing within the house, at which she is a guest, a beautiful lyric, *Over the Edge of the Purple Down*.

He falls in love with her for the reason that certain obscure geographical references in her song show that she is the heroine of the strange dreams which he has had on various nights for several years. Obviously, then, she has had similar dreams and knows him in this dream-world, of which he, with an admirable touch of nature which reveals Kipling's insight into humanity, has made a rough map in the most matter-of-fact way. Curiously enough, it turns out that they have both named the places alike. Hence, having long been lovers in these peculiar dreams, which in all important respects exactly correspond to each other, what more natural than that they should become lovers in real life?

In detective tales, suggestion is especially important. Note the effect of the following, for example, from Poe's *The Gold-Bug:*

> He received the paper very peevishly, and was about to crumple it, apparently to throw it in the fire, when a casual glance at the design seemed suddenly to rivet his attention. In an instant his face grew violently red, — in another as excessively pale. For some minutes he continued to scrutinize the drawing minutely where he sat. At length he arose, took a candle from the table, and proceeded to seat himself upon a sea-chest in the farthest corner of the room. Here again he made an

anxious examination of the paper, turning it in all directions. He said nothing, however, and his conduct greatly astonished me; yet I thought it prudent not to exacerbate the growing moodiness of his temper by any comment. Presently he took from his coat-pocket a wallet, placed the paper carefully in it, and deposited both in a writing-desk, which he locked. He now grew more composed in his demeanor; but his original air of enthusiasm had quite disappeared.

The Sherlock Holmes tales are full of such suggestions, to heighten the suspense. The description of the ventilator in the room where a woman had been mysteriously murdered [1] is an instance in point; and another is the curious advertisement [2] for men with red hair. An excellent example of a tale which contains a large number of passages of suggestion is Henry James' remarkable ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw*.[3] This portrays the influence of the spirits of a dead manservant and a governess upon the characters of a young boy and a young girl and the efforts of their living governess to combat this influence. In their lives, the two servants had been disreputable and after their deaths they tried to keep up their evil ascendancy over the children. Until the startling

[1] In *The Speckled Band*. [2] In *The Red-Headed League*.
[3] In *The Two Magics*.

climax the reader is puzzled to make out just what is the nature and extent of this supernatural power. The result is a story of rare suspense and impressionism. It affords proof that Mr. James, when he wished, could write a tale in which genuine story-interest is strong. He has not strayed off into over-subtle analysis of character and motive; there is progress from the first page to the last. Even persons to whom the mention of Henry James is a red rag will do well to peruse this little masterpiece, which may profitably be compared with Kipling's *They* and Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw.*

When skilfully employed, suggestion puzzles the reader without irritating him. When clumsily used, it deliberately throws him off the track and, at the close of the story, is seen to be illogical and absurd. This is bad structure — dishonest structure. The tales of Arthur B. Reeve are not free from this defect; but Poe, and generally Conan Doyle, are severely logical. To follow their mysteries is a keen technical pleasure. Suggestion without revelation is essential to that suspense which all good narrative possesses. In the magazines of largest circulation it will be noted that suggestion is used sparingly in most of the stories. This is due to the

average subscriber's dislike of anything not clear. He may forgive it on account of the aid to suspense; but he will not appreciate fully a frequent use of it. It is hard for this commonplace person to realize that a great short story is not a bureau of information. He ought to delight in using his mother wit to discern what is between the lines; but, of course, if he lacks the wit he must be regaled with simpler and clearer narrative. It is generally unsafe to assume his delight in subtle suggestion, except in a mystery tale.

The first reading of a masterpiece, even a play of Shakespeare's, has a fascination which can never be recaptured — the fascination of not knowing what is coming next. In order to enjoy to the full a Shakespearean play on the stage, try one which you have never read. You will be surprised at the pleasure derived merely from unfamiliarity with the plot. This unfamiliarity is essential to any good short story. And it is skilful structure which causes the pleasure.[1]

The office of dialogue in structure may perhaps be best indicated by the fact that a very

[1] Anyone who wishes to delve deeply into the subject of structure, from the dramatic standpoint, will find material in Professor George P. Baker's treatise, *The Development of Shakespeare as a Dramatist.*

large proportion of the average modern story is told by means of dialogue. Some, indeed, are so nearly dramatic in form that they can be transferred to the stage with surprisingly few changes. Poe got along with only a small proportion of dialogue, but Poe had very little dramatic ability. He was more interested in situations and climaxes than in his characters. Kipling relies mainly on the talk of his characters for the progress and development of his stories. So does W. W. Jacobs. The opening of his tale, *Sam's Ghost*, shows his usual skill in introducing action and arousing keen interest in character:[1]

"Yes, I know," said the night watchman, thoughtfully, as he sat with a cold pipe in his mouth gazing across the river, "I've 'eard it afore. People tell me they don't believe in ghosts and make a laugh of 'em, and all I say is: let them take on a night watchman's job. Let 'em sit 'ere all alone of a night with the water lapping against the posts and the wind moaning in the corners; especially if a pal of theirs has slipped overboard and there's little nasty bills stuck up just outside in the High Street offering a reward for the body. Twice men 'ave fallen overboard from this jetty, and I've 'ad to stand my watch here the same night and not a farthing more for it.

"One of the worst and awfulest ghosts I ever 'ad anything to do with was Sam Briggs. He was a waterman at

[1] *Metropolitan*, June, 1916.

the stairs near by 'ere; the sort o' man that 'ud get you to pay for drinks, and drink yours up by mistake arter he 'ad finished his own. The sort of man that 'ud always leave his baccy box at 'ome, but always 'ad a big pipe in 'is pocket.

"He fell overboard off a lighter one evening, and all that his mates could save was 'is cap. It was only two nights afore that he 'ad knocked down an old man and bit a policeman's little finger to the bone, so that as they pointed out to the widder, p'raps he was taken for a wise purpose. P'raps he was 'appier where he was than doing six months.

"'He was the sort o' chap that'll make himself 'appy *anywhere*,' ses one of 'em comforting-like.

"'Not without me,' ses Mrs. Briggs, sobbing and wiping her eyes on something she used for a pocket handkercher. 'He never could bear to be away from me. Was there no last words?'

"'Only one,' ses one o' the chaps, Joe Peel by name.

"'As 'e fell overboard,' ses the other."

This story, told in the first person by the author's familiar character, the night watchman, gives the effect of a monologue plus dialogue. The advantage is the greater naturalness obtainable by a born story-teller through this method. It also brings the short story still closer to the drama than ordinarily. In his humorous tales Mr. Jacobs uses this first-person method very frequently.

This author has that utmost cunning of art which produces the effect of nature. A casual reading of one of his stories is not likely to reveal the surpassing skill in almost every speech and even every phrase. His characters talk with such absolute naturalness and his story progresses so rapidly to its goal — generally in about three thousand words — that the young writer may be deceived into thinking that all this must be very easy if one has a natural turn for it. The fact is, of course, that it is the result of much study and much painstaking. Charles E. Van Loan's praiseworthy naturalness in dialogue is also very deceptive. The story seems to be talked off as casually and readily as in real life; but if one looks carefully at the structure one sees that the whole is artfully planned and skilfully executed. His volume of short stories, *Buck Parvin and the Movies*, is well worth examining with care for the means by which naturalness and effectiveness in dialogue are secured.

Artificial, melodramatic talk is not always readily recognized by the average reader, if covered up by sentiment and an exciting plot. Mr. Julian Street has performed a valuable service by satirizing this sort of dialogue in his

burlesque sex story, *Living up to Letchwood.*[1] The insincerity and melodrama of much third-rate fiction are well brought out in the following passage—which certainly does not lack action:

There followed one of those idyllic Letchwood conversations, in which they pretended, fancifully, that they were the only man and woman in the world. Then something seemed to snap within him. He tried to control himself, and to that end dug his finger-nails into his palms. He told himself that he had seen her only twice; that he had never spoken to her until now; that the feelings which surged through him were nothing short of madness — sheer madness! And yet — a great wave of longing swept over him.

"Lorette!" he burst out passionately. "I love you! We are meant for each other! You know it! I saw it in your eyes when we first met!"

"Don't!" she whispered, going white.

"It was bound to come!" he cried, his deep, well-bred voice throbbing with suppressed passion. "It is Fate! You love me! Tell me that you love me!" . . .

"And to think," he whispered, "that to me you are only Lorette! That I do not even know your name!"

At that she stiffened suddenly within his strong embrace. The smile vanished from her lips; a look of anguish came into her eyes. "My name!" she sobbed. "I had forgotten that — forgotten all! This is only a dream! Let me go! Tell me it is only a dream!"

He released her. Panting, she leaned against a tree.

[1] *Everybody's*, July, 1914.

"What is it?" he cried in alarm. "Speak, Lorette!"

"My name!" she wept. "That brings it all back! Can't you see? Can't you guess?"

"No! For God's sake, speak!"

Trembling terribly, she drew herself together. "My name," she said slowly, "is Lorette Coventry!"

"Ah, no!" cried Desbarets, an icy chill running through his body. "You cannot mean that you are—" He could not utter the rest.

She inclined her head.

"Heaven help me!" she said. "It is true. I am David Coventry's wife!"

Before her eyes he seemed to wither, like a man suddenly grown old. His broad shoulders drooped. He leaned his weight against a tree-trunk. Slowly he raised one of his gloved hands and removed the fashionable hat from his bowed head. Then in choking tones he spoke two words:

"Good-by!"

"Good-by!" Her voice was like a dying breath.

This bears a recognizable resemblance to some of the recent work of a certain sex-story writer and his school. This author has been described, in the austere pages of the New York *Nation*, as the servant girl's novelist.

The portrayal of character through dialogue is admirably illustrated in a passage from a story previously alluded to, Henry C. Rowland's *The Copy-Cat:* [1]

[1] *Saturday Evening Post*, May 18, 1907.

"Oncet I was well-to-do, Jake," he began complainingly. "Me and a feller named Hank worked a claim that would ha' made our fortun's in a year. I did most o' the work an' Hank he sorter looked after things an' saw we wa'n't interfered with. If ever I was a bit down I'd kinder git a line on how Hank tuk things an' that 'ud buck me up. He was a driver, he was" — Bill's face lighted — "but he done me in the end!" He sighed.

"Course he did!" growled Jake. "He'd ha' bin a plum' fool if he hadn't ha'."

"When I was a young 'un," Bill pursued, "they useter call me the Copy-Cat, becuz if I was left alone I allus seemed to kinder peter out. But jes' so long as they was some 'un I cud watch and copy like I was all right."

"You're a jelly-fish — that's what *you* are!" grunted Jake. "Copy-Cat — Copy-Cat — and a good name for ye, too!"

"I reckon it is, Jake," sighed Bill. "The funny part of it was that when I was a-copyin' some other feller like as not I'd do what he was a-doin' better'n what he cud. I cud lick any feller on the mountain jes' so long as he kept a-whalin' me and kep' his mad up, but without that I'd sorter wilt like."

In the following passage from Donn Byrne's story, *Graft*,[1] there is a combination of characterization with a prophecy of the outcome:

A few of the men seemed contemptuous toward him, a few seemed furtive in their nodded greeting, as though he were a person not to be known, a few were frankly de-

[1] *Saturday Evening Post*, April 22, 1916.

sirous of not seeing him. A pale, hawk-faced lawyer with a breezy Western client by his side nodded in response to Trainor's pleasant smile.

"Who is it?" the client asked.

"Oh, that?" the lawyer queried. A little yawn of distaste showed on his face. "That's John Trainor, the purchasing agent for the Azure Star Line."

"What's wrong with him?" the Westerner smiled. "You made a face like a kid taking medicine. What's up?"

"Well" — the lawyer spat the words in disgust — "if you want to know, that's the damnedest grafter, liar and thief in the city. He's not even a big one. He's a cheap piker." He shook his head. "And the queer part of it is that ten years ago he used to be one of the decentest fellows in the world."

"Grows on you like dope," the client nodded.

"You've got it," the lawyer turned to him. "You've laid your finger on it. That man doesn't know how deep in it he is. Some of these days he's going to be caught with the goods, and then — good night!"

Past action is briefly and deftly indicated in a passage from Corra Harris' *Epsie of Blue Sky* [1] — a passage which also exhibits the author's philosophizing on life and her Biblical vein of sentiment:

"The marigolds and zinnias are doing well this season," said Epsie, coming up the steps and seating herself beside me, with her apron filled with these coarse blossoms.

[1] *Pictorial Review*, April, 1916.

"Epsie," I whispered, "it's awful to die without being married — if you are a woman!"

"Yes," she answered simply.

"Did you ever have a lover?" I asked.

"No, not one that I could love," she answered softly.

"But there was a lover?" I insisted.

"Yes," she sighed, so low that I scarcely heard the whispered word.

"Is he married now?"

"No."

"Dead?"

"No."

Thus we sat side by side, two women bereaved of love. I drew her hard brown hand into mine. I leaned forward and kissed her upon the cheek. As Cadmus introduced letters into Greece, so did I introduce kissing into the Meade household. I doubt if Epsie had kissed or been kissed for many a year. She started, stiffened, as if that little caress reminded her of something hidden and forbidden in her innocent breast.

"Why didn't you marry him, dear?" I asked gently.

"He is not a good man," she answered, turning her face from me.

"But must a woman always marry a good man?"

"If you marry one who is not good, you approve of him," she answered with stern simplicity.

I was moved by this logic. It reminded me of that time long past, before my confirmation, when every act was either right or wrong, when there was no middle ground for my trembling young soul. I considered Carey. I saw him with Epsie's clear eyes, and with the innocent eyes of that girl I had been. He seemed to shrink

into a poor creature. He lost his brilliance, his insouciance. He became tinkling brass and the world's sounding cymbals.

The directness and economy of this dialogue are worthy of close study. It illustrates the rule that there should be no talk for talk's sake. Here every stroke counts, every word is for a purpose. Good dialogue always shows this economy and artistry.

In the following passage from Mary Synon's *The Bounty-Jumper*,[1] the problem of the story is stated in dialogue:

The boy turned from his strained watching of his father's face to read the letter. It was the official notification of the Senate's confirmation of the President's appointment of James Thorold as ambassador to the Court of St. Jerome.

"Why, father!" Incredulity heightened the boyishness in Peter's tone.

James Thorold wheeled around until he faced him. "Peter," he said huskily, "there's something you'll have to know before I go to Forsland — if ever I go to Forsland. You'll have to decide."

The boy shrank from the ominous cadence of the words. "Why, I can't judge for you, dad," he said awkwardly.

"Our children are always our ultimate judges," James Thorold said.

[1] *Scribner's*, February, 1915. Reprinted in *The Best Short Stories of 1915*. Small, Maynard & Co.

This noble tale of American patriotism is worthy of careful perusal both for its artistry and its basis of thought. There is not much outward action in it, but a good deal of struggle in those ultimate empires, the affections and the conscience.

In mastering structure, as in mastering anything worth while, no substitute has yet been discovered for hard work. If you are a beginner and are not afraid of work, transcribe a few tales which by virtually all critics are voted masterly in structure and in phraseology. You will find that you can become intimately acquainted with an author's methods and diction by this simple process — which forces you to look closely at things that, in mere reading, you pass by or only half perceive. Some of the best models for this purpose are Maupassant's *The Necklace*, Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*, Hawthorne's *The Ambitious Guest*, Stevenson's *The Sire de Malétroit's Door*, Kipling's *The Man Who Was*, W. W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw*, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*.[1]

The form, the structure of the short story —

[1] For the volumes in which these stories are contained see the Appendix, pages 258–263.

even of some of the masterpieces just mentioned — may seem to be highly artificial; and so, in a certain sense, it is. Some of the most beautiful verse-forms, such as the Italian sonnet, the triolet, and the rondeau, are open to the same criticism. The placing of the climax at the very end of the story may be artificial. Things seldom happen so in real life, you say. Existence is not, after all, a succession of supreme moments; it is not spent at continual high pressure. Naturalness seems to be sacrificed to power. Characters are shown for only an hour, or a day, or in brief, lightning-like glimpses for a few months. There is none of the complexity of genuine life. Problems are simplified beyond the mathematical limit. There is too much isolation, segregration for literary experiments. Well — all these accusations have some weight. And yet the total effect of one of Stevenson's stories, or Hawthorne's, or Kipling's, is not an effect of artificiality. They have achieved nature through an artificial form. All art, of course, is merely representative, is in some sense artificial — "nature to advantage drest." The short story *form* is indeed highly artificial; but when the master weaves his tale upon this form the result is something very

different, something profoundly moving, as in Kipling's *The Man Who Was*, or eminently inspiring, as in Hawthorne's *The Artist of the Beautiful*. And this the artificial can never accomplish. The hack writer for the minor magazines may never rise above mere artifice; but the gifted and conscientious workman will achieve the convincing power of nature.

EXERCISES

1. Test a long story (8,000 or 9,000 words) in the *Saturday Evening Post* to discover whether any "component atom," in Poe's phrase, can be removed without injury to the plot or to the total effect. If you find any story of this length which is "padded," for the benefit of the advertising columns beside which the last part (the "hanger") of the tale is placed, copy the unnecessary passage or passages and present also an outline of the whole plot such as shall show why the said passage or passages are superfluous. Apply the same test to a few stories in other magazines which print advertising side by side with reading matter. Do you agree with Mr. Ward Muir that, in general, the American short story "is apt to spread itself and not sufficiently study economy of words, etc., in getting its effect"?

2. Which of the following stories strike the keynote sharply (as does *The Fall of the House of Usher*) in the opening paragraph?—*On the Stairs*, by Arthur Morrison

(in *The World's Greatest Short Stories*); *The Man Who Would Be King*, by Kipling (in the same volume); *Rip van Winkle*, by Irving (in the same volume); *Phœbe*, by O. Henry (in *A Book of Short Stories*); *Marse Chan*, by Thomas Nelson Page (in *Short Stories for High Schools*); *The Triumph of Night*, by Edith Wharton (in the same volume). Do those which do not strike this note sharply seem to you to be inferior?

3. Name five short stories in which the central character shows unusually strong will power; five in which there is a conflict between two characters of about equal will power.

4. Describe briefly, or quote, three surprise endings from the stories of O. Henry; three from a current magazine of large circulation. In what respects, if any, are O. Henry's superior? Comment on the endings of Kipling's *Without Benefit of Clergy*, *On Greenhow Hill*, *The Mark of the Beast*, *The City of Dreadful Night*, *The Man Who Was*. All of these will be found in his greatest volume, *Life's Handicap*.

5. Describe three stories which, like *The Fall of the House of Usher*, show that the author "may take a certain atmosphere and get actions and persons to express it." Is this kind of story common in the current magazines?

6. Mention two or more stories which obey the three unities of time, place, and action. What is the effect on you, as compared with the average story? Does this method restrict the author as much as in the drama — in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*, for example?

7. Give an example of a story-opening which plunges *in medias res* — which does not begin at the beginning, so to speak, but takes a good deal for granted. Does the author explain the preliminary events afterward? If so, where?

8. From the standpoint of structure compare Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (in its condensed form, 12,000 words — it was originally 50,000) with Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* by making a structural outline of each. Do you find too many incidents in Dickens' tale? Comment on the unity in each story.

9. Make a structural outline of Stevenson's *The Sire de Malétroit's Door* and of Kipling's *The Man Who Was.* (Both of these are in *A Book of Short Stories.*) In what respects do they show especial skill in structure? Can you name one of O. Henry's which reveals equal skill? One of Maupassant's?

10. Point out several instances of "suggestion," or foreshadowing of the outcome, in a mystery tale — Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, for example (in *The Two Magics*). Do they enable you to guess the ending? Apply the same test to any of the Sherlock Holmes tales; to Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Purloined Letter.*

11. Quote two passages of dialogue closely connected with the structure of a story. Do they advance the action rapidly? Explain past action? Lead up to the climax-close? Or in what other respects do they show structural skill?

12. O. Henry used to read all the New York Sunday papers in order to get material for stories. Try this yourself, and give at least one example of an item which would make a good climax upon which to build a short story.

13. Give at least one example, from a current magazine, of a story which shows bad or mediocre structure redeemed by excellent character study or by some other important element which seems to have induced the editor to accept it in spite of the defects of structure.

14. Stories with weak endings do not often gain entrance to modern magazines; but see whether you can find one such — one in which the close seems inferior to the rest of the tale. What probably induced the editor to accept it?

15. Passages of description are generally brief in a modern short story; but there are plenty of unnecessarily long passages in the novels of Scott and Dickens. Find one or two and show why they are largely or wholly superfluous. Can you find any long passage in Kipling or Stevenson which could be condensed without loss?

16. Find, among short stories written before Poe's (*i.e.*, before 1830), three or more which do not obey the rule of the climax ending. Do they seem to lose anything in structural effect — or in general effect on the reader — by their neglect of modern technique?

17. Do you prefer Stevenson as a novelist or as a short-story writer? Why? Apply the same test to Hawthorne and Kipling. Can you give any definite reasons why their technique is superior, in either literary form?

18. Compare Maupassant's methods of structure, in half a dozen of his stories, with Kipling's; with O. Henry's; with W. W. Jacobs'; with Mary Wilkins-Freeman's. Note the length which each author seems to prefer. Point out any of their stories — if you can find any such — in which the framework or structure strikes you as being too artificial, in which it "shows through," so to speak. (Generally, in the case of these authors, something comparable to an *X*-ray analysis on the part of the student is necessary to detect the structural skill; but the result is always worth the trouble.)

19. Analyze three stories (by great writers like Kipling) which are not entirely clear to you at a first reading, in order to find out why they are difficult. Could they be made clearer without injury to the total effect? In other words, is the obscurity a necessity or a fault?

CHAPTER IV

CHARACTER *vs.* PLOT

It is not enough that Aristotle has said so, for Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides; and, if he had seen ours, might have changed his mind. — JOHN DRYDEN.

The charm of all art will probably be found to be at bottom just this — it quickens and intensifies the sense of life. Art *is* the spontaneous yet ordered overflow of life. It knows no such thing as age. That is what makes it so precious to us men and women. For the one inevitable misfortune of life is to grow old; to feel the spring of our life less elastic, our perceptions less new and vivid, our joys less fresh, our anticipations less eager and confident. No added philosophy of life's afternoon can ever quite atone for the faded poetry of its morning. But it is the office of art to renew this early freshness of feeling in us. — C. T. WINCHESTER, *Some Principles of Literary Criticism*.[1]

IN a highly interesting and provocative article, *The Blight*,[2] Melville Davisson Post takes to task the "high-brows" of the thirty-five-cent magazines and of certain examples of classic literature, for failure to provide exciting plots, for neglect of problem and mystery. He de-

[1] The Macmillan Co. [2] *Saturday Evening Post*, Dec. 26, 1914.

clares that, in a good short story, plot comes first and character second:

It is a matter of profound regret that men of talent and culture in this country have got the idea, in order to distinguish themselves from the common run of writers, they must avoid the very elements essential to the highest form of literature. Because surprise in the plot and virile incident have the widest appeal, and are therefore usually undertaken by the unskilful, these men have determined to avoid them altogether.

Alas! In doing so they abandon the highest forms of literature. . . .

The basic element in the taste of the public is correct. The demand of the human mind for mystery or problem — something to unravel — is universal. It is the desire of everybody to know how persons will act in tragic situations; how men of individuality and power in high places will conduct themselves under certain conditions of stress. We shall never cease to be interested in these things, and the author who presents them to us will have our attention.

It has therefore happened in this country that the men who have had the foresight and courage to give the reading public these universal elements of interest in their fiction have built up great and prosperous publications, while those who have denied the public these elements of interest have fallen into bankruptcy.

Resolute editors, refusing to be influenced by the pretensions of the smaller dilettante class, have been able to run the circulation of their periodicals into incredible figures.

This is specious reasoning; but, as in the case of Wordsworth's radical prefaces *versus* his best poems, Mr. Post's best stories do not illustrate his own theories. Without the remarkably impressive character of Uncle Abner, this author's excellent short stories of mystery and crime would fall apart like a house of cards. And, without the character of Sherlock Holmes — which is a real contribution to literature — Conan Doyle's detective tales would suffer the same fate. What we are principally interested in, after all, is not the "virile incidents" but the way in which "*persons* will act in tragic situations" — or comic. In Shakespeare, of course, we find the supreme example of this. The disposition to worship all elements in his plays is passing; but his characters need fear no test. Professor Brander Matthews[1] says that the central incidents of *The Merchant of Venice* are unconvincing, but that Shylock is an unforgettable figure.

From an animated chorus of replies to Mr. Post's article — a chorus made possible by a symposium in the New York *Sun*[2] — I select

[1] *A Study of the Drama*, p. 153.

[2] *Does Character Drawing or Plot Count More in Fiction?* April 17, 1915.

first an admirable remark by that good craftsman, Booth Tarkington: "It seems strange that he [Mr. Post] does not perceive the profounder interest of the mystery and surprise of character." Ah! there is the nub of the matter, stated with a felicity which we have learned to expect from Mr. Tarkington. The "mystery and surprise of character" is in truth the great spectacle of this human life of ours. Even the good business man will testify to that. In a given set of circumstances, how will a certain individual (and no other) act? That is what interests masters of the short story like Rudyard Kipling and Guy de Maupassant, masters of the novel like Thackeray, and masters of the drama like Shakespeare. That is what gives us Stevenson's *Markheim* and Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* and Kipling's *William the Conqueror* and the excellent tales in Mr. Tarkington's own volumes, *Penrod* and *Seventeen*. It is what gives us Peter B. Kyne's *The Three Godfathers*, in the *Saturday Evening Post* (reprinted in book form); and it is what gave vogue to the *Letters of a Self-Made Merchant to His Son*, by the editor of the *Post*. "Mystery and surprise," quotha! Why, you don't have to look farther than your next-door neighbor for that.

Probably most editors, if asked whether they insist upon strong character portrayal, would answer that they desire it and that they secure it as often as possible. The editor of *Adventure*, which might be expected to lay especial stress on plot and rapid action, states that what he is after is "clean stories of action *with characters who are people, not mere names.*" And a fiction editor who has been in the business a good many years, in returning a very promising story to a young author, said: "We like this in many respects, but we shall have to ask for a little more emphasis on character."

An interesting plot is one essential; but if it were the only thing, or the primary thing, could we reread for the tenth or the twentieth time the masterpieces of literature which all generations have voted great? Could a teacher of Shakespeare take up *Hamlet* with college classes for forty years, and bring to the final year the same enthusiasm as to the first? There seems to be, among fiction writers themselves, a pretty general agreement that Joseph Conrad is the greatest living master of fiction. Yet he is one of the most unworried as to the necessity for entertaining and carefully woven plots. His magnificent short story, *Youth*, can hardly

be said to have a plot at all; but as an impression of the energy and romantic yearnings of a young man — of what Hazlitt called "the feeling of immortality in youth" — it is matchless. Here, however, the character is not so individualized as usual; it is typical, for a purpose. And, in general, Conrad owes his eminence quite as much to his wonderful atmosphere and his English style as to character portrayal. His *Heart of Darkness* is a dramatization of Nature, of the fascination and perils of tropical forests — although the degeneration of the character of the white man who has spent years in these surroundings is, after all, probably the chief point of interest in the story. It may be admitted, however, that Joseph Conrad has not invaded the highly popular periodicals to any extent, in spite of the admiration which Gouverneur Morris, Harry Leon Wilson, and other successful invaders feel for his work.

W. W. Jacobs, on the other hand, *is* popular. Yet he has seldom shown himself master of more than four plots, says Mr. Wilson,[1] and for some years has used not more than two. "But a lot of us would still tramp a long trail for a new Jacobs story." It is the springs of men's

[1] In the *Sun* symposium.

actions, treated from the humorous standpoint, that interest us in Mr. Jacobs' tales. There is an excellent balance, however, between plot and character; for, although his plots may lack variety, they show a deft construction and an economy of means that are of the school of Maupassant. One of Maupassant's own stories, *A Coward*, may be cited as an illustration of a tale that is, so to speak, all character — the portrayal of the changes of mood in a man who is to fight a duel and is afraid that he may be afraid! This is a masterpiece of psychology in which the rapid shifts of mood take the place of outward action. But there is a striking dramatic climax. It is not the heavy-footed Henry James psychology. Character in action is the ideal of narrative. In the best fiction, short or long, it is the characters that *make things happen*. They do not wait for things to happen to them. Let me quote again that comment of a good critic, Professor Stuart P. Sherman, on O. Henry's surprise climaxes: "His surprises are not generally dependent upon arbitrary arrangements of external circumstances, but upon plausible shifts and twists in the feelings and ideas of the human agents." All young writers please copy!

An interesting psychological comparison may be made between Maupassant's *A Coward* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe was, as Leslie Stephen has said, primarily and essentially a journalist. "It never seemed to occur to him to analyze character or work up sentiment." He portrayed merely what he saw, not what he felt about what he saw. He does not even make Friday's death pathetic. And Crusoe displays, in the face of his isolation and hardships, no mental torments whatever—only a "preternatural stolidity." There is certainly a fault in character-drawing here—though Crusoe, we must remember, was a typical Englishman of the early eighteenth century, who distrusted "enthusiasm" of any sort and was as hard-headed and devoted to reason as any mortal can be. If you don't believe this, read Swift's account of his ideal race, the Houyhnhnms, in the fourth part of *Gulliver's Travels*.

On the whole, magazine stories reveal much more deftness in plot than in character. The "persons of the story" are often very conventional. A good character tale always stands out by contrast with them. Note, for example, *The Friends*, by Stacy Aumonier.[1] Says Harry

[1] *Century*, October, 1915.

Leon Wilson: "I take a dozen monthly magazines. . . . I count it a lucky month when I find four readable short stories in the twelve — say four stories out of seventy-two! Plots evenly good, but oh! the dreadful aridity of their disclosures — their appalling dead conventionalness of character." If Aristotle said, adds Mr. Wilson, that the plot is the first principle and that character holds a second place, why, "that will be about all for Aristotle." And some of us are likely to indorse both the sentiment and the slang.

Note, for example, the cheap, melodramatic effect in the following passage. The attempt at characterization is wholly unconvincing. And in this case the plot also is stale.

At the doctor's side was seated a woman about thirty years of age. She was still very beautiful. Her wide blue eyes were turned with an intelligent interest to her companion, who was speaking.

"Yes, Mrs. Waverly," he said, "many of the patients are quite sane on most subjects. In fact, one of my best patients is at this very moment playing bridge in there with your husband, my wife and Miss Siebert." His companion leaned forward in her chair, surprise evinced in her features. "There, there," continued the doctor, smiling, "do not be alarmed. He is a perfect gentleman, one of the finest I have ever met. He has only one be-

setting sin which society will not forgive — insanity. One of my guests did not turn up, so I invited my patient."

A few moments later the physician was called away, and Mrs. Waverly remained alone. The fire was very low now. Its cheeriness seemed to have vanished. The voices from the other room sounded indistinct and far away. Suddenly the plush curtains over the doorway parted and a tall, not unhandsome man quietly entered. He advanced toward Mrs. Waverly and, bowing politely, seated himself in the vacant chair.

"Pardon me" — his voice was very pleasant — "the doctor sent me in to talk to you for a moment or so. He was called to the telephone. He will not be long."

As he turned and looked at her face, suggestively silhouetted by the firelight, he started and paled. Then he laughed quietly and smiled like a weary child. "Strange! At first I thought you were some one else — some one I knew a long, long time ago. But that, of course, is very foolish of me. She died years and years ago."

He had turned to the fire and could not see the look of terror in the blue eyes of the woman beside him. His eyes seemed to search the center of the flames for some secret of the past. "Yes. At first I thought you were some one else, some one I used to know, out there in the world; a girl named Vera. We were in love, Vera and I — but she died. All that was long ago." Suddenly he started. "You will excuse me, Mrs. Waverly? I suddenly remember that I counted up the score in the last rubber incorrectly. Good evening." He bowed politely.

This has all the earmarks of the old-style melodrama, and to even a moderately sophisti-

cated reader it is full of unconscious humor. Of course the heroine drops a handkerchief embroidered with a V — for Vera — and the doctor picks it up after she has left!

An even worse example of amateurishness was recently printed (with an editorial note) as a jest by the *Smart Set*.[1] The author confided that he had been writing stories for eight years; so the editor thought he ought to have a chance! The reader may judge how many more years would be necessary to make this author successful. I quote from the beginning and the end:

Ed Miller and his wife were sitting together in their private lounging-room on this special evening, when Ed spoke to his wife suddenly, and said:

"Cora, I think we should have some children, now that we have been married seven years — and seven years of honeymoon represents a barren moon."

"Possibly so," agreed Cora with carelessness. "But I'm not inclined to favor children, Eddy, in just that manner. Life is too short, and time too precious to be wasting my poor blood in reproduction."

Now, Ed was breaking down with overwork, and was not prepared to shake off his wife's flippancy.

"Cora," said he, "this will never do! Are you going to die a barren woman, never to be remembered by posterity, and forgotten in your tomb?"

[1] February, 1915.

"Ah, now, Eddy!" pouted Cora. "You are too solemn this evening, and I cannot agree to listen with patience. It would seem that I have sufficient grievance with life to resent anything that pertains to having children. The picture of that little grave hanging on the wall is quite enough to arouse my bitterness."

Eddy disappears on that "cold and stormy night" and is not heard from for a long time, although Cora offers a reward of fifty thousand dollars for information! Finally a letter arrives. It contains only four words: "Come see Black Mantle." She goes, is met by two Indians and taken a hundred miles by river to meet the chief. In a little green valley she finds him and his wife, Queen Mantle, "a born lady of the wilderness," who has seven children. Also Eddy turns up:

"Poor Cora!" came a heavy voice. "So you have come at last. Good little girl!"

"Oh, Eddy! My own, my own! I'm afraid to open my eyes lest I see your poor ghost a-vanishing."

"Open your eyes, Cora. It is I — what there is left of me."

So Cora opened her eyes slowly, fearing lest she should awake in Hades, with this last, least hope coming to haunt her nights of sorrow. But she was in her Eddy's arms, drawn up close to his living heart, and they gazed upon one another speechless, until the stars came out to twinkle in the heavens. And they were left alone, for

Black Mantle and his wife had slipped away, and were gone all night.

"Well," said Ed, "my life has been made complete once more, except that I do not know how I got here. I recall a night when it was raining, and I was talking to you, when a mist rose up around me. In that mist I could see the Colorado River, and it seemed that I was already there — though I must have traveled a great distance to get there, for Black Mantle found me a month ago, and he said that I was asking for him, but I did not know him in person."

This is a little more absurd than the average amateur manuscript, but the present writer has seen many that were close rivals of it. It is necessary to read only a few such exaggerated examples of faulty character portrayal and improbable plot to realize that story writing is a difficult art — so difficult that the tyro is likely to supply, here and there at least, passages of unconscious humor to sub-editors whose duty it is to run through the day's volunteer manuscripts. It is only by a rare ability to realize one's characters so intensely that they seem to be actually present as one writes that natural, convincing dialogue and brief, pregnant comments upon these characters can be produced. Too many personages, in tales with skilful plots, are but half-animate or wholly inanimate pup-

pets moved about in a toy theater. You catch the author studying his moves. Even in craftsmanlike stories one who is himself a writer of fiction can often see the machinery which is hidden from the casual reader. To conceal one's art perfectly, either in dialogue or in structure, is an achievement reserved for a few acknowledged masters. But how briefly, sometimes, is a great effect secured! Lear expresses his intolerable grief over the death of Cordelia by saying simply — as he tugs at his throat — "Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir."

Poe's greatest defect was his lack of interest in individuals. Take as an extreme example his remarkably vivid narrative of the Spanish Inquisition, *The Pit and the Pendulum*. The man lying bound under the descending crescent of steel is not an individual. As Professor Bliss Perry puts it, he is anyone in that situation, "Richard Roe or John Doe." Here the situation itself is exciting enough and memorable enough to carry the story; but it is not usually ranked as one of Poe's greatest efforts. By common consent it is a kind of art which is lower than the highest. What would Savonarola have done in such a situation? That is the kind

of question which a writer profoundly interested in character would have asked himself. It is said that Browning was intimately acquainted with the details of all celebrated murder cases for half a century — not for delight in the gory deeds of the criminals but for the delight and wonder of searching for their motives.

In sharp contrast to Poe's tale, the reaction of one particular individual on another is admirably shown in one of Katharine Fullerton Gerould's stories, *Vain Oblations*, in the volume bearing that title.[1] This tale, which illustrates Mrs. Gerould's art at its best rather than at its over-subtle and psychological worst — for she is evidently a disciple of Henry James — contains a powerful climax situation that could have been brought about, we feel, only by the coöperation of the two peculiar persons concerned. The theme is the New England conscience. A missionary's daughter has been captured in Africa by a hostile tribe and has become one of the wives of a chief. Long afterward her New England lover finds her, but she is so changed in appearance that she is able to deceive him into thinking that she is, after all, another person. To the end, he is not quite

[1] Charles Scribner's Sons.

sure. Unquestionably here is a strange plot in itself, but it is the character analysis which makes the story. If Mrs. Gerould had written many tales thus combining the virtues of plot and character, she would have reached a much wider audience than she has so far succeeded in reaching. I quote the climax scene:

Outside the hut, her back to the setting sun, stood the woman. Saxe had of course known that Mary would be dressed like a native; but this figure staggered him. She was half naked, after the fashion of the tribe, a long petticoat being her only garment. Undoubtedly her skin had been originally fair, Saxe said; but it was tanned to a deep brown — virtually bronzed. For that matter, there was hardly an inch of her that was not tattooed or painted. Some great design, crudely smeared in with thick strokes of ochre, covered her throat, shoulders, and breast. Over it were hung rows and rows of shells, the longest rows reaching to the top of the petticoat. Her face was oddly marred — uncivilized, you might say — by a large nose-ring, and a metal disk that was set in the lower lip, distending it. . . . To his consternation, the woman stood absolutely silent, her eyes bent on the ground, her face in shadow. Even Saxe, who had no psychology, seems to have seen that Mary Bradford would, in that plight — if it was she — wait for him to speak first. . . .

Perhaps he was simply afraid it was she because it would be so terrible if it were, and was resolved not to shirk. Saxe, too, was a New Englander. At all events,

he shouted his creed a little louder still. "You are treating me very badly, Mary. I am going to buy you from the chief; and then you will listen to me.". . .

The woman grovelled at the chief's feet; she pointed to Saxe and wrung her hands. She was not Saxe's slave, and evidently did not wish to be. . . .

Let it be said now that Saxe had one clear inspiration. Before leaving the hut, he had turned and spoken to the woman who was fawning on the wretched negro. "Mary," he said, "if you ask me to, I will shoot you straight through the heart." The woman had snarled unintelligibly at the sound of his voice, and had redoubled her caresses. Can you blame Saxe for having doubted? Remember that she had not for one moment given any sign of being Mary Bradford; remember that he had no proof that it was Mary Bradford.

Early the next morning she was found dead in her own hovel, "with a clean stab to her heart." The author adds: "Suicide is virtually unknown among savages." Why did she do it? Evidently because she felt that her bodily degradation had unfitted her to be taken back to civilization as Saxe's wife. She had sacrificed herself — quixotically, if you like — for his sake. You feel, after following the whole story carefully, that to a person of her temperament her course was inevitable. As a piece of character analysis the tale is worthy of high praise.

Stevenson's beautiful tale, *The Sire de Malétroit's Door*, is well worth comparing with his *Will o' the Mill* or *A Lodging for the Night*, with respect to character. The young lovers in the first-named story are largely typical rather than individual. What they do is what youth would always do in a similar situation. There is no attempt at careful individualization. But the Sire de Malétroit himself is, in contrast, remarkably individualized:

On a high chair beside the chimney, and directly facing Denis as he entered, sat a little old gentleman in a fur tippet. He sat with his legs crossed and his hands folded, and a cup of spiced wine stood by his elbow on a bracket on the wall. His countenance had a strongly masculine cast; not properly human, but such as we see in the bull, the goat, or the domestic boar; something equivocal and wheedling, something greedy, brutal, and dangerous. The upper lip was inordinately full, as though swollen by a blow or a toothache; and the smile, the peaked eyebrows, and the small, strong eyes were quaintly and almost comically evil in expression. Beautiful white hair hung straight all round his head, like a saint's, and fell in a single curl upon the tippet. His beard and mustache were the pink of venerable sweetness. Age, probably in consequence of inordinate precautions, had left no mark upon his hands; and the Malétroit hand was famous. It would be difficult to imagine anything at once so fleshy and so delicate in design; the taper, sensual fingers were

like those of one of Leonardo's women; the fork of the thumb made a dimpled protuberance when closed; the nails were perfectly shaped, and of a dead, surprising whiteness. It rendered his aspect tenfold more redoubtable, that a man with hands like these should keep them devoutly folded like a virgin martyr — that a man with so intent and startling an expression of face should sit patiently on his seat and contemplate people with an unwinking stare, like a god, or a god's statue. His quiescence seemed ironical and treacherous, it fitted so poorly with his looks.

Such was Alain, Sire de Malétroit.

You will search far, in present-day magazine fiction, to find a passage like that! What Stevenson said of Hazlitt, one of the best stylists of the nineteenth century, may be applied to himself: we are mighty fine fellows, but we can't write like Robert Louis Stevenson.

The Sire de Malétroit illustrates admirably what is true of most of the effective character studies in short stories — that the persons are unusual and striking, perhaps even eccentric. This kind of man or woman can be handled in the brief space of the short tale much more easily and vividly than can an average person. Stevenson's Olalla, Will o' the Mill, Villon, and Dr. Jekyll are all out of the ordinary. And so are most of Kipling's characters, including that

capable young lady, William the Conqueror. Only one such figure is necessary, however, in a short story. The others — of whom there should be few — may be nearer to the normal. Character contrast, between the two principal figures, is often used very skilfully, as in the case of Dravot and Carnehan [1] or Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. In both these cases one is weaker and is used merely as a foil to the other. What Hamlet says, jestingly, of himself is profoundly true if applied to Watson versus Holmes:

> "I'll be your foil, Laertes; in mine ignorance
> Your skill shall, like a star i' the darkest night,
> Stick fiery off indeed."

It must be borne in mind also that the short story does not give sufficient scope for the development of character. Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* lends him opportunity denied to his brief tales. In them, character is largely static. But it may be tested at some moment of crisis. And it is in such moments that the real man comes out. Half of us do not even know ourselves until we have been tested by some crisis that calls for immediate action. Browning was

[1] In *The Man Who Would Be King.*

extraordinarily fond of these "eminent moments" of life. Of the meeting of the Grand Duke Ferdinand and the unnamed lady, in *The Statue and the Bust*, he finely says: "The past was a sleep and her life began." The short-story writer who can seize upon such moments as these can etch a memorable portrait. But he must not hope to rival the novelist or the dramatist — except the dramatist in the one-act play. His is a literary form with strict limitations.

It has not seemed wise to insert in this volume an extended discussion of realism versus romanticism in fiction. Those who are interested in this eternal controversy will find two excellent chapters on it in Professor Bliss Perry's *A Study of Prose Fiction*. It is perhaps sufficient to remark here that Shakespeare's plays, like most great literature, show a judicious combination of realistic and romantic elements. As Maurice Hewlett says: "The peeling and gutting of fact should be done in the kitchen." Homely or displeasing details of everyday life should not be exhibited merely for their own sake. The effect of Zola, one of the gods of the realists, is well described by Cecil Chesterton: "His work reminded me only of a stretch of soft mud

diversified by a few dead dogs and decaying vegetables — as depressing as it was noxious."

A good way to arrive at a verdict as to what qualities are required to produce the greatest short stories is to take a vote among prominent writers of such stories. This the New York *Times* has done, in a symposium printed in its issue of January 25, 1914.[1] Some of the authors who voted were Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, W. W. Jacobs, Booth Tarkington, Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman, Thomas Nelson Page, Mary Roberts Rinehart, James Lane Allen, Leonard Merrick, Owen Wister, Robert W. Chambers, Owen Johnson, Jack London, Edna Ferber, Irvin S. Cobb, Richard Harding Davis, Montague Glass, and Gouverneur Morris. They were asked to name "pointblank" the best short story in English. Some refused to select any one, but mentioned several. As a result, Stevenson's *A Lodging for the Night* and Bret Harte's *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* led all the rest. In a second group fell three Kipling tales, *The Man Who Would Be King*, *The Brushwood Boy*, and *Without Benefit of Clergy;* also Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and O. Henry's *A Municipal Report.* In a third group

[1] *What is The Best Short Story in English?*

came Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, Poe's *The Gold-Bug* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Bret Harte's *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, and Irvin Cobb's *The Belled Buzzard*.

Conan Doyle declared that, on the whole, Stevenson's *Pavilion on the Links* was his ideal of a short story. W. W. Jacobs thought that "one of the best" was *Will o' the Mill*. Thomas Nelson Page voted for *Heart of Darkness*. James Lane Allen named *A Christmas Carol*, though he added that it is "perhaps as faulty a story as was ever written" — which is probably due to the fact that Dickens was not primarily a short-story writer and had not studied the special technique of the short story.

The verdicts of authors are not, on the whole, so valuable as those of persons more detached — of trained critics. But most of the stories named satisfy the verdict of humanity. Now, what qualities do these best stories exhibit? I think it will be found safe to generalize to this extent: Those short stories are greatest which, in addition to good structure and good character portrayal, show fine humanity, with a touch of elevation, of nobility.[1] They must

[1] It is assumed that they show a good English style. This topic is treated in the next chapter.

lift us out of the commonplace and inspire us. And they do it largely by the touch of elevation in even such hardened characters as that of Oakhurst, the professional gambler.[1] Literary conscience and the touch of elevation mark all great literature of a serious turn — all literature which the generations finally agree to call classic.

The ambition of the two adventurers, Dravot and Carnehan, in *The Man Who Would Be King*, certainly shows this elevation; and *A Municipal Report* reveals that kindness of heart which prevents us from losing faith in human nature. Ingenious as are the plots of some of these best stories, it is treatment of character which overtops all else. What was that illuminating remark that Lamb made when some one asked him whether he didn't hate a certain man? "Hate him?" replied Lamb in surprise. "How could I hate him? Didn't I *know* him?" In that answer is contained a whole textbook of character study. Only in melodrama is there such an anomaly as an out-and-out villain or an out-and-out hero. The writers of the greatest short stories know human nature. They are enthralled and uplifted by the "mystery and surprise of character."

[1] In *The Outcasts of Poker Flat.*

In *A Lodging for the Night* there is a fine balance between plot and character. The murder supplies sufficient excitement; and there is also a vivid tableau when Villon confronts the honest old gentleman in his doorway and asks him for a lodging. Here, however, it is clear that Stevenson was interested chiefly in the contrast in appearance and character between the two — the rogue and the honest man. The description of the latter, as he stands in the strong light, framed in a doorway picture, is not likely to be forgotten even by the casual reader. The vagabond poet, with all his cleverness, makes but a poor figure beside simple and soldierly uprightness. Yet of didacticism there is hardly a trace in the tale.

Among highly popular short stories this is one of the few that go far back in time. The scene is laid in the Paris of 1456. Maurice Hewlett's less well known *Quattrocentisteria*, laid in Florence at about the same time, may well be compared with it. There, also, is to be discerned the finest character work possible within the narrow limits of the short story, and in addition a remarkable purity and nobility in handling a sex theme: painter and model. In both stories creative imagination is, of course, far

above the merely good. In connection with Stevenson's it is worth while to read his essay, *François Villon, Student, Poet, and Housebreaker*, in order to see how differently some of the same material is treated in non-fiction form.

The Outcasts of Poker Flat, though often listed as a local-color story, gains its high rank chiefly from its sympathy and penetration in treatment of character. It is in many respects intensely American; and this doubtless accounts for the large number of votes cast for it by American authors. But its appeal is universal. As an illustration of the "soul of goodness in things evil" it would be difficult to surpass it. Peter B. Kyne's *The Three Godfathers*, which is also laid in the Far West and founded on a similar theme, affords a suggestive comparison among recent short tales. It has the same touch of nobility. Three desperadoes, after committing a crime, meet a woman at the point of death and agree to take her baby out of the desert to civilization. Two of them perish of weariness and thirst, but the youngest finally staggers to his goal. For sentiment without sentimentality there are few magazine stories that can match it. John Oakhurst, however, in Bret Harte's tale, is probably better drawn than any

of the three characters in Mr. Kyne's. There is an almost epic largeness about his figure which lifts the story out of the realm of the popular periodical into the domain of permanent literature. It would be rash, however, to predict that *The Three Godfathers* will not eventually find entrance into the same domain. Mr. Kyne at his best has more than mere talent — felicity rather than facility.

In *The Brushwood Boy* it must be the author's power of imagination which is chiefly admired. Here also, nevertheless, the character portrayal should not be overlooked. George Cottar makes the story convincing because he is such a normal, healthy, and efficient human being. He is not a creature of nerves; and his psychical experience is therefore better suited to Kipling's purpose than is that of the blind woman in *They*. When he declares his love for the girl who has shared his remarkable dream voyages that start from the brushwood pile on the beach, he is surprised to find himself saying things to her which he had previously imagined to exist only in story-books. It is his matter-of-factness which individualizes the tale quite as much as the strange plot. Here again, therefore, is an admirable example of the balance between

plot and character which should mark any great story. Analyzing character while the narrative stands still is not good art in the short story — and not the highest art in the novel. Considered as a story, George Eliot's *Adam Bede* is superior to her later novel, *Middlemarch.* The same is true of Henry James' early works as compared with his later ones. Character is of genuine story value only when it is shown in action. In the short story, as has already been pointed out, it should generally be shown at some "eminent moment" of life, some crisis which will put it to a severe test.

Obviously, *A Christmas Carol* would have received no votes at all on the score of technique. Charles Dickens did not know how to write a short story; but here he blundered into greatness, if one may speak cavalierly, by sheer merit of character portrayal and warm human sympathy. He is didactic and sentimental — as didactic as Hawthorne in his second-best work and as sentimental (almost) as a modern "best-seller" — but he probes the human heart with a sure finger. Dickens was so great a novelist that he could not help showing some of his greatness even in a literary form which was uncongenial to him. The moment, however,

that one compares him as a short-story writer with Kipling or Stevenson, one can see what is missing.

The fact that three Kipling tales were placed in the second group of most popular stories is significant partly in that Kipling is intensely modern. Better than any other short-story artist, he caught, in his great period, from 1888 to about 1900, the spirit of the age. His effect upon his public has been so well put by Professor Stuart P. Sherman [1] that I reproduce the passage here:

> In concocting his tales he aimed to hit robust masculine tastes, to speak with a tang to men in smoking-rooms, and trains and barracks. But he made them so brilliant with Oriental color, so intense and arresting in their energy, wonder, terror, and splendor that he fascinated not merely the miscellaneous reading multitudes but also the hardened critics and the fastidious literary men like R. L. Stevenson and Mr. Henry James, who dropped their pens, and pricked up their ears, and cried out to one another that in the smoking-room there was a great artist.

Kipling is both a people's author and an authors' author. This is true also of O. Henry, but not to anything like the same extent. And this is due mainly to the fact that his characters

[1] *A Book of Short Stories*, p. 337. Henry Holt & Co.

are by no means so well individualized. One does not think offhand of even the best of them as indubitable flesh-and-blood people — which is how one thinks of Mulvaney and William the Conqueror and Dravot and Cottar. One pictures O. Henry as more thoroughly at home in the smoking-room than Kipling; the latter has evidently put in a good many quiet hours in a spacious library of the old masters. He comes to his modernity down an avenue of inheritances and traditions.

The relegation of Poe to the third group, by the author vote, is intelligible because of his lack of interest in character and his morbidity; but one rubs one's eyes upon discovering no Hawthorne tale in any group. Is Hawthorne old-fashioned? Has the New England conscience been totally superseded? Is Hawthorne spiritually provincial? I find no very satisfactory answers to these questions; but I discover something suggestive in this comment by one of his modern critics: "He found it difficult to form contacts with his fellow men because he was almost wholly engrossed in what they prefer not to communicate" — in other words, in secrets of the conscience. Professor C. T. Winchester, in his *Principles of*

Literary Criticism,[1] states that, for literary purposes, "the emotions highest of all are those related to the deciding forces of life, the affections and the conscience." But Hawthorne, who was a little chilly, rarely showed strength in the realm of the affections. Can you recall offhand any Hawthorne character for whom you have a warm, intimate liking? Perhaps for Ernest, in *The Great Stone Face;* but even this story failed to receive a vote. Some of us, I suspect, will not be able to reconcile ourselves to the omission, from any list of great short stories, of such masterpieces as *The Birthmark*, *The Artist of the Beautiful*, *Ethan Brand*, and *The Ambitious Guest*. And the influence of Hawthorne upon the short story of to-day, if not so great as that of Poe and Maupassant, is nevertheless clearly to be discerned. His chief defect, I suspect, in the eyes of the voting authors, was that he was obsessed by allegory and was always a little too much the preacher. One thinks of him, with his romantic tone and rhythmical periods, as the Jeremy Taylor of the short story.

It is the touch of elevation which is most lacking in current magazine fiction — partic-

[1] Page 108.

ularly in the magazines of large circulation. Flippant, colloquial, slangy tales predominate, designed merely to fill in the half-hour before dinner, or the hour or two on the train, or the evening after hard work at the office or in the field. Many tales of this kind there must be — tales that amuse without requiring much thought. But they are forgotten the week after they are read. Their very dialect is ephemeral; the slang and colloquialisms of to-day are thrown on the ash heap of to-morrow. Some of O. Henry's stories, for this reason, are already beginning to sound flat and stale, after an interval of less than ten years — but not his best ones.

The writer of short stories who wishes to gain the top must take his craft seriously. He must give more than the average editor demands — that more which consists in character portrayal that will stand scrutiny, not merely the hasty reading of the average subscriber; in construction that needs no props, no editorial changes or suggestions; in English style that is unpretentious but carefully wrought; and in honesty that refuses to treat themes and characters with which he has only an imperfect acquaintance. It may be true that, when business comes in at the door, art flies out of the window. Yet

good work, sound work, always finds ultimately its reward. If you are writing for a definite magazine, give the editor what he says he wants, also what he really wants — and then the little more which is art.

EXERCISES

1. Make an outline (if you can!) of Joseph Conrad's *Youth* (in the volume bearing that title), in order to show how little dependence he places on plot in this instance. Compare *Heart of Darkness*, in the same volume. Can you suggest any reasons, aside from plot, why Conrad is not so popular among average magazine readers as was O. Henry? And how do you account for the fact that so many story *writers* admire him greatly?

2. Of six stories in a single issue of *Harper's* how many are mystery or problem stories? Apply the same test to six in two successive issues of the *Saturday Evening Post.* Do you prefer the "problem" tales in these magazines? Why, or why not?

3. Compare the plot with the character drawing in Galsworthy's admirable little story, *Quality* (in *Short Stories for High Schools*). Is there any mystery or surprise in this story? What does the title suggest, as to the author's purpose?

4. Find in a current magazine a story which resembles Poe's *The Pit and the Pendulum* — one where the situation is everything and the character or characters noth-

ing, so far as individualization is concerned. Then compare it with some other story in the same issue.

5. Give an impression of the character of Sherlock Holmes from any one of the short stories in which he appears.

6. Give three examples of a striking test of character (in a short story) at an "eminent moment" of life — a moment of supreme crisis. What writers handle such a moment best? Compare Kipling, for example, with Mary Wilkins-Freeman or with O. Henry.

7. In what magazines do you find most stories with a touch of elevation, of nobility? And in what ones do you find most that are flippant, or cynical, or merely examples of light entertainment? What evidence do you find, if any, that our best magazines are giving us some real literature in their short stories?

8. Give an example from one of Booth Tarkington's Penrod tales of what he calls "the mystery and surprise of character." Try *An Overwhelming Saturday*, which is one of his best. (You will find this, under different chapter titles, in *Penrod*, chapters xv, xvi, xvii; or, in its original form, in the *Cosmopolitan*, Nov., 1913.)

9. Peter B. Kyne's admirable story, *The Three Godfathers*, has been "dramatized" by a motion picture company. Does this indicate that the pictorial element in it, the action element, is stronger than the characters? Read it, and write a comment upon the characterization. Compare it, favorably or unfavorably, with some other story of pathos.

10. What writers seem to prefer very unusual or eccentric characters? Does this method, in your opinion, improve or injure their short stories? Why? Compare Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King* with *The Brushwood Boy*, with respect to choice and portrayal of characters. And compare his average characters with those in one of Jane Austen's novels — *Pride and Prejudice*, for example.

11. Prophecy is a dangerous business; but name at least one highly popular magazine writer whose work seems superficial and aimed merely at temporary vogue — one not likely to be read much after his death. Is his lack of permanent quality chiefly a lack of depth and truth of character portrayal? Of a noble attitude toward life? Of a truly literary style? Or is it a result of apparent haste in composition? Of insincerity? Of over-addiction to newspaper methods and atmosphere?

12. In a given set of circumstances — for example, in Kipling's *The Brushwood Boy* — substitute a different type of character for the one used by the author as his hero or heroine. Would this new character act as did the original one? Interchange some of Shakespeare's characters — Ophelia with Lady Macbeth or Cleopatra, for example — and observe the profound change which would be necessary in plot.

13. In the newspaper reports of any recent murder case, study the apparent motives of the criminal. Which seem certain and which doubtful? And why?

14. In which of the following stories is there a character, or more than one, that you instantly remember?

And why do you remember him or her so readily? (This of course presupposes that you have already perused the tales mentioned.) Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Maupassant's *The Necklace*, Kipling's *The Man Who Was*, O. Henry's *Phoebe*, Mary Wilkins-Freeman's *The Revolt of "Mother,"* Poe's *The Gold-Bug*, Hawthorne's *The Great Stone Face*, Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Speckled Band.*

15. Compare *Zelig*, by Benjamin Rosenblatt, in O'Brien's *The Best Short Stories of 1915*, with Mary Synon's *The Bounty-Jumper* in the same volume. Mr. O'Brien declares that *Zelig* is the best story of the year; but the editor of *The Bookman* (May, 1916) says that it is not the second best, "nor the twentieth best." What is your opinion?

Of House of Usher
& Speckled Band

CHAPTER V

STYLE AND THE CLASSICS

Whoever talks of excellence as common and abundant, is on the way to lose all right standard of excellence. And when the right standard of excellence is lost, it is not likely that much which is excellent will be produced. — MATTHEW ARNOLD, *Essays in Criticism, Second Series.*

Although fairly good prose is much more common than fairly good verse, yet I hold that truly fine prose is more rare than truly fine poetry. I trust that it will be counted neither a whim nor a paradox if I give it as a reason that mastery in prose is an art more difficult than mastery in verse. The very freedom of prose, its want of conventions, of settled prosody, of musical inspiration, give wider scope for failure and afford no beaten paths. — FREDERIC HARRISON, *On English Prose.*

I do not know — and I do not believe that any one knows, however much he may juggle with terms — why certain words arranged in certain order stir one like the face of the sea, or like the face of a girl, while other arrangements leave one absolutely indifferent or excite boredom or dislike. — GEORGE SAINTSBURY, *A History of Criticism.*

No style is good that is not fit to be spoken or read aloud with effect. — WILLIAM HAZLITT, *The Plain Speaker.*

> Each phrase in literature is built of sounds, as each phrase in music consists of notes. One sound suggests, echoes, demands, and harmonizes with another; and the art of rightly using these concordances is the final art in literature. — ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, *On Some Technical Elements of Style in Literature.*

AMONG the editors who have made known their wants in the monthly *Bulletin* of the Authors' League of America, only one states that contributions must be written "with due regard to English style." The omission, in many of the other cases, is significant. A well-known fiction editor remarked, in a lecture to a college class in the short story, that though editors do not discourage finish of style they do not call for it — with the implication that it adds nothing to the money value of a story. Another editor, equally well known, is reputed to have said that there is no such thing as a classic — that his clever writers are just as good as Stevenson and Thackeray and Swift and Addison. And an anonymous contributor to the *Saturday Evening Post* delivers himself of this *naïve* verdict:

> The principal reason a gem of literature is called classic is because it is old. The authors who are now revered as producers of classics — the boys we all revere and never read — were pretty lucky in their day and gen-

eration; for, with most of them, the sole reason for the embalming of their productions in the amber of literary regard is found in the anterior period in which they were produced, and not in the art of their productions. There was not so much competition, and they got by rather easily.

Making due allowance for the fact that this verdict occurs in a humorous article, one may still surmise that it represents pretty accurately the sober opinion of its author (whose name is known to the present writer). Certain it is that this somewhat egotistical contributor did not get his own style from the classics; else he would have learned not to waste words.

As educators have mournfully and frequently asserted, the ultra-popular periodical lowers the tone of written and spoken English by encouraging, in fact insisting upon, a profusion of colloquialisms and slang. In humorous articles and stories this is somewhat defensible; but it probably accounts for the fact that, in a recent test, half of the students in a college class in rhetoric were unable to recognize as slang the term "joy ride." As mentioned in the last chapter, O. Henry will undoubtedly suffer from his too liberal use of ephemeral slang. Twenty-five years from now most of

this slang will have been forgotten and new phrases will have taken the place of the old — to be forgotten in their turn. But the phrases of Swift and Addison, written in the early eighteenth century, are as good to-day as when the wits of the Queen Anne coffee houses first applauded them. Swift was "the prince of journalists"; but he would not have been known to-day if he had not been something more. He was a literary artist.

Certain editors of highly popular magazines have steadfastly set their faces against allowing America to become what Lord Palmerston called Germany: "A land of damned professors." But it must be remembered that such editors — and some book publishers also — are of the business-man type rather than the literary type. Some of them would apparently like to create a sort of French Revolution in literature, in the course of which all the "highbrows" should be guillotined and all the other fellows exalted. If this blessed millennium ever arrives, we shall all humbly admit that we were mistaken in preferring Stevenson to Samuel G. Blythe, and we shall calmly accept the new literary era in which businesslike editors of periodicals with a circulation of a million

or two millions shall act as arbiters of the reading and literary destinies of the American people!

But — first listen to Harry Leon Wilson, who, as a favorite contributor to the *Post*, cannot be accused of being a "high-brow." In the *Sun* symposium, referred to in the preceding chapter, he quotes a request for a story: "We would prefer that it be a romance with a strong love interest and a charming girl heroine, so to say, with a dramatic ending that will surprise the reader."

And he adds this comment:

> If we are still at the diaperous stage it is because publishers have kept us there. Roughly speaking, they are all about equally guilty. The proof of it is that scarce one of them will see anything cheap or funny or impertinent in the above prescription — or, alas! more dreadful still, anything significant. Publishers get to be like that. God knows I do truly rate my own writings as but of moderate worth, but I have never known a publisher who was as meek as he should have been, even in my poor presence. I know hardly one of them that wouldn't feel competent to tell me the sort of thing I ought to write. And they are doing it and we are doing it — too many of us.

Mr. Wilson deserves a medal for his frankness. Good writers should not allow themselves to

be bullied by editors and publishers. The fact is that we are in danger of developing in America a race of literary invertebrates. They write mediocre sex stories when they might be writing good outdoor stories of adventure or serious studies of genuine contemporary problems. And American readers of popular magazines are rapidly losing their respect for that which most surely distinguishes real literature — the genius for expression, for style.

This is the nub of the whole matter. We acclaim as geniuses writers who have never learned how to write and who never will, men and women who have never felt the joy of the finely turned phrase and the subtle prose rhythm of a Stevenson or a Lamb. Aside from his ability as a thinker and an interpreter of life, the chief excuse for a writer's occupation — I am speaking here of *belles lettres* rather than of manuals of information — is his ability to say felicitously what we have all felt but could never hope to catch in the magic leash of words.[1] This ability is possessed by not more than a minority of our American fiction writers. Says Kipling, in a recent poem:

[1] Cf. Hazlitt: "We only find in books what is already written within 'the red-leaved tables of our hearts.'"

"Ah! what avails the classic bent,
And what the chosen word,
Against the uncultured incident
That actually occurred?" [1]

If, however, the incident is not only uncultured but fictitious, then there is little excuse for the absence of well-wrought phraseology. The crudity of American prose style in fiction is becoming hardly less than alarming. Of the four excellences of prose style mentioned by Matthew Arnold — regularity, uniformity, precision, balance — many of our novelists and short-story writers seem never to have heard. Jack London, for example, a writer of real talent, has never overcome the painful unevenness of texture which marks the 'prentice. He is an artist in spots — a good many spots in *The Call of the Wild* and *John Barleycorn* — but he is not a consistent artist.

When Chesterton called this an age of inspired office boys, he was more nearly right with reference to this country than to his own. "Fame's great antiseptic, style," has been applied to very few of the somewhat pathological specimens of recent "best-sellers." John Galsworthy had it in his *Dark Flower;* but Mr. Galsworthy

[1] *Metropolitan Magazine.* Copyright by Rudyard Kipling.

is a Briton. The unevenness of Rupert Hughes' performance in *What Will People Say?* is a lamentable contrast. But it is not the purpose of the present writer to multiply lists of offenders against style — against adequate expression. It suffices to say that there are only two classes of authors: those who have a literary conscience and those who have none. Many of our American fiction writers may be estimable private citizens; but some of them have not been reared in a genuinely literary atmosphere like that in which authors such as Mr. Galsworthy were reared. They would probably reject as laughable Milton's definition of a real book as "the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life."

If it were not for the editorial shibboleth, "American subjects for American readers," more Britons would probably crowd out Americans from the popular magazines than at present; for even the most businesslike type of editor has a sneaking admiration for style — though he might not recognize it by this name. What American humorist in fiction has anything like the unerring sense of humorous and characterizing phrase that distinguishes the work

of W. W. Jacobs? Concerning his rivals in this country, it may be said that most of them are merely clever journalists. And some of them would be generous enough to admit it. Booth Tarkington's Penrod tales, however, show a style above journalese; likewise his novel, *The Turmoil*, which is a much-needed criticism of our American glorification of commercialism, of business life.

Gouverneur Morris, in answering a query put to him as to the best short story in English, after naming several, humorously added: "I like my own stories better than anybody else's — until they are written." The remark is a complete justification of the desirability of spending laborious days and nights in acquiring a good English style, an adequate means of expression. Mr. Morris himself has it when he does not write too rapidly and when he is engaged on a theme which really pleases him. And he got it from masters like Stevenson, not from the advice of brisk and businesslike editors of periodicals with immense circulation. The advice, however, of such editors as Henry Mills Alden of *Harper's Magazine*, or the late Richard Watson Gilder of the *Century*, never harmed, I suspect, any contributor's literary style.

Turn back to that passage from Stevenson's *The Sire de Malétroit's Door*, on page 157, and observe the minute accuracy and fine literary conscience with which each word, each phrase, is chosen and is set in its proper place. Who, among the contributors to the *Saturday Evening Post*, could write such a passage to-day? Or take the even better passage from *Markheim* which describes the murderer's consciousness of his surroundings just after the crime:

> Time had some score of small voices in that shop, some stately and slow as was becoming to their great age; others garrulous and hurried. All these told out the seconds in an intricate chorus of tickings. Then the passage of a lad's feet, heavily running on the pavement, broke in upon these smaller voices and startled Markheim into a consciousness of his surroundings. He looked about him awfully. The candle stood on the counter, its flame solemnly wagging in a draught; and by that inconsiderable movement, the whole room was filled with noiseless bustle and kept heaving like a sea: the tall shadows nodding, the gross blots of darkness swelling and dwindling as with respiration, the faces of the portraits and the china gods changing and wavering like images in water. The inner door stood ajar, and peered into that leaguer of shadows with a long slit of daylight like a pointing finger.

Here Stevenson has perhaps gone too far in

his search for the fresh and striking phrase — in "solemnly wagging," for instance. But his final simile, "like a pointing finger," is marvellously adapted to his purpose. The very vocabulary of such a passage is beyond most of our modern successful writers for magazines. And its prose rhythm is as carefully calculated and as pleasing in effect as its diction. Kipling, though he lacks the fine finish of Stevenson, is often nearly as felicitous in expression. His phrase, in *Without Benefit of Clergy*, expressing the fear of a husband for the safety of his loved ones, is perfection. "The most soul-satisfying fear known to man," he calls it. Shakespeare himself could hardly have bettered that.

Take, again, that memorable passage from Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*[1] which pictures Beatrix Esmond as she comes down the staircase:

> Esmond had left a child and found a woman, grown beyond the common height, and arrived at such a dazzling completeness of beauty that his eyes might well show surprise and delight at beholding her. In hers there was a brightness so lustrous and melting that I have seen a whole assembly follow her as by an attraction irresistible. . . . Her eyes, hair, and eyebrows and eyelashes were dark, her hair curling in rich undulations and waving

[1] Book ii, chap. vii.

over her shoulders; but her complexion was as dazzling white as snow in sunshine, except her cheeks, which were a bright red, and her lips, which were of a still deeper crimson. Her mouth and chin, they said, were too large and full; and so they might be for a goddess in marble, but not for a woman whose eyes were fire, whose look was love, whose voice was the sweetest low song, whose shape was perfect symmetry, health, decision, activity, whose foot as it planted itself on the ground was firm but flexible, and whose motion, whether rapid or slow, was always perfect grace — agile as a nymph, lofty as a queen — now melting, now imperious, now sarcastic: there was no single movement of hers but was beautiful. As he thinks of her, he who writes feels young again, and remembers a paragon.

After comparing such a passage with, say, a description of one of Gene Stratton Porter's latest heroines, or Robert W. Chambers', or Harold Bell Wright's, will anyone have the temerity to assert that there is no such thing as a classic? The very movement and melody of Thackeray's sentence beginning, "Her mouth and chin, they said," are far beyond the powers of most of our present-day writers of fiction. And the way in which he individualizes Beatrix is a lesson to those who have only one type of heroine, on which they play numberless variations — the same being true of the illustrators who call themselves "artists."

How is it that Joseph Conrad, in his much-praised story, *Heart of Darkness*, gains his remarkable effect of atmosphere if not by style — by remarkable resources of expression? The temptation to quote without limit is strong, but I content myself with one passage which shows an almost perfect adaptation of means to end. It is from Conrad's story, *The Lagoon*.[1] I have italicized a few phrases which are particularly felicitous:

The white man rested his chin on his crossed arms and gazed at the wake of the boat. At the end of the straight avenue of forests cut by the intense glitter of the river, the sun appeared unclouded and dazzling, poised low over the water that *shone smoothly like a band of metal*. The forests, sombre and dull, stood motionless and silent on each side of the broad stream. At the foot of big, towering trees, trunkless nipa palms rose from the mud of the bank, in bunches of leaves enormous and heavy, that hung unstirring over the brown swirl of eddies. In the stillness of the air, every tree, every leaf, every bough, every tendril of creeper and every petal of minute blossoms seemed to have been *bewitched into an immobility perfect and final*. Nothing moved on the river but the eight paddles that rose flashing regularly, dipped together with a single splash; while the steersman swept right and left with a periodic and sudden flourish of his blade describing a glinting semicircle above his head.

[1] In *Tales of Unrest*. Doubleday, Page & Co.

The churned-up water frothed alongside with a confused murmur. And the white man's canoe, advancing up stream in the short-lived disturbance of its own making, seemed to enter the portals of a land *from which the very memory of motion had forever departed.* . . .

Astern of the boat the repeated call of some bird, a cry discordant and feeble, *skipped along over the smooth water* and lost itself, before it could reach the other shore, in the breathless silence of the world. . . .

The course of the boat had been altered at right angles to the stream, and the carved dragon-head of its prow was pointing now at a gap in the fringing bushes of the bank. It glided through, brushing the overhanging twigs, and disappeared from the river like some slim and amphibious creature leaving the water for its lair in the forests.

The narrow creek was like a ditch: tortuous, fabulously deep; filled with gloom under the thin strip of pure and shining blue of the heaven. Immense trees soared up, invisible behind their festooned draperies of creepers. Here and there, near the glistening blackness of the water, a twisted root of some tall tree showed amongst the tracery of small ferns, black and dull, writhing and motionless, like an arrested snake. The short words of the paddlers reverberated loudly between the thick and sombre walls of vegetation. *Darkness oozed out from between the trees,* through the tangled maze of the creepers, from behind the great fantastic and unstirring leaves; *the darkness, mysterious and invincible; the darkness scented and poisonous of impenetrable forests.*

One of Kipling's critics, Professor Henry S.

Canby, complains that he journalized the short story by making a religion of emphasis, and of emphasis without enough discrimination. Kipling's characters, says this critic, are always "immensely striking people," his phrases are unusual, even eccentric at times. But Professor Canby admits that he is a master of the specific word. The fact is that Kipling, both in phraseology and in character work, displays a trifle too much of that mere cleverness which is to-day accepted by too many editors as the equivalent — which it is not — of artistic and effective workmanship. Kipling's faults have proved easy of imitation, but his power of expression and his insight into human nature cannot easily be reproduced.

It is a pretty widely accepted canon of literary criticism that greatness in substance and greatness in style go together; yet it must be admitted that some American writers of fiction really have something to say without knowing how to say it adequately. Among certain magazine writers and editors there is altogether too evident a tendency to decry college education and to glorify newspaper training. The results do not justify their position. The success of even the best humorous tales in the popular periodicals

depends largely upon deftness of phrase. This is true of Harry Leon Wilson's *Saturday Evening Post* serial, *Ruggles of Red Gap*. Irvin Cobb, in his humorous articles, is often much too glib and journalistic, but he reveals a far better style in his fiction. *The Belled Buzzard* has real distinction. It was written in the atmosphere of Edgar Allan Poe rather than of the New York *World* — on which Mr. Cobb used to be a reporter.

Of Eleanor Hallowell Abbott and the hysterical style I shall make but brief mention. This author wrote well in *Molly Make-Believe*, but has since acquired a habit of torturing words and phrases which constitutes at times an actual atrocity. Eccentricity by shrieking emphasis seems to be her goal in her inferior works. Here is a sample — not of her worst — from a rather good story, *Man's Place:* [1]

"Ting-a-ling-ling-ling!" *shrieked* the Telephone.

"Y-e-s?" *crooned* the Bride.

"Is this Mrs. — Mrs. Frazer Hartley?" *worried* the Voice in the Telephone.

"It is!" *boasted* the Bride.

"Um-m," *faltered* the Voice in the Telephone. "Er-r-e-r, that is to say, I have a message for you — it's something about your husband!"

[1] *Good Housekeeping*, January, 1915.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped the Bride. "Has anything happened to Frazer?"

Well, whether anything has happened to Frazer or not, something evidently has happened to the English style of Eleanor Hallowell Abbott — and that something is not desirable. She is an author who can write good English when she will; but she never learned this style from Shakespeare and the Bible.

Set beside such a passage one from a real artist, William John Hopkins, author of that whimsically delightful novelette, *The Clammer*. The following is from his short story, *With a Savour of Salt*, in *Harper's Bazar*: [1]

Nobody said much on the way out. Marian Wafer kept her thoughts to herself, and they must have been pleasant thoughts, for she was half smiling. No one would have needed to ask Helena and Hannibal what they thought, or even to wonder. It was written on their faces. The salt breeze was in their nostrils, and they heard all the little soft sounds: the whishing of the wind in the rigging and on the sails, an occasional soft cluck of a block when the boat rose to a sea, and the gentle bubbling and hissing of the water as she drove through it.

They were out of the lee of the land now, and the seas were great green seas, with tops that curled a little and broke in spreading rumbles of foam, which hissed

[1] September, 1915.

itself away while the seas marched on majestically. It did not seem possible that anything could stop those rolling seas; not a mere shore.

Another excellent passage which is particularly notable for its figures of comparison is the following from the opening of *Brunt*,[1] by that conscientious and gifted writer, Fannie Hurst:

In Spartan, which lies like a picture-puzzle between the tawny cornfields and the smutty coalfields of Illinois, the rain-crow flies low when autumn threatens, croaking of wet days and chest protectors, of nights filled with the commotion of wind and leaves flopped wetly against windowpanes like boneless hands tapping.

Then, and oh, so surely, come the melancholy days themselves, and everybody's picket-fenced-in garden turns to mud with a pull to it, sucking in overshoes and oozing up slipperily over the plank sidewalks. Wagon wheels slither along the unmade streets as if cutting through cold grease. Children, rejoicing in double-session, bob homeward an hour earlier beneath their enveloping umbrellas like a procession of low mushrooms.

This is so carefully wrought and so successful in attaining precision that it is no surprise to learn that Miss Hurst writes her stories very slowly. Her future and that of such other young artists as Donn Byrne will be watched with great interest by lovers of real literature.

[1] *Metropolitan*, June, 1916.

For a fine maturity, penetration, and simplicity, as well as for remarkable vigor and directness, nearly all living American writers of fiction must yield to Gertrude Atherton. There is no pretty ornamentation in her work, but a good deal of finish.

It is worth noting that in the end some of the writers most sought even by the magazines of largest circulation are the artists, not the merchants. The writer without a literary conscience and a literary backbone has no assured future. It is to the men and women who have made their craft a fine art that editors and book publishers eventually come pleading most earnestly — among Americans, to such writers as Booth Tarkington, Edith Wharton, Gertrude Atherton, Winston Churchill, Fannie Hurst. Ten years ago one might have been inclined to add to this list the name of Gouverneur Morris. This paragraph is respectfully dedicated to authors who are grinding out serials at the rate of two or three a year.

Even the apparently effortless naturalness of Charles E. Van Loan — who, with Booth Tarkington, Peter B. Kyne and several others, is sadly underestimated by Mr. Edward J. O'Brien in his *Best Short Stories of 1915* — is the product

of a long apprenticeship rather than direct inspiration; and the same is true of the sparkling satires of Freeman Tilden. In both these cases one may perceive that style, in the final analysis, is the man himself — although no man can express himself adequately without long and painful study. Mr. Van Loan's praiseworthy naturalness is exhibited in almost all of his work; but particularly good examples are to be found in his volume of short stories, *Buck Parvin and the Movies.* This volume and Peter B. Kyne's *Cappy Ricks*, by the way, show an excellence of character drawing for which one often looks in vain in writers of greater "literary" reputation.

The style of Jack London and Rex Beach is full of personality; but in neither case is it a style uniform throughout like John Galsworthy's. And E. Phillips Oppenheim, prolific though he is, shows himself a surer craftsman than most Americans. Strong personality alone is not enough. One of the best examples in English literature of a towering personality is Jonathan Swift; but he was also a trained, conscientious, and therefore remarkably effective writer. Even in his inflammatory pamphlets, *The Drapier's Letters*, designed to arouse the Irish populace

against English misrule, there is a distinction of style as notable as its absolute clearness and naked simplicity. The most ignorant reader could understand it; and the most cultured could admire it. This is the ideal of a style for a periodical of large circulation. Swift's method of testing his clearness may be commended to literary workers who desire a large audience: he admitted to his final version of a manuscript no word or phrase which his domestic servant failed to comprehend. One may surmise that he regaled her only with selected portions as test passages; but he got many a useful hint thereby. Plainness and simplicity are not incompatible with the highest literary art. Certain subjects, however, call for a more extensive vocabulary and a more subtle vein of reflection than the uncultured can understand. The "groundlings" in the pit never got the benefit of the highest flights of Shakespeare; but they got enough else to keep them interested.

Let a writer, at any rate, be himself. There is too great a tendency to-day to imitate, more or less openly, the greatest popular magazine successes. But what editors want most is individuality. Every succeeding year proves that there is no sure recipe for a "best-selling"

novel. Some new writer steps in with a new idea and a new style and carries home the medal. Let a young author study a hundred successful writers of fiction, if he will, but let him remain true to himself. "No mantle-of-O.-Henry business, please, in advertising my work," remarked an excellent writer of humorous tales. And he was right.

Perhaps the most practical result of the acquirement of a good English style, and therefore the one best worth leaving in one's mind, is the surprising change which it makes in the number of words necessary to express oneself clearly and effectively. Good style implies economy and brevity. It is only the great artist like Guy de Maupassant who finds a 2500-word limit congenial in the short story. The amateur always finds it difficult to condense. It was Stevenson who said that the only test of writing that he knew was this: "If there is anywhere a thing said in two sentences that could have been as clearly and as engagingly and as forcibly said in one, then it's amateur work."

The ability to write without waste is indeed the final goal of any good stylist — the ability to transfer from brain to paper the exact im-

pression recorded. How seldom this is done may be judged from Gouverneur Morris' remark that he likes his own stories best—"until they are written." To lessen the escape of precious energy is the object of all ambitious craftsmen. And, whatever the average editor may say, they will keep ever before them that vision of perfection without which good work is impossible.

EXERCISES

1. Point out, in a recent issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* or *Collier's*, fifteen or more slang phrases in the short stories. Point out a similar number in the stories of O. Henry. Then apply the same test to Bret Harte's *The Outcasts of Poker Flat*, Stevenson's *Will o' the Mill*, and Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*. How many slang phrases, if any, do you discover? Find, if possible, in O. Henry's stories some slang which has already passed out of use.

2. Copy from one of W. W. Jacobs' humorous tales at least ten brief phrases which show felicity of expression — which characterize a person, or a situation, or which illustrate description of any sort.

3. Make a list, from one of Edith Wharton's stories, or Kipling's, or O. Henry's, of synonyms or variations of "said," "replied," etc., in the dialogue. Notice also to what extent dialogue is used without any reference to the speakers. When this is clear, it is often the best

method — although sometimes "stage directions" or indications of the emotion of the speaker are desirable.

4. Compare Fannie Hurst's *Power and Horsepower* (in *Just Around the Corner*) with one of her tales in this volume written in Jewish dialect. Which do you prefer, and why? Do you find many dialect stories in current periodicals?

5. Point out, if possible, any means by which brevity is secured in the tales of Maupassant, W. W. Jacobs, and Stevenson. Does the style of Stevenson seem to you to be too "literary" for the average magazine reader? Mention any recent stories in the *Saturday Evening Post* which seem to possess finish of style. About what proportion of such stories do you find in the *Post?* In any other magazine of large circulation?

6. Find a magazine story which is overweighted with adjectives, especially in pairs. Compare the effect with that of a passage from Kipling or Stevenson where the nouns and verbs are more noticeable than the adjectives.

7. Select from a page of a short story by Kipling, Stevenson, W. W. Jacobs, Maurice Hewlett, Joseph Conrad, Poe, or Hawthorne five unusual words which seem to you admirably adapted to their purpose. Then see how many such words you can select from a page by any popular magazine writer.

8. Find two passages in Stevenson's short stories which are particularly felicitous in sound-quality. (See the quotation from him at the beginning of this chapter.)

9. Copy two passages from Kipling, one of which is written in a truly literary style and the other in a jour-

nalistic style — crisp, breezy, informal, but not very polished. Copy two similar passages from O. Henry.

10. Hazlitt declared that whenever he misquoted Shakespeare he found that he had used a word or phrase inferior to the original. Try this yourself by partly memorizing — not too accurately, for this purpose — a famous passage such as a portion of one of the soliloquies in *Hamlet* and then writing it down and comparing it with the original. (Such a word as the one italicized in the following sentence is a good example of Shakespeare's felicity: "How sweet the moonlight *sleeps* upon this bank!"

11. Select from three famous short-story writers three passages which differ sharply by revealing in each case the personality of the writer. Comment briefly on the personality in each passage. (Kipling, O. Henry, Maurice Hewlett, and Stevenson are good writers to examine for this purpose.)

12. Point out, in a passage from the work of any good short-story writer, the specific (as contrasted with general) words. How many abstract words do you find? Why are more of these used in a treatise on philosophy than in a story?

13. A good style is nearly uniform in texture throughout; it has very few "purple patches" which stand out in contrast to the rest. Copy from a magazine story a short passage which seems notably superior to what precedes and follows. A few lines before and after it will have to be copied also, in order to show the contrast. (Thackeray is an excellent writer to study for uniformity of style — and for a wise philosophy of life as well.)

14. Point out a passage, preferably at the opening of a story, which shows almost perfect naturalness of style — as if the tale were being "talked off" to the reader. (Sometimes you will find this "naturalness" associated with considerable carelessness.)

15. Do you find any differences between Thackeray's style in his essays and that in his novels? Stevenson's? Poe's? What are these differences? (Narrative style should generally be less formal and in a certain sense less dignified than essay style.)

16. Any good style, particularly in narration, shows a free use of figures. Make a list, from a page by any short-story writer of genuinely literary reputation, of the figures, especially comparisons (metaphor and simile).

17. In the following passages point out, in the case of the pairs of words or phrases in parentheses, which ones were probably used by the author and why. In the case of a single word or phrase in parentheses state whether it should be retained or omitted, and why. This test may profitably be applied by an instructor to several passages from good writers. He may then read the passage as the author wrote it and explain why the author's word or phrase is superior to the one substituted.

A little after sundown the full fury of the gale broke forth, such a gale as I have never seen in summer, nor, (seeing how swiftly it had come) (in consideration of the swiftness with which it had come), even in winter. Mary and I sat in silence, the house (shaking) (quaking) overhead, the tempest howling (outside) (without), the fire between us (hissing) (sputtering) with raindrops. Our thoughts were far away with the poor (devils) (fellows) on the schooner, or my not less unhappy uncle,

(houseless) on the promontory; and yet (now and then) (ever and again) we were startled back to ourselves, when the wind would rise and (buffet) (strike) the gable like (a giant) (a solid body), or (all of a sudden) (suddenly) fall and draw away, so that the fire (leaped into flame) (blazed up) and our hearts bounded (in our sides). Now the storm (in its might) would seize and shake the four corners of the roof, roaring like Leviathan (does) in anger. Anon, in a lull, cold (gusts) (eddies) of tempest moved (shudderingly) (like a ghost) in the room, lifting the hair upon our heads and passing between us as we sat (listening). And again the wind would break forth in a chorus of (sad noises) (melancholy sounds), hooting low in the chimney, wailing (gently, like the notes of a flute) (with flute-like softness) round the house. . . .

Intervals of (dimness) (a groping twilight) alternated with spells of (utter) blackness; and it was impossible to trace the reason of these changes in the (horrible rapidity of the flying clouds) (flying horror of the sky). The wind blew the breath out of a man's nostrils; (the whole sky) (all heaven) seemed to thunder overhead like (a crashing avalanche) (one huge sail).

Outside was a wonderful clear (night of stars) (starry night), with here and there a cloud (or two) still hanging, last (remains) (stragglers) of the tempest. It was near the (greatest height) (top) of the flood (tide), and the reefs were roaring in the (windless) quiet of the night (undisturbed by any wind). Never, not even in the height of the tempest, had I heard their (noise) (song) with greater awe. Now, when the winds were (gathered home) (silent), when the (ocean) (deep) was dandling itself back into its (sleep as of summer) (summer slumber), and when the stars (shed) (rained) their (gentle) light over land and sea, the voice of these tide-breakers was still raised for (harm) (havoc). They seemed, indeed, to be a part of the world's evil and the tragic (side) (facet) of life.

CHAPTER VI

HOW MAGAZINES DIFFER

It is doubtful whether those who aspire to a finer literary palate than is possessed by the vulgar herd are really so keenly appreciative as the innocent reader of published remarks might suppose. Hypocrisy in matters of taste — whether of the literal or metaphorical kind — is the commonest of vices. — LESLIE STEPHEN, *Hours in a Library.*

In walking down Fleet Street the other day, my eye caught the title of a book standing open in a bookseller's window. It was — "On the necessity of the diffusion of taste among all classes." "Ah," I thought to myself, "my classifying friend, when you have diffused your taste, where will your classes be? The man who likes what you like, belongs to the same class with you, I think. Inevitably so. . . . You get hold of a scavenger or a costermonger, who enjoyed the Newgate Calendar for literature, and 'Pop Goes the Weasel' for music. You think you can make him like Dante and Beethoven? I wish you joy of your lessons; but if you do, you have made a gentleman of him: — he won't like to go back to his costermongering." — JOHN RUSKIN, *The Crown of Wild Olive.*

ALTHOUGH there is a certain family or racial resemblance among fiction magazines, it is true of several of the most successful that each has

aimed to occupy a distinct field. They have, of course, had imitators. The imitations, partial or total, of the *Saturday Evening Post* have been legion; but it has held its colossal circulation largely by sheer merit and editorial brains. The *Cosmopolitan* and its imitators stand pretty emphatically for what has come to be known as the "sex story" — that is to say, the story of passion as distinguished from the story of love. Controversial themes, "problem" stories on love and marriage, are treated with countless variations, most of them very minute. After reading such periodicals for a year, *les jeunes filles* may be pardoned for coming to the belief that life must be just one unhappy marriage after another, or just one wave of sex emotion after another. The action of such stories tends to take place chiefly within four walls rather than in the healthful oxygen of the open air. But a large number of people seem to like stories that are just a little naughty; and so authors who in their early years used to write pretty well, like Robert W. Chambers and Gouverneur Morris, descend and give the public these stories. It was *Harper's Weekly*, I believe, that printed under a full-page portrait of Mr. Chambers: "He used to be an artist, and now earns $60,000 a year."

The mediocrity which sometimes results from marketing names rather than merit can hardly be better illustrated than by almost any of Mr. Chambers' short stories in *Hearst's* during 1914–1915. It is quite safe to say that some of them would never have been accepted, had they been written by an unknown author. It should be added, in justice to the *Cosmopolitan*, that, in its short stories at least, some effort has recently been made to get away from sex subjects and thus secure more variety and sanity. This tendency is best exhibited in those mirth-provoking studies of irrepressible boyhood, the Penrod tales, by Booth Tarkington. Not even lavish offers of gold, apparently, can make Mr. Tarkington cease to be an artist. Winston Churchill, too, writes as he likes, despite the fact that his serials are published in a sex-story periodical. The fact is, of course, that any well-established novelist or short-story writer is foolish if he yields to editorial demands that fail to fit his best talents. In the long run, he is likely to lose both money and reputation. But the beginner must certainly bow to editors if he wishes to "get on in the world." The best thing he can do, therefore, is to study a pretty large number of fiction magazines and then write

for two or three the policy of which is most favorable to the development of his special ability and to his preferred subjects.

The remark of one editor that it is now "past sex o'clock" in the magazine world may be true of the sex story in its most objectionable forms, particularly the "white-slave" story; but the financial success of certain minor magazines does not indicate desertion of the sex field.[1] Unfortunately it is the frank and honest studies of sex, without the allurement of tales that deliberately distort the facts of real life, which are likely to be rejected by "snappy" and businesslike editors. One such story, a powerful and essentially unobjectionable study of a London courtesan after the early days of the European War, was rejected by several editors before its acceptance by one who possessed courage. It told the truth about life and was therefore not alluring. The specialty of the sex-story periodicals is to give young people wrong ideas about life. No story can be immoral which portrays human life as it is—and to the end. Shakespeare is never immoral. It is merely his language that seems coarse to our prudish generation and country.

[1] For a good satire on the sex story, see Freeman Tilden's *That Night* (in the volume bearing this title), or Julian Street's *Living up to Letchwood* (*Everybody's*, July, 1914).

Better far that a young girl should read Shakespeare in an unexpurgated edition than many copies of a modern sex-story periodical—better not merely for her literary education but for her morals.

For a sex story that is really beautiful and inspiring, turn to Eden Phillpotts' *The Secret Woman* among novels of the present century, and to Maurice Hewlett's *Quattrocentisteria* [1] among short tales of the past twenty-five years. The latter is historical, dealing with the painter Botticelli and a beautiful young girl, Simonetta. Great literature is full of sex themes and always must be; but in any good piece of literature these themes are treated with nobility.

In contrast to the ignoble way of treating them, exhibited in certain contemporary magazines, Irvin Cobb's inspiring story, *The Lord Provides*,[2] is well worth mention. It depicts the funeral service of a young girl, an inmate of a house of ill fame, who had requested that she be buried from a church. The woman who runs the house comes to Judge Priest to persuade him to undertake the negotiations—which, obviously, were likely to be difficult.

[1] In *Earthwork out of Tuscany.*

[2] *Saturday Evening Post*, Oct. 9, 1915.

The judge grants her request. He himself reads the Scripture at the church, Mrs. Matilda Weeks, a lady who doesn't observe precedents but makes them, plays the organ, and some of the leading citizens as well as the leading sinners of the town join the funeral procession. The man who prays — but let Mr. Cobb tell that:

Then Judge Priest's eyes looked about him and three pews away he saw Ashby Corwin. It may have been he remembered that as a young man Ashby Corwin had been destined for holy orders until another thing — some said it was a woman and some said it was whisky, and some said it was first the woman and then the whisky — came into his life and wrecked it so that until the end of his days Ashby Corwin trod the rocky downhill road of the profligate and the waster.

Or it may have been the look he read upon the face of the other that moved Judge Priest to say:

"I will ask Mr. Corwin to pray."

At that Ashby Corwin stood up in his place and threw back his prematurely whitened head, and he lifted his face that was all scarified with the blighting flames of dissipation, and he shut his eyes that long since had wearied of looking upon a trivial world, and Ashby Corwin prayed. There are prayers that seem to circle round and round in futile rings, going nowhere; and then again there are prayers that are like sparks struck off from the wheels of the prophet's chariot of fire, coursing their way

upward in spiritual splendor to blaze on the sills of the Judgment Seat. This prayer was one of those prayers that burn.

It is not necessary, at any rate, for a periodical to be dull in order to be respectable. The *Saturday Evening Post* offers proof of respectability without dullness. It specializes in American business and American humor, some of its most popular writers in the former field being Edwin Lefèvre, Will Payne, and James H. Collins; and, in the latter, Irvin S. Cobb and Samuel G. Blythe. The *Post*, however, does not depend wholly or perhaps even chiefly upon fiction. The first page is generally occupied by an article. And a good deal of the fiction is full of the atmosphere and wise saws of American business. The "fictionized article," too, which relates in confession form, and anonymously, some adventure in industry or the like, has been made famous by this enterprising periodical, whose editor, George Horace Lorimer, has real ideas. The *Post* is edited emphatically for men. Its tone, from cover to cover, is virile — though plenty of women find it interesting. Its editorial page, owing to the necessity of placating its many subscribers, is less vigorous and provocative than that of *Collier's*, its rival

in the five-cent field; but it is amusing to discover how many New York editors call for stories "of the *Saturday Evening Post* type." It is the sincerest flattery that this periodical could receive.

Notable, too, is the strong Western atmosphere in the *Post*. The breezy confidence of packing-house Chicago and Kansas City is clearly reflected in its pages. And much of its best fiction has an out-of-doors setting on the Far Western plains or desert. Charles E. Van Loan, Peter B. Kyne, and Eugene Manlove Rhodes are full of the spirit of the West. The truth is that this Western spirit is much more accurately representative of the genuine American spirit than the more conventional feeling on the Eastern seaboard. In no other American periodical, at any rate, is there so much personality, so much unity of feeling and tone, as in the *Post*. And this is due to the fact that it represents to a surprising degree the personal ideas and standpoints of its editor. What the public want, however, is generally what Mr. Lorimer wants and accepts; for he is a typical American business man of the desirable kind. Don't believe an editor when he solemnly assures you that he doesn't pick material in ac-

cordance with his personal likings; he can't help it. And the worst of periodicals is that in which the material is chosen by a vote of four or five persons rather than by one who knows his business. Moral for magazine-owners: Choose a strong editor and give him a free hand.

Herbert Quick, himself a successful editor, has some highly interesting and valuable remarks on these points in his article, *How to Print What the People Want:* [1]

> The editor who does not know instantly whether the people want a certain story or not is adventuring in a field for which he is not fitted. If he is the right man in the right place, any argument on the matter will do more harm than good.
>
> Such an editor does not guess. He prints the thing which pleases him. He knows that what pleases him pleases his audience. In a field in which the reason fails, he is guided by something which in his own domain is far more trustworthy than reason — instinct. . . .
>
> There is an infallible recipe for printing what the people want. It is to secure an editor with universal sympathies, and leave the matter to him. . . .
>
> My three men with the editorial natures are Benjamin Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Peter Cooper. . . . Nothing human was alien to any of them. No manuscript possessing interest to any large number of people would have failed to interest any of them.

[1] *Bulletin* of the Authors' League of America, December, 1915.

There is no disputing the fact that we Americans are chiefly a commercial nation, with a preference for a certain broad rather than a refined or subtle humor. And it is upon this formula that the *Post* has so successfully built up its circulation. The vogue of such humorous serials as Harry Leon Wilson's *Ruggles of Red Gap* indicates the wisdom of the *Post's* editorial policies. If by its glorification of business and money-making it tends still further to philistinize an already Philistine nation, that is regrettable; but one must not look for too lofty an ideal in a highly popular periodical. The *Post* has at least kept its skirts—or trousers—clean. No parent need be afraid to leave it on the table for the growing boys and girls to read.

Some magazines edited chiefly for men illustrate the editors' belief that men care less for ornamental (and generally unintelligent) illustrations than do women. *The Popular*, *Adventure*, and the *All-Story Weekly* are printed on cheap paper, without illustrations, and therefore do not have to depend upon a large volume of advertising for their profits. The stories in these periodicals are largely direct, colorful tales of action and adventure, many with a breezy outdoor atmosphere. The lumberman,

the cowboy, the hunter — in short, the "men who do things"—bulk large in them. The love motive, though not absent, is generally secondary. Sentiment frequently gives way to the worship of force and masculine vigor. In the monthly *Bulletin* of the Authors' League of America (May, 1915) the editor of the *Popular* announces that his "present especial needs" are "stories of action, written from a man's point of view." And in the same publication the editor of *Adventure* calls for "clean, swift-moving stories with well-drawn characters. No sex, no problems." In contrast may be quoted the request of a periodical which shall be nameless, for "stories of the erotic or risqué type, *without vulgarity!*" Can any resourceful writer fill this prescription?

The *Popular* has printed many excellent baseball and prizefight stories by Charles E. Van Loan, and some vivid and convincing tales of wild animals by Miss Vingie E. Roe — which indicates that women write successfully even for the most masculine periodicals. Many women authors will be found also in the *Post.* Indeed, Miss Agnes C. Laut even writes business articles for it. On the other hand, it may be mentioned that most of the editors-in-chief of

women's magazines are men. On the whole it may be said that a woman has a good chance of getting a story accepted by any man's periodical, and a man by any woman's periodical. It is merely a matter of subject and point of view.

Good love stories are eagerly sought by almost all magazines; likewise good mystery and detective stories. Arthur B. Reeve's Craig Kennedy tales, which have been printed every month in the *Cosmopolitan* for three or four years, furnish a good illustration of the vogue of the detective story. An uncommon fund of inventiveness and ingenuity is necessary for such work, but several writers have had at least fair success with it. The Sherlock Holmes tales are, of course, the modern leaders in this field. They exhibit a much higher literary art than Mr. Reeve's, in addition to a stronger popular appeal. G. K. Chesterton and Melville Davisson Post have also had notable success in the field of the mystery tale.

The love story, as distinguished from the sex story, is the type of narrative having most nearly universal appeal. A good magazine aims to please some readers by certain stories and others by other stories, the editor believing

that no one person can like everything in any single issue. But a vivid love tale that rings true wins the vote of all readers with a spark of sentiment left in them. Such is Maria Thompson Daviess' charming narrative, *The Poor Dear.*[1] Two of the most human of Maupassant's stories and, I suspect, most welcomed by American readers, are a beautiful tale of youthful romance, *Moonlight*, and a story of wedded contentment amid the simplest surroundings on a lonely island. This is entitled *Happiness;* and it is one of the best expositions of that elusive object of human pursuit which can be found in literature. Both these stories may be had in an English translation, in the volume, *An Odd Number.* They should be read by all persons who believe that Maupassant was always cold and unsympathetic.

Kipling and Stevenson largely avoided the love *motif* in the short story, and attained great popularity notwithstanding. And a young author, Donn Byrne, ventures to entitle a collection of his spirited tales, *Stories Without Women.* In the short story, certainly, the love element is not so important as in the novel, nor is there space for so satisfactory a development. Yet

[1] *Ladies' Home Journal,* August, 1916.

in short fiction as well as in long it is true that "many waters cannot quench love."

The purely sentimental — sentiment for which there is no adequate basis and which upon analysis is often seen to be absurd — is welcomed in many women's magazines, particularly the *Ladies' Home Journal.* This chocolate-caramel type of fiction is at least harmless, as a rule, and is the clue to the success of many a "best-selling" novel. The *Woman's Home Companion, Good Housekeeping,* and the *Pictorial Review* also print a pretty sizable amount of this "sweet" type of short story and serial. I am tempted to say that a better indication of what kind of fiction appeals to the average woman *versus* what appeals to the average man could hardly be gained than by comparing several issues of the *Ladies' Home Journal* with several of the *Saturday Evening Post* — which, however, be it remembered, depends upon articles quite as much as upon fiction for popularity. And the large circulation of the *Ladies' Home Journal* seems to be due chiefly to its many departmental articles rather than to its fiction.

The most significant distinction between periodicals is probably that between the old thirty-

five-cent conservatives, like *Harper's* and the *Century*, and the avalanche of fifteen-cent, ten-cent, five-cent, and now even three-cent periodicals which the past twenty-five years have produced. The best story of the month is now likely to appear in any one of a dozen magazines. A few notable writers remain faithful to the undoubtedly more intelligent audience of the thirty-five-cent magazine; but most writers have been tempted away by higher prices. It is only a kind of snobbery in criticism to maintain that the short stories in the old magazines are vastly superior to those in the new. With such literary artists as Joseph Conrad, W. W. Jacobs, and Rudyard Kipling writing short fiction for the fifteen-cent *Metropolitan*, Mary Wilkins-Freeman for the *Pictorial Review* and the *Woman's Home Companion*, and dozens of other deft literary workmen for dozens of other low-priced periodicals, it must be clear to all but the hopelessly prejudiced that the "old guard" no longer have a monopoly of the best fiction, or even a large share of it. They still have the best of a highly intellectual type, it is true, for these do not appeal to a wide audience and would not, therefore, be acceptable to a periodical of large circulation—300,000 or more.

It is worth noting also that Joseph Conrad's novel, *Victory*, was published complete in one issue of *Munsey's*, and that Gertrude Atherton's *Mrs. Balfame*, a masterly study of a murder mystery, ran serially in the *Blue Book*. Verily, traditions are rapidly being shattered. The cheap magazines are being invaded by real literature! Authors who twenty or even ten years ago wrote only for *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, the *Century*, and the *Atlantic* now write also — or in some cases exclusively — for periodicals which cost readers less but pay writers more. The magic of the advertising columns is responsible for this.

Naturally, with the increase of the democratic periodicals, a new range of subjects has become popular. We no longer hear so much about the "four hundred," but more about the "four million." (See O. Henry's volume with this title.) Modern democratic criticism of Shakespeare, by the way, is directed against the unconscious snobbery of his continual celebration of kings and princes. In the up-to-date periodical, however, the life of the manicure girl and the department-store employee — the latter frequently of the Jewish race — has been chronicled with minute fidelity and no little literary

skill by Fannie Hurst and other authors. A good many imitations of her work have come to the present writer in manuscript. Much as the "cultivated" reader may dislike the dialect and habits of Miss Hurst's characters, he must admit that she has made very human figures of them. And such passages as her comparison of Fifth and Sixth Avenues, New York City, in *The Spring Song*,[1] reveal power of expression which no magazine writer would be ashamed to claim:

One city block, and a social chasm deeper than the city block is long, separate the shiny serge of Sixth Avenue from the shiny silk of Fifth Avenue. The tropic between the Cancer of Sixth Avenue and the Capricorn of Fifth is an unimaginary line drawn with indelible pencil by trusts and tailors, classes and masses, landlords and lords of land.

Such a line drawn through a marble-façaded, Louis-Quinze, thousand-dollars-a-month establishment on Fifth Avenue would enter the back door of a thirty-three-dollars-thirty-three-and-one-third-cents-a-month shop on Sixth Avenue and bisect the lowest of the three gilt balls suspended above the entrance.

A mauve-colored art dealer's shop, where thirty canvas inches of Corot landscape rivaled in price thirty golden feet of Fifth Avenue acreage, rubbed shoulder-blades and ash cans with Madam Epstein's Sixth Avenue Em-

[1] *Saturday Evening Post*, May 23, 1914.

porium — Slightly Used Gowns. The rear of the De-Luxe Hotel, eight dollars a day and up, backed so imminently on the rear of the Hoffheimer Delicatessen Shop that Mrs. Hoffheimer's three-for-five dill pickles and three-for-fifteen herrings exchanged raciness with the quintessence of four-dollars-a-portion diamondback terrapin and attar of redheaded duckling.

Thus the city's million dramas are crowded into a million crowded theaters. The society comedy drinks tea round the corner from the tenement tragedy of a child being born with no name and a crooked back; a flat-breasted Hedda Gabler, with eyes as meaningless as glass, throws herself before the black rush of a Subway train; and within that same train a beardless juvenile slips his hand into the muff of the blonde ingénue beside him, and at the meeting of finger tips their blood dances to a whole orchestra of emotions.

In the third-floor, nine-room de-luxe suite of the De-Luxe Hotel, Madame Lina Feraldini, famous diva, abroad on her sixth farewell tour, juggled coloratura trills that were as fanciful as iridescent bubbles blown upward from a soap pipe. In the delicatessen shop, across the figurative chasm, Mrs. Hoffheimer plunged a large workaday arm elbow deep into a barrel of brine and brought up three warty pickles, whitish with rime and dripping wet.

Another very democratic writer who has had a huge popular success is Montague Glass, in his Potash and Perlmutter tales — vivid and racy studies of the Jewish garment trade and the men engaged in it. These stories have

proved great circulation-getters for the *Post;* and their success in dramatized form has been notable both in America and in England. It is almost the kind of work that Dickens might have done, had he written the modern short story. Mr. Glass's shrewd insight into the little tricks of American business and into the leading traits of the Jewish character is far above the mediocrity which the average magazine story exhibits. He has followed, consciously or unconsciously, Flaubert's advice to Maupassant and has individualized every figure on his canvas. Some very creditable imitations of his work have appeared in the minor magazines; and many less creditable have been read by the present writer in manuscript. Most of them lack the humor and the searchlight vividness of character portrayal shown by Mr. Glass. The Jewish stories of Bruno Lessing are greatly inferior in both respects.

One of the most curious conventions of the magazine short story is the rather rigid standardization of length. Five thousand words has come to be the average length, with a range, however, from 3,000 to 7,000 and occasionally (in a two-part story) 10,000 or even 15,000. The *Post*, it should be added, not infrequently

prints a story of 9,000 words in one issue. These limits make short-story technique somewhat difficult for the beginner and subject him to what seems cruel amputation and condensation by ruthless editors. But the blue pencil is good for his soul — as he soon learns.

The new writer's chance is of course much better in the minor magazines than in those of the greatest circulation, just as the young baseball pitcher generally has to work his way up from the "bush leagues." The *Saturday Evening Post*, however, introduces a dozen or more new writers of short stories every year. Much the same is true of the *Popular*, *McClure's*, *Collier's*, the *Red Book*, the *American* and several other high-class periodicals, including (partly from inability to pay high prices) the revered "thirty-five-centers." Some of these new writers succeed in getting only one story apiece accepted by the *Post* during a year; but others become regular contributors. The *Smart Set* used to uncover many new fiction writers of promise; and that genial and keen-eyed discoverer, Robert H. Davis — better known as "Bob" Davis — of the Munsey magazines, has brought forward many a newcomer who has later risen to fame and prosperity. There is, after all, no reward

comparable to the joy of discovery, whether the object is the North Pole or only a fresh and original short story. Keats has sung this joy in a famous sonnet:

> "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
> When a new planet swims into his ken."

The young writer may be sure that, if he has unusual promise, too many editors are looking for him to admit any possibility of his being slighted. But, except in magazines that pay little, he must not expect to crowd out the established authors easily.

There can be no doubt that the present high prices paid for the short stories and serials of famous authors are absurdly in excess of the real value of the stories. This is due to the furious competition of the leading magazines. Probably the Hearst magazines are most directly responsible for raising prices to this artificially high level. By putting authors under contract to produce short stories and serials for his magazines exclusively for a period of from three to five years, Mr. Hearst has obtained some of the best-known names. But it is a question whether, in the end, such a policy can be financially most profitable — especially during periods

of business depression. Moreover, it relaxes the mental fiber of the average writer to be under contract instead of having to submit his work for approval. The *Post*, at any rate, which has declined to follow the Hearst policies, has had no difficulty in maintaining a circulation of two million copies in contrast to the *Cosmopolitan's* one million.

The average price paid by a high-class periodical for a good short story by a new writer is from $75 to $300. Magazines of smaller circulation may pay only from $40 to $60. These prices are based on an average limit of 5,000 words. The best-known writers may, and often do, command from $1,000 to $1,500, and in a few cases even more. Such prices did not exist ten years ago; and it may prove difficult to maintain them. As a result of unrestricted competition, however, they may profitably be compared with prices of some necessities of life which the *public* have to pay as a result of trusts and monopolies.

Many magazines, in addition to holding their news-stand buyers — who in some cases greatly outnumber the direct subscribers — through serials with strong suspense, have also adopted the series idea in the short story. Arthur B.

Reeve, George Randolph Chester, Montague Glass, Booth Tarkington, Melville Davisson Post, Edna Ferber, Charles E. Van Loan, and Fannie Hurst are only a few among those who have rendered editors valuable service in this field. The policy of the most successful periodicals is to keep the public looking for more work by favorite authors.

In general, book collections of short stories are looked at askance by publishers. They do not ordinarily prove profitable — and in most cases they do not have the literary finish that deserves preservation between the covers of a book. The average short story serves its purpose if it merely entertains. It is not a matter of great concern to the magazine editor whether it is forgotten a month after it is printed. But ambitious writers generally strive to produce something that shall have at least a measure of permanence. Booth Tarkington's Penrod tales well deserve their preservation in book form.

Certain magazines differ from one another so greatly in their policies that, if a short story is refused by one, it is frequently no indication that it will not be accepted by another with an equally large circulation. In one case a sentimental love story with the inevitable charming

stenographer and the rich employer was refused by the *Smart Set* and accepted by the *Ladies' Home Journal.* In the *Bulletin* of the Authors' League, already referred to, the *Smart Set* announces that it desires fiction "dealing with well-educated and sophisticated persons."

A short story with slow movement and subtle character analysis might be refused by the *Saturday Evening Post* and accepted by *Harper's.* Literary finish would have more weight, too, with the editor of *Harper's* or *Scribner's* than with the editor of the *Post.* The present writer happens to know that a strong and sincere sex story was refused by the *Cosmopolitan* — presumably because the author was not famous enough — and accepted by the *Post.* Evidently, "you never can tell." If you have faith in your story, it pays to try at least a dozen magazines — better, two dozen — before concluding that it is unsalable. An excellent love story (but not a sex story) was refused by a sex-story periodical and accepted by *Collier's.* An admirable story of the patent-medicine evil, rejected by *Good Housekeeping,* was taken by the *Post.* A fine character study by a pretty well known author failed to please the editor of *Harper's Bazar* but was printed in *Harper's*

Magazine. Another was refused by the *Smart Set* and accepted by the *Century*. A series of stories, powerfully and brilliantly written but devoid of love interest, was reluctantly returned by a sex-story magazine of large circulation and found a place in *McClure's*—which, however, rejected a tale of some distinction that was later printed in the *Pictorial Review*. A short serial, with a romantic love element, which was refused by *Good Housekeeping* was accepted by the *Ladies' Home Journal* and, when printed, was introduced by an enthusiastic editorial note. An excellent humorous story, with a newspaper atmosphere, which proved unsuited to one of the periodicals of largest circulation was taken by *Scribner's*. These little things simply add the fascination of uncertainty to the game of trying to please editors. For obvious reasons, I have omitted the names of the authors and the titles of the stories.

Often a theme which seems to one editor too unpleasant is welcomed by another. Some of the stories of Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman are voted drab and depressing by readers of the highly popular magazines; but the editor of *Harper's* does not fear their effect on his intelligent public. Is a good story about a defective

child undesirable, no matter how good? May a physically deformed person be introduced successfully into a short story as its hero? Can a poorhouse scene be made inspiring? Upon such questions the editorial fraternity will show no general agreement.

One editor states that a tale intended for his magazine need not have the conventional happy ending, "if the story is striking." The happy ending is, to intelligent persons, an absurd convention. Yet even Kipling altered the sombre close of *The Light That Failed*, for dramatic presentation. The average person, at whom periodicals with large circulations are aimed, dislikes with a purely childish dislike any unhappy ending, however logical and inevitable. He prefers to have life falsified for his delectation; and, being the buyer, he gets his wish. Compare the department-store motto: "The customer is always right."

EXERCISES

1. What general difference in the kind of society treated do you find in *Harper's* (or *Scribner's*) as compared with the *Saturday Evening Post* (or the *Ladies' Home Journal*)? What general difference in the literary style is shown in the short stories in these maga-

zines? Is there any American magazine which you read especially for its literary quality?

2. Compare an issue of the *Post* with one of the *Cosmopolitan*, with respect to subjects for short stories. Do you find the atmosphere of American business life reflected in the latter magazine? Domestic life? Marriage problems? In what respects is the *Post* sharply differentiated from the *Cosmopolitan?* Do you find as much difference between the *Post* and *Collier's?* What authors write for both the *Post* and the *Metropolitan?* The *Post* and *Collier's?* The *Post* and *Harper's?* (The list of authors and stories in *The Best Short Stories of 1915* gives data for this.)

3. Do you find any evidence that it is necessary for a periodical to print some stories that are salacious, in order to obtain a large circulation? Which do you consider the cleanest and safest magazines for family reading?

4. Among the following magazines, which seem to favor brisk action and a so-called "punch" at the close, and which prefer a quieter type of story, with emphasis on genuine character portrayal and some finish of style? — *Harper's, All-Story Weekly, Pictorial Review, Adventure, Popular, Atlantic, Metropolitan, Red Book, Century.* (In some cases you may find it hard to draw a line, for stories of both types appear in certain periodicals.)

5. What are the differences in the character of the fiction in a typical woman's magazine, such as the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and a typical man's magazine, such as

the *Saturday Evening Post?* Compare, on this score, the *Woman's Home Companion* with *Collier's; Good Housekeeping* with the *Popular.*

6. Which periodicals print most humorous stories? Which print the best ones? Which are most addicted to extremely sentimental love stories?

7. In what magazine or magazines do the short stories of W. W. Jacobs appear? Margaret Deland? Booth Tarkington? Irvin S. Cobb? Katharine Fullerton Gerould? Joseph Conrad? Conan Doyle? John Galsworthy? Mary E. Wilkins-Freeman? Gouverneur Morris? Rudyard Kipling? Peter B. Kyne? Corra Harris? Melville Davisson Post? Donn Byrne? Montague Glass? Edith Wharton? Fannie Hurst? Charles E. Van Loan? Freeman Tilden?

8. What periodicals do not always insist on a "happy ending" for a short story? What ones seem to allow an author most freedom as to subjects and methods?

9. Point out two magazines which seem to you to show most variety of contents and two which show least variety.

10. Mention three or more magazines which print stories that you consider trashy. Give reasons for your opinions.

11. What magazine writers have had their short stories printed in book form? Do you consider all of these superior to the stories of authors whose work has not been thus collected?

12. Is great popularity, in the case of magazine stories, inconsistent with literary permanence? What estimate do you place upon the intelligence and taste of the average American reader of periodicals?

13. Is there any living writer of short stories whom you consider equal, or nearly equal, as a literary artist, to Poe or Maupassant or Stevenson? Give reasons for your opinion.

14. What periodicals print stories that require considerable thought on the part of the reader? Have you learned anything practical about human life and human nature from any magazine stories?

15. Which do you consider the best ten American magazines that print fiction? The worst five? Why?

16. Do you think that American novels exhibit higher literary art than American short stories? Why, or why not?

17. Compare (if you can obtain a copy) an issue of the British edition of the *Strand* with an issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* and one of the *Pictorial Review*, in order to study the differences between British and American taste in fiction. Do you prefer the *Strand* stories? Why, or why not?

18. Keep a list, for six months, of the magazine stories which have pleased you most; and jot down, in each case, a briefly expressed reason.

19. Make a list of the subjects — love, mystery, business, outdoor adventure, the supernatural, etc., — in one

issue of *Harper's*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Metropolitan*, and *Scribner's*. Then make a list of the subjects in one or more of these periodicals in a bound volume, in order to ascertain the editor's policy.

20. In an issue of the *Century*, *American*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *McClure's*, *Harper's*, *Popular*, or *Collier's*, compare a story by a new writer with one by a famous writer. Which do you consider the better story, and why? In general, do you prefer to read tales by new authors or by old ones?

21. Find, in a magazine of not over 200,000 circulation, a well-written story which you think would be likely to arouse the resentment of some readers on account of its criticism of any aspect of religious, social, or political life. Have you ever found in a magazine a story that showed strong political partisanship? A strong prejudice in favor of or against any religious sect?

CHAPTER VII

A MAGAZINE OFFICE FROM THE INSIDE

The office of a fiction magazine presents a decided contrast to a college classroom. It is not academic. The editor, who is likely to be a brisk and businesslike rather than a studious person, dreads few things more than what he calls a "high-brow" atmosphere. For his business is to please his hundreds of thousands of readers. They are not forced to buy his magazine, as students are forced to buy a textbook and to listen to the lectures of an instructor. Hence he must ascertain, not what people ought to want, but what they actually do want. True, he generally contrives to educate them to at least a trifling extent — sometimes to a considerable extent — yet his mental attitude is and must be wholly different from that of a college teacher. He lives, like most of his subscribers, in the informal, breezy, commercial world; and he realizes that they read fiction during their leisure hours, *after* they have finished the hard work of the day or the week.

To criticize his periodical from any other standpoint is to do it an injustice. And at least he escapes that frequent bane of the college classroom, pedantry. He is a practical man, and he gets results.

The systematic handling of manuscripts, however, and of all details, presents a salutary lesson to many an academic institution. One who should step inside a typical magazine office and be introduced to its methods by an editorial acquaintance would be impressed by the high efficiency shown on every hand. All manuscripts, for example, are indexed as soon as they arrive, so that future reference will indicate the author of a particular story, the date when it was submitted, and any other desirable information. Generally a separate card index is kept for the accepted manuscripts. All correspondence is filed, of course.

The day's mail once entered on the card index, the first reader takes up his (or frequently her) task. A rapid glance at nine-tenths of the manuscripts suffices. If the first page is hopeless, he merely runs through the others to confirm an already pretty well formed opinion. A few stories, however, he peruses with care and passes up to the next reader, who in some cases

is the editor-in-chief but more frequently, in the office of a large periodical, a second sub-editor. A brief comment (sometimes merely "no") is placed upon a slip of paper and fastened to the manuscript. If the comments of all editors are favorable, the story is likely to be accepted. And it sometimes happens that the editor-in-chief overrules unfavorable verdicts of his assistants. He is also the first person to read some of the important manuscripts by well-known authors. He bears in mind, of course, not only the merit of a story but its availability for his immediate purposes. Not infrequently he performs the kindly office of suggesting to a writer whose tale he has rejected a likely market; and it often sells in that market. This is one of several indications that the average editor, after all, is a human being and not an ogre. A main reason for his rejection may be that he has ordered so many stories from famous authors that he has little space left for volunteers. He cannot afford to trust to chance for his best features. He generally wants to encourage the new writer, however, for his magazine depends to some extent upon a constant supply of new blood.

The contributor should remember that the

editor's plans for each issue must be made some weeks or (in the case of a monthly magazine) several months ahead. Generally a meeting of the most important members of the editorial staff, including the art editor, is held at regular intervals. The contents of each page are set down on a schedule sheet, and as fast as the final page-proof is read this fact is generally indicated on the sheet. In some offices, suggestions and criticisms from sub-editors are welcomed; in others, the will of the editor-in-chief is absolute law. In the final analysis it has to be, if the magazine is to be highly successful. But the atmosphere of the staff meeting is generally chatty and jocose rather than severe.

It is commonly the duty of some editor, or of more than one, to read a certain proportion of rival magazines, in order to make sure that they are not getting new ideas first. Some editors-in-chief, however, pay little attention to rivals. Indeed, one well-known editor maintains that heads of various periodicals see each other too often, in clubs and elsewhere, and do not keep their ideas sufficiently to themselves. On the whole, therefore, there is perhaps something desirable in the Philadelphian isolation of three important magazines. Whether he sees

his rivals or not, the average editor is constantly on the alert; and if anyone steals a march on him he resolves that it shall not happen again. All this presupposes abundant vitality, optimism, the business instinct, and almost unfailing good judgment. A competent editor rarely has occasion to change his mind about a manuscript which he has once accepted. A new editor, however, generally declines to use certain stories and articles purchased by his predecessor — particularly if that predecessor has lost his position through poor judgment on manuscripts. In reality the editor's judgment is his chief stock in trade. He cannot afford to be influenced by friendship with a contributor; or by anything else save the merit and availability of the manuscript itself.

On the other hand, courtesy is always an asset, whether shown by a letter or in an interview. It is generally a mistake for an editor to make himself too inaccessible. The master cultivates the art — a very delicate one — of cutting off an interview after all *necessary* remarks have been made by himself and his visitor. Generally it is only the bore who has occasion to hate the editorial fraternity. For the average editor likes to exchange ideas with a possible

contributor and to encourage him by an infusion of his own contagious optimism and enthusiasm for good fiction and good articles. "There are some editors from whom I always carry away something," said a successful writer. Those are the real editors, the born editors. Even if an editor-in-chief is too busy himself to see a visitor, he often sends one of his assistants out to answer inquiries and offer useful suggestions. Of course editors differ greatly in personality. Some are gruff and inconsiderate, yet continue to be successful in spite of this serious handicap. Some are destitute of the highest qualities of a gentleman — but not many. Most are likable men and women who maintain an *esprit de corps* in the whole organization. The Curtis periodicals have been highly successful in this respect; but they are not alone in their success.

Some magazines have acquired an enviable reputation among authors by their promptness in rendering a decision on a manuscript. The *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Pictorial Review*, for example, commonly accept or return a story within a week. A proper business system always makes this practicable. In fact, it is distinctly discourteous to an author, as well as unnecessary, to hold a manuscript longer

than a fortnight. Several periodicals, nevertheless, persist in their dilatory methods; and as a result they ordinarily do not get the first offer of a story. Some even delay a decision for five or six weeks; but these are seldom first-class magazines. The beginner, of course, has to be tolerant of such unbusinesslike methods. The successful writer, on the other hand, generally confines his efforts to such periodicals as are conducted on fair business principles — which include, first of all, promptness. All first-class magazines, moreover, pay immediately upon acceptance.

The relation of the publisher, the owner, to his editors is often of great importance. The slave-driver and the officious meddler seldom make large profits in the magazine field. The wise owner selects a competent, if possible a great, editor and leaves editorial policies to him. This is one of the secrets of the success of the *Saturday Evening Post;* and the absence of non-interference was the chief reason for the decline of a periodical which fifteen years ago had a large circulation and a large amount of advertising matter. An owner who treats his editor like an office boy has only himself to thank for future lack of financial prosperity.

To both owner and editor, of course, business is business; but it is a poor office in which some sentiment warmer than that of business does not circulate. Some expert has recently discovered that even hens will lay more eggs for you if you pet them. No one can do his best work for a man whom he dislikes. And it is the business of all of us, in this world, to make ourselves agreeable as well as efficient. It will be found that the inside of most magazine offices is a companionable place, peopled by reasonably kind and cheerful inhabitants. The contagious laugh of one great editor can be heard three offices away. He meets hard work day after day with the gayety of one who is always more than equal to his task.

It may surprise some persons to learn that the amount of advertising in a magazine generally bears a pretty definite ratio to the excellence of the "reading matter"—the stories and articles. For a good fiction magazine is read by alert people who prove to be a better buying public than the other sort. The moment a periodical becomes somewhat dull, even if its circulation does not fall off perceptibly, it becomes a poor "buy" for advertisers. This has frequently been tested by the "keyed ad.,"

which asks the buyer to name the magazine in which he saw the advertisement or, more commonly, induces him to clip a corner containing a number that identifies the magazine. The advertising manager, as well as the circulation manager, also has something to say, in a few cases, about the editorial policy. His suggestions, if he is a highly competent man, should naturally prove worthy of the editor's serious consideration. Not that he often directs the editorial policy of the periodical in any given instance; but he may remind the editor that a magazine is made to sell — if perchance that alert individual himself ever forgets this business principle.

One of the best illustrations of the relation of interesting reading matter to increase in advertising is the "boom" which *Scribner's* enjoyed while it was publishing the African game trail sketches of ex-President Roosevelt. The volume of advertising which it contained during that memorable year is highly significant — as is also the fact that the advertising fell off again shortly afterward. Colonel Roosevelt's political articles in the *Metropolitan* seem to be somewhat less valuable to the advertising department of that magazine; but they are

undoubtedly an asset. It is not merely the number of subscribers, but the kind, which determines the value of advertising columns to a merchant. Obviously, for example, it would be folly to advertise high-priced luxuries in a five-cent weekly, but wisdom to advertise them in a thirty-five-cent monthly like *Harper's*.

The outsider may be prone to ask whether all periodicals are purely business "propositions" or whether some of them aim to benefit their readers by the fiction and articles and to protect them from fraud and injury through the advertising columns. Fortunately a large proportion of the leading periodicals do have some educational value and do exclude objectionable advertisements, no matter how much money is lost thereby. The *Post*, for example, even rejects cigarette advertising. During the financial stress of the first year of the European War it let down the bars to a limited number of cigarette manufacturers; but it has since put these bars up again. No patent medicines, unless of proved worth, can gain entrance to the columns of a reputable periodical. And many of the best magazines reject all liquor advertising. It is not only good morals to do this, but in the long run good business also.

A first-class periodical should be in all respects dependable. Some now guarantee that all advertised goods are strictly as represented. A censor employed by the magazine takes the investigation of doubtful cases as his province. Nearly all of the best magazines have these censors; and they earn their salaries.

Sometimes a periodical performs definite services for its subscribers through its department editors, who are paid to answer thousands of letters annually. The inquiries cover a wide range; and it is to be presumed that a large majority of the answers prove practical. Although this system is much more characteristic of women's magazines than of men's, yet the financial editors of several non-feminine periodicals give valuable advice on investments. This again illustrates the fact that a periodical which has been built up by the good-will of its thousands of buyers — and the news-stand purchasers often outnumber the direct subscribers — should recognize this good-will by some substantial services. A good magazine, like a public office, is a public trust.

The influence of motion pictures on the popular magazines is decidedly noticeable to an insider. The fact that "people want pictures"

has become so firmly impressed upon the editorial fraternity that they have increased the size and number of their illustrations until some periodicals have become veritable picture books. The news photograph has appeared, too, in various weeklies and seems to be a welcome innovation. Several periodicals have also changed from the old standard size to the *Post* or the *American* size in order to get a larger page for illustrations and to give more scope for variety. The main purpose, however, in making this change was undoubtedly to print advertising side by side with reading matter in the back pages — these "back pages" generally constitute more than half of the total number — and thus secure a larger advertising revenue. From the standpoint of the reader, it is desirable to separate the two kinds of matter; but the modern popular magazine is run partly for the benefit of the advertiser. It makes its money largely through its advertising revenue rather than through its subscription price. Indeed, more than one periodical is virtually given away; it would be printed at a heavy loss were it not for the advertisements. What happens to a magazine which attacks "malefactors of great wealth" who are advertisers is shown in the

financial failure of *Hampton's* some years ago. It was ably edited, but its advertising revenue fell off on account of attacks on vicious corporations, it was unable to secure loans from the large New York banks, and finally it was obliged to suspend publication. The "muck-raking" era for periodicals now seems to be pretty well over. Several magazines show commendable courage in their editorial columns; but they are somewhat cautious about offending many large advertisers. This is not equivalent, however, to saying that the advertisers control the policies of the magazines. Nor do they control the best newspapers.

The casual observer often misses the close relationship of the magazine to the newspaper. Such fiction-and-article weeklies as the *Post* and *Collier's* are in reality glorified news-sheets. In the case of the new three-cent *Every Week*, this relation is emphasized by the price. To a lesser extent the relation holds for the monthlies also. Even the fiction is often founded on ideas or customs recently introduced. This is illustrated in the subjects of the detective stories of Arthur B. Reeve, which aim to keep up to the minute on scientific discoveries. Most magazine editors have been newspaper men,

and the atmosphere of the newspaper office is pretty accurately preserved. The "nose for news" and the desire to make a "scoop" are prominent. Both kinds of editors commonly impress one first by their great physical energy, though there are notable exceptions even among the leaders. They are business men rather than literary men — though here again there are notable exceptions. It is the commercial atmosphere of America and the development of the advertising idea which are responsible for the surprising number of our periodicals as compared with those of other countries. Our glorification of the "practical" and contempt for the beautiful is nowhere so well illustrated as in the outrageous prevalence of advertising signs along our highways and railways.

Inside the average magazine office one is likely to feel that he is still in a commercial atmosphere. Although a few editors give a writer of good fiction a free hand, most of them are prone to prescribe certain subjects and methods which subscribers seem to prefer. The contributor is therefore constantly in danger of being turned into a literary hack — more so after he becomes famous, perhaps, than before. If he wishes to turn out South African tales, he is reminded

that American subjects are best for American readers. If he wishes to develop tragedy in the short story, he is emphatically warned that subscribers will endure only a small proportion of unpleasant subjects; and, particularly, unpleasant endings. If, in a word, he wishes to be artistic, he is told that he must be businesslike. As a result, this businesslike quality is reflected in the faces of altogether too many of our American novelists and short-story writers. They compare very unfavorably with the faces of British novelists. A few editors, however, really desire to develop an author on the lines of his best possibilities; and these editors have an opportunity to do a great service to American literature. No one who has followed the disappointing career of such fiction writers as Rex Beach and Jack London can fail to regret that they have not had the best editorial advice and encouragement.

The magazine office has journalized too many of our promising young artists. The temptation to make money has in a large majority of cases proved too much for their literary consciences. Carlyle long ago referred contemptuously to this fault in Scott — "writing extempore novels to buy farms with." Too few

magazine owners realize to the full their public responsiblity. Most of them are honest business men, but they are indifferent or hostile to literary art. They will not listen with patience to anything that is inconsistent with large profits. On the whole, it is surprising, therefore, that so large a proportion of really good short stories creep into our highly popular periodicals. Perhaps the most optimistic thought that can be left in the mind of the person who is interested in the future of American fiction is that literary finish and literary art, provided they are accompanied by lively action and complete intelligibility, are not scorned even by commercialized editors. After all, therefore, business is not always incompatible with art.

APPENDIX

SUGGESTIONS FOR BEGINNERS

1. Submit typewritten copy only. Editors are too busy to look for gems in half illegible manuscripts. Double-space the lines. Place your address, or both name and address, in the upper left-hand corner of the first sheet. In the upper right-hand corner indicate the approximate number of words. Mail your manuscript flat or folded, not rolled.

2. Enclose, if possible, not merely return postage, but a stamped and addressed envelope. In any case, be sure that the postage is sufficient. Magazines are constantly receiving manuscripts that are only partly prepaid.

3. Don't ask an editor for criticism. If your manuscript is promising, you will probably get a brief letter of encouragement without asking for it.

4. Don't expect an editor to grant you an interview until he has expressed interest in your work. Remember that some hundreds, perhaps thousands, besides yourself are submitting manuscripts to him.

5. Get a friend or an acquaintance who is not too indulgent to your faults to criticise your work before sending it to a magazine. And don't be deceived by the "foolish face of praise" which some of your closest friends

may exhibit.[1] Hundreds of people are attempting to write short stories who ought to be engaged in occupations better suited to their abilities. Story-writing requires special aptitude as well as special study. Ability to create character and write dialogue presupposes a possession of the dramatic faculty — the faculty of putting yourself in another person's place. Some poor story-writers make good writers of magazine articles.

6. Read at least half a dozen issues of each of a large number of periodicals, in order to ascertain what subjects and methods of treatment are preferred. Don't try to sell your goods to a market of which you are ignorant. You can get a pretty good idea of current fiction by reading for a year each issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Harper's Magazine*, or any other highly popular periodical and any other conservative and thoughtful one. Cut out and preserve any stories that especially please you; reread them at various times and study their technique. If you fasten the sheets together with metal clips, you can keep them in large envelopes and have them handy for reference.

7. Stories about story-writers, editors, publishers, etc., are in general undesirable. They indicate, also, that an author's ideas are running dry.

8. The virtue of a literary agent lies chiefly in his knowing the market better than you do, and in his ability to get a decision from several magazines more quickly than you can if you live at a long distance from New York

[1] Cf. Samuel Johnson: "The reciprocal civility of authors is one of the most risible scenes in the farce of life."

City. Most agents who advertise are reliable, but none can guarantee to sell a poor story. Sometimes they can get a higher price for a good story than the author himself could have obtained; but not always.

9. If some competent critic of your acquaintance tells you — taking his Bible oath upon it — that your story is good, don't be discouraged by two or three rejections. One manuscript was accepted by a periodical of large circulation after being refused by nearly thirty others. Keep a card index of the magazines to which you send each story.

10. Submit manuscripts intended for a special issue, such as the Thanksgiving or Christmas issue, at least six months in advance, if possible. Good magazines do not wait until the last moment to provide themselves with stories for special numbers.

The following additional suggestions are reprinted, by permission, from the *Bulletin* of the Authors' League of America.[1] They are intended not merely for beginners, but for all writers.

11. Never employ an agent without an agreement.

12. Sign no agreement that does not provide that the agent shall render periodically full and detailed reports

[1] All persons producing works subject to copyright protection, authors of stories, novels, poems, essays, text-books, etc., dramatic and photoplay authors, composers, painters, illustrators, sculptors, photographers, etc., are eligible for regular membership in the Authors' League of America. The offices of the league are at 33 West 42nd St., New York City.

as to his efforts to dispose of the property intrusted to him.

13. Always retain at least one carbon copy of every manuscript you send out.

14. It is well specifically to reserve dramatic and motion-picture rights in all instances. Have this understanding confirmed by letter whenever possible.

15. If the editor refuses a decision on work submitted, within a reasonable period of time, send him notice by registered letter that you are offering the work elsewhere, and proceed to do so, using your carbon copies.

TEST QUESTIONS

1. Do the opening paragraphs clearly indicate the nature of the story?

2. What sentences, if any, at various points foreshadow the outcome? Are these suggestions too clear or too obscure?

3. Are there any passages in which the author uses analysis and comment, instead of direct delineation of action or character? Do these passages improve or injure the narrative? [1]

4. Are there any didactic or sermonizing passages? Does the story have a moral, and if so is it hidden or is it thrust upon the reader?

5. Is there any incident unrelated to the others? Could it be omitted without injury to the total effect?

6. Does the narrative grow stronger or weaker toward the close? Is there a genuine climax?

7. Is the end inevitable, or is it the result of accident or of a trick on the part of the author? If the climax is a surprise, does it convince and satisfy you?

8. Are there any points where a person's talk or act is "out of character"? Is this intentional — *i.e.*, is it done to help out the plot? And is it in any measure justified?

9. Is the story of interest chiefly to a particular cir-

[1] See Winchester's *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp. 303–306.

cle at a particular time, or does it possess permanent interest? In other words, is it journalism or literature?

10. Is the story as a whole, or are any passages in it, painful or disgusting to you? If so, why? Would it produce the same effect on the average reader? [1]

11. What is the atmosphere or mood of the narrative? Is it pathos, idealism, horror, youthful love, illicit passion? Has the story unity — *i.e.*, is the mood sustained throughout? Is it good art to relieve a serious story by passages of humor? [2]

12. In what respect is the story original? In climax, character, setting, style? Or in more than one?

13. If the tale is laid in an unfamiliar locality, does it show that the author knows that locality thoroughly? In other words, is the work honest?

14. Is the effect of the story inspiring or depressing? Is the author too fond of realism, and does he use it without discrimination? [3]

15. Does the style show finish, or carelessness? Is the vocabulary large? Does the tale reveal the influence of study of the great fiction writers, or is it too journalistic? Is the author trying to express himself effectively, or is he merely trying to be clever?

16. Is it probable that the story would be accepted by *Harper's Magazine?* The *Saturday Evening Post?* The *Popular?* The *Ladies' Home Journal?* The *All-Story Weekly?* The *Metropolitan?* Why, or why not?

[1] See Winchester's *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp. 64–68.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 92–97, 321. [3] *Ibid.*, pp. 159–181, 300–303.

A LIST OF AMERICAN FICTION MAGAZINES

[Some of these print only a small amount of fiction; others print virtually nothing else. Unless otherwise stated, the place of publication is New York City.]

Adventure
Ainslee's
All-Around
All-Story Weekly
American
American Boy (Detroit, Mich.)
American Sunday Monthly
Argosy
Atlantic (Boston)
Baseball
Bellman (Minneapolis, Minn.)
Black Cat (Salem, Mass.)
Blue Book (Chicago)
Boys' World (Elgin, Ill.)
Breezy Stories
Century
Collier's
Cosmopolitan
Country Gentleman (Philadelphia)
Craftsman
Delineator
Designer
Detective Stories
Everybody's
Every Week
Good Housekeeping
Green Book (Chicago)
Harper's Bazar
Harper's Magazine
Hearst's
Housewife
Illustrated Sunday Magazine
International
Ladies' Home Journal (Philadelphia)
Ladies' World
Live Stories
McCall's
McClure's
Masses
Metropolitan
Midland (Corning, Ia.)
Munsey's
National (Boston)
National Sunday Magazine
Outing
Outlook
Parisienne
Pearson's
People's
People's Home Journal
Pictorial Review
Popular
Railroad Man's
Red Book (Chicago)
Romance
St. Nicholas

Saturday Evening Post (Philadelphia)
Scribner's
Short Stories (Garden City, N. Y.)
Smart Set
Smith's
Snappy Stories
Sunset (San Francisco)
Ten-Story Book (Chicago)
Today's
Top-Notch
Town Topics
Woman's Home Companion
Woman's Magazine
Woman's World (Chicago)
Young's
Youth's Companion (Boston)

A FEW BOOKS ON THE SHORT STORY

Ina Ten Eyck Firkins. *An Index to Short Stories.* White Plains, New York: H. W. Wilson Co. (This large volume is extremely useful, and would be more so but for the author's arbitrary methods of inclusion and exclusion of writers. Some of the most important recent collections of short stories are omitted.)

Brander Matthews. *The Philosophy of the Short Story.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Bliss Perry. *A Study of Prose Fiction* (Chapter XII, The Short Story). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Stuart P. Sherman. *A Book of Short Stories.* New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Henry S. Canby. *A Study of the Short Story.* New York: Henry Holt & Co.

Walter B. Pitkin. *The Art and the Business of Story Writing.* New York: The Macmillan Co.

Carolyn Wells. *The Technique of the Mystery Story.* Springfield, Mass.: The Home Correspondence School.

J. Berg Esenwein. *Writing the Short Story.* A Practical Handbook on the Rise, Structure, Writing, and Sale of the Modern Short Story. New York: Hinds, Noble & Eldredge.

A LIST OF REPRESENTATIVE SHORT STORIES

EDGAR ALLAN POE

- ✓The Cask of Amontillado
- ✓The Gold-Bug
- ✓The Fall of the House of Usher
- ✓The Purloined Letter
- A Descent into the Maelstrom
- ✓The Pit and the Pendulum
- ✓The Murders in the Rue Morgue
- Ligeia
- ✓The Masque of the Red Death

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

- The Birthmark (*Mosses from an Old Manse*)
- The Great Stone Face (*The Snow Image*)
- The Artist of the Beautiful (*Mosses from an Old Manse*)
- Rappaccini's Daughter (*Mosses from an Old Manse*)
- The Ambitious Guest (*Twice Told Tales*)
- The White Old Maid " "
- Wakefield " "
- Ethan Brand " "

GUY DE MAUPASSANT

- ✓A Coward (*The Odd Number*)
- ✓The Necklace " "
- The String " "
- On the Journey " "
- Happiness " "
- Moonlight " "

Representative Short Stories

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

Markheim (*The Merry Men*)
The Merry Men
Will o' the Mill (*The Merry Men*)
A Lodging for the Night (*New Arabian Nights*)
The Sire de Malétroit's Door " "
The Pavilion on the Links " "
The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

RUDYARD KIPLING

Without Benefit of Clergy (*Life's Handicap*)
On Greenhow Hill " "
The Mark of the Beast " "
The City of Dreadful Night " "
The Man Who Was " "
The Man Who Would Be King (*Under the Deodars*)
The Drums of the Fore and Aft " "
The Brushwood Boy (*The Day's Work*)
The Ship That Found Herself (*The Day's Work*)
They (*Traffics and Discoveries*)
An Habitation Enforced (*Actions and Reactions*)

MAURICE HEWLETT

Quattrocentisteria (*Earthwork out of Tuscany*)
Madonna of the Peach Tree (*Little Novels of Italy*)
Eugenio and Galeotto (*New Canterbury Tales*)

MARY E. WILKINS-FREEMAN

The Revolt of "Mother" (*A New England Nun*)
The Scent of the Roses " "
The Little Maid at the Door (*Silence*)

O. HENRY

A Municipal Report (*Strictly Business*)
Phoebe (*Roads of Destiny*)
The Gift of the Magi (*The Four Million*)

BRET HARTE
- The Luck of Roaring Camp
- The Outcasts of Poker Flat (*The Luck of Roaring Camp*)
- Tennessee's Partner " "

JOSEPH CONRAD
- Youth
- Heart of Darkness (*Youth*)
- The Lagoon (*Tales of Unrest*)

WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS
- ✓The Monkey's Paw (*The Lady of the Barge*)
- A Black Affair (*Many Cargoes*)

HERBERT GEORGE WELLS
- The Cone (*Thirty Strange Stories*)
- The Star (*Tales of Space and Time*)

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE
- ✓The Adventure of the Speckled Band (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*)
- The Red-Headed League (*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*)

HONORÉ DE BALZAC
- A Passion in the Desert
- La Grande Bretèche

FRANÇOIS COPPÉE
- The Piece of Bread
- The Substitute

PROSPER MÉRIMÉE
- Mateo Falcone

CHARLES DICKENS
- ✓A Christmas Carol

EDWARD EVERETT HALE
- ✓ The Man Without a Country

Representative Short Stories

THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH
Marjorie Daw

THOMAS HARDY
The Three Strangers (*Wessex Tales*)
For Conscience' Sake (*Life's Little Ironies*)

HENRY CUYLER BUNNER
The Love-Letters of Smith (*Short Sixes*)

HENRY JAMES
The Turn of the Screw (*The Two Magics*)

ARTHUR MORRISON
On the Stairs (*Tales of Mean Streets*)

IRVIN S. COBB
The Belled Buzzard (*The Escape of Mr. Trimm*)

GERTRUDE ATHERTON
The Bell in the Fog

PETER B. KYNE
The Three Godfathers

FANNIE HURST
Power and Horsepower (*Just Around the Corner*)

FREEMAN TILDEN
The Defective (*That Night, and Other Satires*)

DONN BYRNE
Biplane No. 2 (*Stories Without Women*)

RICHARD HARDING DAVIS
Her First Appearance (*Van Bibber and Others*)

CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS
The Truce (*The Watchers of the Trails*)

MARGARET DELAND
Good for the Soul (*Old Chester Tales*)

GOUVERNEUR MORRIS
The Claws of the Tiger (*It, and Other Stories*)

JACK LONDON
Love of Life

EDITH WHARTON
His Father's Son (*Tales of Men and Ghosts*)

KATHARINE FULLERTON GEROULD
Vain Oblations

THOMAS NELSON PAGE
Marse Chan (*In Ole Virginia*)

MYRA KELLY
Love Among the Blackboards (*Little Citizens*)

EDNA FERBER
Roast Beef Medium

E. W. HORNUNG
The Honor of the Road (*Stingaree*)

BOOTH TARKINGTON
An Overwhelming Saturday (*Cosmopolitan*, Nov., 1913; reprinted in *Penrod:* chaps. xv, xvi, xvii)

This collection of short stories — in *Penrod* — has been disguised to represent a novel.

ARTHUR COSSLETT SMITH
The Turquoise Cup

ANTHONY HOPE
The House Opposite (*The Dolly Dialogues*)

MELVILLE DAVISSON POST
The House of the Dead Man (*Saturday Evening Post*, Sept. 30, 1911)

MONTAGUE GLASS
Perfectly Neuter (*Saturday Evening Post*, May 22, 1915)

Representative Short Stories

G. K. Chesterton
The Head of Cæsar (*The Wisdom of Father Brown*)

Mary Synon
The Bounty-Jumper (*The Best Short Stories of 1915*)

Charles E. Van Loan
Water Stuff (*Buck Parvin and the Movies*)

John Galsworthy
Quality (*Short Stories for High Schools*)

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