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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IF YOU DON'T WRITE FICTION ***

Transcriber's note

Minor punctuation errors have been corrected without notice. The author's spelling has been maintained.

IF YOU DON'T WRITE FICTION

By

CHARLES PHELPS CUSHING



NEW YORK

ROBERT M. McBRIDE & COMPANY

1920

[Pg ii]

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To
COUSIN ANN

[Pg iii]

who "doesn't write fiction," but who is ambitious to market magazine articles, this little book is affectionately dedicated. If it can save her some tribulations along the road that leads to acceptances, the author will feel that his labors have been well enough repaid.

The author thanks the editors of *The Bookman*, *Outing* and the *Kansas City Star* for granting permission to reprint certain passages that here appear in revised form. [Pg iv]

C. P. C.

PREFACE

[Pg v]

The publisher assures me that no one but a book reviewer ever reads prefaces, so I seize upon the opportunity to have a tête-à-tête with my critics. Gentlemen, my cards are face up on the table. I have declared to the publisher that nearly every American who knows how to read longs to find his way into print, and should appreciate some of the dearly bought hints herein contained upon practical journalism. And, as I kept my face straight when I said it, he may have taken me seriously. Perhaps he thinks he has a best seller.

But this is just between ourselves. As he never reads prefaces, he won't suspect unless you tell him. My own view of the matter is that Harold Bell Wright need not fear me, but that the editors of the *Baseball Rule Book* may be forced to double their annual appropriation for advertising in the literary sections.

As the sport of free lance scribbling has a great deal in common with fishing, the author of this little book may be forgiven for suggesting that in intention it is something like Izaak Walton's "Compleat Angler," in that it attempts to combine practical helpfulness with a narrative of mild adventures. For what the book contains besides advice, I make no apologies, for it is set down neither in embarrassment nor in pride. Many readers there must be who would like nothing better than to dip into chapters from just such a life as mine. Witness how Edward FitzGerald, half author of the "Rubaiyat," sighed to read more lives of obscure persons, and that Arthur Christopher Benson, from his "College Window," repeats the wish and adds:

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"The worst of it is that people often are so modest; they think that their own experience is so dull, so unromantic, so uninteresting. It is an entire mistake. If the dullest person in the world would only put down sincerely what he or she thought about his or her life, about work, love, religion and emotion, it would be a fascinating document."

But, you may protest, by what right do the experiences of a magazine free lance pass as "adventures"?

Then, again, I shall have to introduce expert testimony:

"The literary life," says no less an authority than H. G. Wells, "is one of the modern forms of adventure."

And this holds as true for the least of scribblers as it does for great authors. While the writer whose work excites wide interest is seeing the world and meeting, as Mr. Wells lists them, "philosophers, scientific men, soldiers, artists, professional men, politicians of all sorts, the rich, the great," you may behold journalism's small fry courageously sallying forth to hunt editorial lions with little butterfly nets. The sport requires a firm jaw and demands that the adventurer keep all his wits about him. Any novice who doubts me may have a try at it himself and see! But first he had better read this "Compleat Free Lancer." Its practical hints may save him—or should I say *her*?—many a needless disappointment.

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C. P. C.

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IF YOU DON'T WRITE FICTION

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I

ABOUT NOSES AND JAWS

A foxhound scents the trail of his game and tracks it straight to a killing. A lapdog lacks this capability. In the same way, there are breeds of would-be writers who never can acquire a "nose for news," and others who, from the first day that they set foot in editorial rooms, are hot on the trail that leads to billboard headlines on the front page of a newspaper or acceptances from the big magazines.

Many writers who are hopelessly clumsy with words draw fat pay checks because they have a faculty for smelling out interesting facts. In the larger cities there are reporters with keen noses for news who never write a line from one year's end to another, but do all of their work by word of mouth over the telephone.

To the beginner such facts as these seem to indicate that any one can win in journalism who has the proper kind of nose. This conclusion is only a half-truth, but it is good for the novice to learn—and as soon as possible—that the first requisite toward "landing" in the newspapers and magazines is to know a "story" when he sees one.

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In the slang of the newspaper shop a "story" means non-fiction. It may be an interview. It may be an account of a fire. It may be a page of descriptive writing for the Sunday magazine section. It may be merely a piece of "human interest."

As my own experience in journalism covers barely fifteen years, the writer would not be bold enough to attempt to define a "story" further than to state that it is something in which an editor hopes his public will be interested at the time the paper or magazine appears upon the newsstands. To-morrow morning or next month the same readers might not feel the slightest interest in the same type of contribution.

Timeliness of some sort is important, yet a "story" may have little to do with what in the narrower sense is usually thought of as "news"—such as this morning's happenings in the stock markets or the courts, or the fire in Main Street. The news interest in this restricted sense may dangle from a frayed thread. The timeliness of the contribution may be vague and general. We may not be able to do more than sense it. This is one reason why men of academic minds, who love exact definitions, never feel quite at ease when they attempt to deal with the principles of journalism.

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We practical men, who earn a living as writers, feel no more at ease than the college professors when we attempt to deal with these principles. When we are cub reporters we are likely to conceive the notion that a "story" is anything startling enough, far enough removed from the normal, to catch public attention by its appeal to curiosity. Later, we perceive that this explains only half of the case. The other half may baffle us to the end. Instance the fact that a great many manuscripts sell to newspapers and magazines upon the merits of that mysterious element in writing known as "human interest." If a reward were offered for an identification of "human interest" no jury could agree upon the prize-winning description. A human interest story sometimes slips past the trained nose of a reporter of twenty years' experience and is picked up by a cub. It is something you tell by the scent.

This scent for the trail of a "story" may be sharpened by proper training, and one of the best places for a beginner to acquire such training—and earn his living in the meantime—is in a newspaper office. Yet nothing could be further from the present writer's intention than to advise all beginners in journalism to apply for jobs as reporters. Some of the most successful magazine contributors in America have never set foot inside of a newspaper plant except to pay a subscription to the paper or to insert a want ad for a chauffeur or a butler.

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If you have nose sense for what the public is eager to read, newspaper experience can teach you nothing worth while unless it is a deeper knowledge of human nature. As a reporter you will view from behind the scenes what the people of an American community are like and catch some fleeting glimpses of the more unusual happenings in their lives. You may, or may not, emerge from this experience a better writer than you were when you went in. Your style may become simpler and more forceful by newspaper training. Or it may become tawdry, sloppy and inane.

"Newspapers," observed Charles Lamb, "always excite curiosity. No one ever lays one down without a feeling of disappointment." That was true a hundred years ago, and appears to be just as true to-day.

Fortunately, the men who write the news get more out of the work than do their readers. The reporter usually can set down only a fraction of the interesting facts that he picks up about a "story." His work may be eternally disappointing to the public, but it is rarely half so dull to the man who does the writing.

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No life into which the average modern can dip is so rich in interest for the first year or two as that of the reporter working upon general assignments. A fling at hobo life, ten voyages at sea and more than two years of army life (a year and a half of this time spent in trekking all over the shattered landscape of France) do not shake my conviction that the adventurer most to be envied in our times is the cub reporter enjoying the first thrills and glamors of breaking into print. There is a scent in the air, which, though it be only ink and paper, makes the cub's blood course faster the minute he steps into the office corridor; and as he mounts the stairs to the local room the throbbing of the presses makes him wonder if this is not literally the "heart of the city."

He makes his rounds of undertakers' shops, courtrooms, army and navy recruiting offices, railway stations, jails, markets, clubs, police and fire headquarters. He is sent to picnics and scenes of murders. He is one of the greenest of novices in literary adventure, but, quite like an H. G. Wells, he meets in his community "philosophers, scientific men, soldiers, artists, professional men, politicians of all sorts, the rich, the great."

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He is underpaid and overworked. He has no time to give his writings literary finish; and, in the end, unless he develops either into a specialist or an executive, he may wear himself out in hard service and be cast upon the scrap heap. At first, the life is rich and varied. Then, after a while, the reporter finds his interest growing jaded. The same kind of assignment card keeps cropping up for him, day after day. He perceives that he is in a rut. He tells himself: "I've written that same story half a dozen times before."

Then is the time for him to settle himself to do some serious thinking about his future. Does he have it in him to become an executive? Or does he discover a special taste, worth cultivating, for finance, or sport, or editorial writing? If so, he has something like a future in the newspaper office.

But if what he really longs to do is to contribute to the magazines or to write books, he is at the parting of the ways. He should seize now upon every opportunity to discover topics of wide interest, and in his spare time he should attempt to write articles on these topics and ship them off to market.

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He has laid the first solid foundation of successful freelancing, for if he has been able to survive as long as six months in the competition of the local room he has a nose for what constitutes a "story."

The next thing he has to learn is that an article for a magazine differs chiefly from a newspaper story in that the magazine must make a wider appeal—to a national rather than to a local interest. The successful magazine writer is simply a reporter who knows what the general public likes to read, and who has learned when and where and how to market what he produces. Timeliness is as important as ever, so he must look to his tenses. The magazine article will not appear until from ten days to six months or more after it is accepted. Some of our magazines begin making up their Christmas numbers in July, so he must learn to sweat to the tinkle of sleigh bells.

I wonder how many hundreds of ambitious newspaper reporters are at this very minute urging themselves to extra effort after hours and on their precious holidays and Sundays to test their luck in the magazine markets? The number must be considerable if my experience as a member of the editorial staff of a big national magazine allows me to make a surmise. I have read through bushels of manuscripts that had the ear marks of the newspaper office all over them. They were typed on the cheap kind of "copy paper" that is used only in "city rooms." The first sheet rarely had a title, for the newspaper reporter's habit is to leave headline writing to a "copy reader." Ink and dust had filled in such letters as "a" and "e" and "o." Most of the manuscripts were done with characteristic newspaper office haste, and gave indication somewhere in the text that the author had not the faintest notion of how far in advance of the date line the magazine had to make up its table of contents.

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Many of these novices showed a promise in skill that might give some uneasy moments to our most prosperous magazine headliners. If only there were firm jaws back of the promise! These men had the nose for journalistic success, but that alone will not carry them far unless it is backed with a fighting jaw.

I look back sometimes to cub days and name over the reporters who at that time showed the

greatest ability. Three of the most brilliant are still drudging along in the old shop on general assignments, for little more money than they made ten years ago. One did a book of real merit and the effort he expended upon it overcame him with ennui. Another made the mistake of supposing that he could pin John Barleycorn's shoulders to the mat. Another had no initiative. He is dying in his tracks.

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Who now are rated as successes on the roll call of those cub reporter days? Not our geniuses, but a dozen fellows who had the most determination and perseverance. The men who won were the men who tried, and tried again and then kept on trying.

Mr. Dooley was quite right about opportunity: "Opporchunity knocks at every man's dure wanst. On some men's dures it hammers till it breaks down the dure and goes in an' wakes him up if he's asleep, an' aftherward it works fur him as a night watchman. On other men's dures it knocks an' runs away; an' on the dures of other men it knocks, an' whin they come out it hits thim over the head with an ax. But eviry wan has an opporchunity. So yez had better kape your eye skinned an' nab it before it shlips by an' is lost forevir."

The names on a big magazine's table of contents represent many varieties of the vicissitudes of fortune, but the prevailing type is not a lucky genius, one for whom Opporchunity is working as a night watchman. The type is a firm-jawed plugger. His nose is keen for "good stories," his eye equally alert to dodge the ax or to nab Opporchunity's fleeting coat-tails.

CHAPTER II

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HOW TO PREPARE A MANUSCRIPT

If you have a real "story" up your sleeve and know how to word it in passable English, the next thing to learn is the way to prepare a manuscript in professional form for marketing. In the non-fiction writer's workshop only two machines are essential to efficiency and economy. The first of these, and absolutely indispensable, is a typewriter. The sooner you learn to type your manuscripts, the better for your future and your pocketbook.

It is folly to submit contributions in handwriting to a busy editor who has to read through a bushel of manuscripts a day. The more legible the manuscript, the better are your chances to win a fair reading. I will go further, and declare that a manuscript which has all the earmarks of being by a professional is not only more carefully read, but also is likely to be treated with more consideration when a decision is to be made upon its value to the publisher in dollars and cents. Put yourself in the editor's place and you will quickly enough grasp the psychology of this.

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The editor knows that no professional submits manuscripts in handwriting, that no professional writes upon both sides of the sheet, and that no professional omits to enclose an addressed stamped envelope in which to return the manuscript to its author if it proves unavailable for the magazine's use. Why brand yourself as a novice even before the manuscript reader has seen your first sentence? Remember you are competing for editorial attention against a whole bushel of other manuscripts. The girl who opens the magazine's mail may be tempted to cast your contribution into the rejection basket on general principles, if you are foolish enough to get away to such a poor start. What an ignominious end to your literary adventure is this—and all because you were careless, or didn't know any better!

The writer who really means business will not neglect in any detail the psychology of making his manuscript invite a thorough reading. It may be bad form to accept a dinner invitation in typewriting, but it is infinitely worse form to fail to typewrite an invitation to editorial eyes to buy your manuscript. Good form also dictates that the first page of your contribution should bear in the upper left hand corner of the sheet your name, upon the first line; the street address, on the second; the town and state, on the third. In the upper right hand corner should be set down an estimate of the number of words contained in the manuscript.

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Leave a blank down to the middle of the page. There, in capitals, write the title of the article; then drop down a few lines and type your pen name (if you use one) or whatever version of your signature that you wish to have appear above the article when it comes out in print. Drop down a few more lines before you begin with the text, and indent about an inch for the beginning of each paragraph. Here is a model for your guidance:

Frank H. Jones, about 3000
2416 Front St., words
Oswego, Ohio

CAMPING ON INDIAN CREEK

By

Frank Henry Jones

It took us two minutes by the clock to pack everything we needed—and more, for the camper-out always takes twice as much junk as he can use. All that was left to do after that etc.,

There are sound reasons for all this. The first is that, likely enough, your title may not altogether suit the editor, and he will require some of the white space in the upper part of the page for a revised version. Also, he will need some space upon which to pencil his directions to the printers about how to set the type. [Pg 13]

Double space your lines. If you leave no room between lines, you make it extremely difficult for the editor to write in any corrections in the text. Moreover, a solid mass of single-spaced typewriting is much harder to read than material that is double-spaced.

Use good white paper, of ordinary letter size, eight by eleven inches, and leave a margin of about an inch on either side of the text and at both top and bottom. Number each page. Don't write your "copy" with a ribbon which is too worn to be bright; and, while you are about it, clean up those letters on the typebars that have a tendency to fill up with ink and dust. You may have noticed, for example, that "a," "e," "o," "s," "m," and "w" are not always clear-cut upon the page.

You are doing all this to make the reading of your contribution as easy a task as possible from the purely physical side. You are simply using a little common sense in the process of addressing yourself to the favorable attention of a force of extremely busy persons who are paid to "wade through" a formidable stack of mail. [Pg 14]

If you have an overpowering distaste for doing your own typewriting, you may hire a typist to turn your handwritten "copy" into something easier to read. This procedure, however, may prove to be rather too costly for a beginner's purse. It is the part of wisdom to learn to operate a machine yourself. At first the task may seem rather a tough one, but even after so short a time as a month of practice you are likely to be surprised at the progress you will make. Before long you will be able to write much faster upon a machine than with a pencil or a pen.

The danger then lies in a temptation to haste and carelessness. This is one reason why many fastidious magazine writers always do the first draft of an article in longhand and turn to the typewriter only when they are ready to set down the final version. Temperament and habit should decide the matter. Nearly any one can learn to compose newspaper "copy" at the keyboard, but not so many of us dare attempt to do magazine articles at the same high rate of speed. Particularly does this hold true of the first page of a magazine manuscript. The opening paragraph of such a manuscript is likely to make a much more exacting demand upon the writer's skill than the "lead" of a newspaper "story." All that the newspaper usually demands is that the reporter cram the gist of his facts into the first few sentences. The magazine insists that the first paragraph of a manuscript not only catch attention but also sound the keynote of many words to follow, for the "punch" of the magazine story is more often near the end of the article than the beginning. [Pg 15]

Though the technique of newspaper and magazine writing may differ on this matter of the "lead," do not make the mistake of supposing that the magazine introduction need not be just as chock full of interest as the opening of a newspaper "story." You are no longer under any compulsion, when you write for the magazines, to cram the meat of the story into the first sentence, but one thing you must do—you must rouse the reader to sit up and listen. You can well afford to spend any amount of effort upon that opening paragraph. Write your lead a dozen times, a hundred times, if necessary, until you make it rivet the attention.

CHAPTER III

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HOW TO TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS

After he has bought or rented a typewriter, the would-be free lance in the non-fiction field has his workshop only half equipped. One more machine is an urgent necessity. Get a camera.

Few of our modern American newspapers and magazines are published without pictures; so anybody ought to be able to perceive how absurd it is to submit an unillustrated manuscript to an illustrated periodical. Good photographs have won a market for many a manuscript that scarcely would have been given a reading if it had arrived without interesting pictures; and many a well-written article has been reluctantly returned by the editor because no photographs were available to illustrate it.

There is only one way to dodge this issue. Just as you can hire a typist to put your manuscript into legible form, you can pay a professional photographer to accompany you wherever you go and take the illustrations for your text. But the same vital objection holds here as in the case of the [Pg 17]

professional typist—the costs will cut heavily into your profits. With a little practice you can learn to do the work yourself. After that, you can operate at a small fraction of the expense of hiring a professional.

Your work soon enough will be of as high a quality as anything that the average commercial photographer can produce, and, better yet, it will not have any flat and stale commercial flavor about it. Nothing is more static and banal than the composition that the ordinary professional will produce if you fail to prevent him from having his own way. Ten to one, all the lower half of the picture will be empty foreground, and not a living creature will appear in the entire field of vision.

It cost the present writer upward of \$150 to discover this fact. Then he bought a thirty dollar postcard kodak and a five dollar tripod and told the whole tribe of professionals to go to blazes. The only time since then that he has ever had to hire commercial aid was when he had to have heavy flashlights made of large rooms.

So save yourself money now, instead of eventually. Even if thirty dollars takes your last nickel, don't hesitate. For a beginning, if you are inexperienced in photography, rent a cheap machine with which to practice—a simple "snapshot box" with no adjustments on it will do while you are picking up the first inklings of how to compose a picture and of how much light is required for different classes of subjects.

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After you have practiced with this for a while, go out and buy a folding kodak. If you have the journalistic eye for what is picturesque and newsy the camera will quickly return 100 per cent. upon the investment.

The one great difficulty for the beginner in photography is that he does not know how to "time" the exposure of a picture. The books on photography are all too technical. They discuss chemicals and printing papers and all the finer shadings of processes carried on in laboratories under a ruby light. But what the novice longs to know is simply how to *take* pictures—what exposure to allow for a portrait, what for a street scene, what for a panorama. He usually fails to give the portrait enough light, and he gives the panorama too much. He is willing to allow a professional finisher to do his developing and printing. What the beginner wants to read is a chapter on exposure. As an operator, he is seeking for a *rule of how* and some examples of its application.

If you lack a simple working theory, here is one now, in primer terms:

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The closer the object which you wish to photograph is to your lens, the *more* light it requires; the farther away it is, the *less* light it requires.

This may sound somewhat unreasonable, but that is how a camera works. A portrait head, or anything else that must be brought to within a few feet of the lens, requires the greatest width of shutter aperture (or, what comes to the same thing, the longest exposure); and a far-away mountain peak or a cloud requires the smallest aperture (or the shortest exposure).

To understand thoroughly what this means, take off the back of your kodak and have a look at how the wheels go round. Set the pointer of the time dial on the face of your camera at "T" (it means "time exposure") and then press the bulb (or push the lever) which opens the shutter. Looking through the back of your camera, make the light come through the largest width of the lens. You can do this by pushing the other pointer on the face of your kodak to the extreme left of its scale—the lowest number indicated. On a kodak with a "U. S." scale this number is "4."

You will see now that the light is coming through a hole nearly an inch in diameter. If it were a bright day you could take portrait heads outdoors through this sized aperture with an exposure of one twenty-fifth of a second.

Using this same amount of time, the size of the shutter aperture should be reduced to a mere pin hole of light to make a proper exposure for far-away mountain tops, clouds, or boats in the open sea.

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Suppose we make our problem as simple as possible by leaving the timer at one twenty-fifth of a second for all classes of subjects. We will vary only the size of the hole through which the light is to enter.

For a close-up, a portrait head, we operate with the light coming through the full width of the lens.

Now push to the right one notch the pointer which reduces the size of the hole. This makes the light come through a smaller diameter, which on a "U. S." scale will be marked "8." Only half as much light is coming through now as before. This is the stop at which to take full length figures and many other views in which the foreground is unusually prominent. Buildings which are not light in color should also be taken with this stop. In general, it is for heavy foregrounds.

Push the pointer on to "16." If your scale is "U. S." you will notice that this is midway between the largest and the smallest stops. It is the happy medium stop at which, on bright days, you can properly expose for the great majority of your subjects, those hundreds of scenes not close enough to the lens to be classified as "heavy foregrounds" nor yet far enough away to be panoramas. Buildings which are light in color and sunny street scenes fall into this division of exposures. When in doubt, take it at one twenty-fifth of a second with stop "16." You can't miss it far, one way or another.

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Push the pointer on to "32" and the object to be photographed ought to be at some distance away. This is the stop for the open road and the sunlit fields—anything between an "average view" and a "panorama."

At "64" the scale is set for the most distant of land views, beach scenes and boats in the middle distance off-shore. You will learn by costly overexposures that water views require much less light than landscapes. Photographers have an axiom that "water is as bright as the sky itself." So at "64," which is proper exposure for the most distant of land panoramas, you begin to take waterscapes.

That tiniest pin hole of a stop, at the extreme right of the scale, is never to be used except for such subjects as the open sea and snowcapped mountain tops.

There you have the theory. Apply it with common sense and you will meet with few failures. You scarcely need to be cautioned that if an object is dark in color it will require proportionately more exposure than the same object if it is white. Through various weathers and seasons, experience will keep teaching you how to adapt the rule to changing conditions of light. Certain handbooks and exposure meters will be of service while you are learning the classifications of subjects.

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You have been told how the rule works. Press the "T" bulb again to click your shutter shut and prepare to set out on a picture taking excursion. Set the time scale at one twenty-fifth of a second, and leave it there. Load up a film. Replace the back of the camera. Take along a tripod. Don't forget that tripod! With that you insure yourself against getting your composition askew, or losing a good picture on account of a shaky hand.

Suppose the expedition is gunning somewhere in the backwoods. Down the stony winding road saunters one of the natives in a two-piece suit. Overalls and a hickory shirt constitute his entire outfit. He grows a beard to save himself the labor of shaving. His leathery feet scarcely feel the sharp stones of the highway. Here is a picture worth preserving, for the "cracker" type is becoming a rarity, almost extinct. Set your pointer at "8" and take his full length. If you wish a close-up of his head, set the pointer at "4."

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A little farther and the road plunges into a shady valley. Under the trees ahead is a log cabin, dappled with the sunlight and the shade of dancing leaves. Use your judgment about whether such a scene requires "8" or "4." If in doubt, use "4," for the danger here is that you may under-expose.

In a clearing where the shade of the trees has little effect, stands an old water power mill. It is simply an "average view," and you can safely snap it with a "16" stop.

The friendly razorback hogs under the mail hack make a picture with a heavy foreground. They fall into the "8" classification—half in shade, half in sunlight.

The road leads us at last to a river. An old-fashioned ferry boat is making a crossing in midstream. From the hilltop where we first survey it the scene is a landscape, distant view, and can be taken with a "32." But when you get down to the water's edge and shoot across the shining river, beware of overexposure. Stop down another notch.

Do you see now how the theory works? Give it a fair trial and you will agree that taking pictures—the mere *taking*, with no bothering your head about developing, printing, toning and the like—is a matter no more baffling than the simple art of learning to punch the letters on the keyboard of a typewriter. Keep at it, never neglecting an opportunity to practice. Keep experimenting, until you can fare forth in any sort of weather and know that you will be able to bring back something printable upon your film or plate. If the day is not bright, shove your timer over to one-tenth of a second, or to one-fifth.

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Certain experts in photography will bitterly deride this advice to keep the time set at one twenty-fifth of a second and to vary nothing but the size of the lens aperture. They will point out—and be quite right about it—that the smaller the aperture the sharper the image, and that a more professional method of procedure is to vary the timing so as to take all pictures with small stops.

To which I can only answer that this is all well enough for the trained photographer and that in these days of my semi-professionalism I practice that same sort of thing myself. But in the beginning I was duly grateful to the man who gave me the golden maxim of "the closer the object, the larger the stop; the more distant the object, the smaller the stop"—a piece of advice which enabled a novice, with only one simple adjustment to worry about, to take a passably sharp, properly exposed picture. So I pass the word along to you for whatever it may be worth.

CHAPTER IV

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FINDING A MARKET

A nose for news, some perseverance, a typewriter and a camera have thus far been listed as the equipment most essential to success for a writer of non-fiction who sets out to trade in the periodical market as a free lance. Rather brief mention has been made of the matter of literary style. This is not because the writer of this book lacks reverence for literary craftsmanship. It is

simply because, with the facts staring him in the face, he must set down his conviction that a polished style is not a matter of tremendous importance to the average editor of the average American periodical.

Journalists so clumsy that, in the graphic phrase of a short grass poet, "they seem to write with their feet," sell manuscripts with clock-like regularity to first-class markets. The magazines, like the newspapers, employ "re-write men" to take crude manuscripts to pieces, rebuild them and give them a presentable polish. The matter of prime importance to most of our American editors is an article's content in the way of vital facts and "human interest." Upon the matter of style the typical editor appears to take Matthew Arnold's words quite literally:

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"People think that I can teach them style. What stuff it all is! Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style."

No embittered collector of rejection slips will believe me when I declare that the demand for worth-while articles always exceeds the supply in American magazine markets. None the less it is true, as every editor knows to his constant sorrow. The appetite of our hundreds of periodicals for real "stories" never has been satisfied. The menu has to be filled out with a regrettable proportion of bran and *ersatz*.

The fact that a manuscript lacks all charm of style will not blast its chances of acceptance if the "story" is all there and is typed into a presentable appearance and illustrated with interesting photographs. A good style will enhance the manuscript's value, but want of verbal skill rarely will prove a fatal blemish. Not so long as there are "re-write men" around the shop!

It is not a lack of artistry that administers the most numerous defeats to the novice free lance. It is a lack of market judgment. When he has completed his manuscript he sits down and hopefully mails it out to the first market that strikes his fancy. He shoots into the dark, trusting to luck.

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A huge army of disappointed scribblers have followed that haphazard plan of battle. They would know better than to try to market crates of eggs to a shoe store, but they see nothing equally absurd in shipping a popular science article to the *Atlantic Monthly* or an "uplift" essay to the *Smart Set*. They paper their walls with rejection slips, fill up a trunk with returned manuscripts and pose before their sympathetic friends as martyrs.

Many of these defeated writers have nose-sense for what is of national interest. They write well, and they take the necessary pains to make their manuscripts presentable in appearance. If they only knew enough to offer their contributions to suitable markets, they soon would be scoring successes. What they can't get into their heads is that the names in an index of periodicals represent needs as widely varied as the names in a city directory.

Take, for example, five of our leading weeklies: *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Leslie's*, *The Outlook* and *The Independent*. They all use articles of more or less timeliness, but beyond this one similarity they are no more alike in character than an American, an Irishman, an Englishman, a Welshman and a Scot. Your burning hot news "story" which *The Saturday Evening Post* turned down may have been rejected because the huge circulation of the *Post* necessitates that its "copy" go to press six or seven weeks before it appears upon the newsstands. You should have tried *The Independent*, which makes a specialty of getting hot stuff into circulation before it has time to cool. Your interview with a big man of Wall Street which was returned by *The Outlook* might find a warm welcome at *Leslie's*. A character sketch of the Democratic candidate for President might not please *Leslie's* in the least, but would fetch a good price from *Collier's*. Your article on the Prairie Poets might be rejected by three other weeklies, but prove quite acceptable to *The Outlook*.

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When you have completed a manuscript, forget the inspiration that went into its writing and give cold and sober second thought to this matter of marketing. *The Outlook* might have bought the article that *Collier's* rejected. *Collier's* might have bought the one that *The Outlook* rejected. Every experienced writer will tell you that this sort of thing happens every day.

Don't snort in disdain because the editor of *The Ladies' Home Journal* rejects a contribution on economics. Maybe the lady's husband would like it. So try it on *The World's Work*, or *Leslie's* or *System*. It might win you a place of honor, with your name blazoned on the cover.

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Too many discouraged novices believe that the bromide of the rejection slip—"rejection implies no lack of merit"—is simply a piece of sarcasm. It is nothing of the sort. In tens of thousands of instances it is a solemn fact. Don't sulk and berate the editors who return your manuscript, but carefully read the contribution again, trying to forget for the moment that it is one of your own precious "brain children." Cold-bloodedly size it up as something to sell. Then you may perceive that you have been trying to market a crate of eggs at a shoe store. Eggs are none the less precious on that account. Try again—applying this time to a grocer. If he doesn't buy, it will be because he already has all the eggs on hand that he needs. In that event, look up the addresses of some more grocers.

The same common sense principles apply in selling manuscripts to the magazines and newspapers as in marketing any other kind of produce. The top prices go to the fellow who delivers his goods fresh and in good order to buyers who stand in need of his particular sort of staple. Composing a manuscript may be art, but selling it is business.

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Naturally, it requires practice to become expert in picking topics of wide enough appeal to

interest the public which reads magazines of national circulation. Every beginner, except an inspired genius, is likely to be oppressed with a sense of hopelessness when he is making his first desperate attempts to "break in." The writer can testify feelingly on this point from his own experience. Kansas City was then my base of operations, and it seemed as if I never possibly could find anything in that far inland locality worthy of nation-wide attention. Everything I wrote bounced back with a printed rejection slip.

At last, however, I discovered a "story" that appeared to be of undeniable national appeal. Missouri, for the first time in thirty-six years, had elected a Republican governor. I decided that the surest market for this would be a magazine dealing with personality sketches. If a magazine of that type would not buy the "story," I was willing to own myself whipped.

On the afternoon when we were all sure that Herbert Hadley had won, I begged a big lithographed portrait of the governor-elect from a cigar store man who had displayed it prominently in his front window. There was no time, then, to search for a photograph. A thrill of conviction pervaded me that at last my fingers were on a "story" that no magazine editor, however much he might hate to recognize the worth of new authors, could afford to reject.

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The newspaper office files of clippings gave me all the information necessary for a brief biography; the lithograph should serve for an illustration. By midnight that Irresistible Wedge for entering the magazines was in the mails.... Sure enough, the editors of *Human Life* bought it. And, by some miracle of speed in magazine making never explained to this day, they printed it in their next month's issue.

The moral of this was obvious—that in the proper market a real "story," even though it be somewhat hastily written, will receive a sincere welcome. The week after this Irresistible Wedge appeared in print I threw up my job as a reporter and dived off of the springboard into free lancing. A small bank account gave me assurance that there was no immediate peril of starving, and I wisely kept a connection with the local newspaper. In case disaster overtook me, I knew where I could find a job again.

CHAPTER V

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A BEGINNER'S FIRST ADVENTURES

What happened to me in making a beginning as a free lance producer of non-fiction might happen to any one else of an equal amount of inexperience. My home town had no professional magazine writer to whom I could turn for advice; and though I devoured scores of books about writing, they were chiefly concerned either with the newspaper business or with the technique of fiction, and they all failed to get down to brass tacks about my own pressing problem, which was how to write and sell magazine articles. I was not seeking any more ABC advice about newspaper "stories," nor did I feel the least urge toward producing fiction. I thirsted to find out how to prepare and market a manuscript to *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Collier's*, but the books in the public library were all about the short story and the novel, Sunday "features," the evolution of the printing press or the adventures of a sob sister on an afternoon daily.

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So I had to go out and get my education as a magazine writer in a school of tough experiences. A few of these experiences are here recorded, in the hope that some of the lessons that were enforced upon me may be of help to other beginners.

The immediate results of my plunge into free lancing were:

JANUARY—not one cent.

FEBRUARY—\$50.46. Seven dollars of this was for the magazine article. No other magazine acceptances had followed the Wedge. I had not yet caught the national viewpoint, nor had I picked up much practical information about the magazine markets.

By March it was becoming painfully evident that a fledgling free lance should, if he is wise, depend for a while upon a local newspaper for the larger part of his income. In a school of hard knocks I learned to sell "stories" of purely local interest to the Kansas City market, topics of state-wide interest to the St. Louis Sunday editors, and contributions whose appeal was as wide as the Gulf of Mexico to newspapers in Chicago and New York.

Also I learned that if the free lance hopes to make any of these markets take a lively interest in him, he will introduce his manuscripts with interesting photographs. I rented a little black cube of a camera for twenty-five cents a day. It had a universal focus and nothing to bother about in the way of adjustments. To operate it you peeked into the range finder, then threw a lever. Its lens was so slow that no pictures could be taken with it except in bright sunlight.

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I wrote about motor cars, willow farms, celebrities, freaks of nature in the city parks, catfish and junk heaps—anything of which I could snap interesting photographs and find enough text to "carry" the picture.

March saw me earn \$126.00 by doing assignments for the city editor in the mornings and "stories" at space rates in the afternoons for the Sunday section. At night I plugged away at

manuscripts hopefully intended for national periodicals. But not until late in September did I "land" in a big magazine. Then—the thrill that comes once in a lifetime—I sold an article to *Collier's*. It required tremendous energy to keep up such a pace, but there was sweet comfort in the thought that, technically at least, I was now my own boss. Gradually, I broke away from assignment work until I was free to write what I liked and to go where I pleased.

From finding material in the city, I adventured into some of the near-by towns in Missouri and Kansas, and soon was arguing a theory that in every small town the local correspondents of big city newspapers are constantly overlooking pay streaks of good "feature stories." Usually I would start out with twenty-five dollars and keep moving until I went broke. A railway journey no longer meant, as in reportorial days, a banquet in the dining-car and a chair on the observation platform, charged up on an expense account. Often enough I slept in a day coach, my head pillowed on a kodak wrapped in a sweater vest. The elevation was just right for a pillow; and at the same time the traveler was insured against theft of his most precious possession, a brand new folding camera of post card size.

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For the little snapshot box soon showed its weakness in an emergency and had to be replaced with a better machine which had an adjustable diaphragm, a timing apparatus, a focusing scale and a front like an accordion. One afternoon it had happened that while two hundred miles from a city and twenty from the nearest railroad, the snapshot box had been useless baggage for two hours, while an anxious free lance sat perched on the crest of an Ozark mountain studying an overcast sky and praying for some sunlight. At last the sun blazed out for half a minute and the lever clicked in exultation.

This experience enforced a lesson: "Learn to take any sort of picture, indoors or out, on land or water, in any sort of weather." After I got the new machine, with a tripod to insure stability and consequent sharpness of outline, a piece of lemon-colored glass for cloud photography and another extra lens for portrait work, I began snapping at anything that held out even the faintest promise of allowing me to clear expenses in the course of acquiring needed experience. I photographed the neighbors' children, houses offered for sale, downtown street scenes and any number of x-marks-the-spot-of-the-accident.

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When a cyclone cut a swath through one of our suburbs, I rushed half-a-dozen photographs to *Leslie's*, feeling again some of the same thrilling sort of confidence that had accompanied the first Irresistible Wedge. Back came three dollars for a single print. Rather a proud day, that! Never before had one of my prints sold for more than fifty cents.

There were evenings after that when I meditated giving the writing game good-bye in favor of photography; and many a time since then the old temptation has recurred. The wonder of catching lovely scenery in a box and of watching film and print reproduce it in black and white keeps ever fresh and fascinating to me, gratifying an instinct for composition in one whose fingers are too clumsy to attempt to draw or paint. In those early days of my adventures in photography an editor came very near the literal truth when he sarcastically observed: "Young man, life to you seems to be just one long undeveloped film."

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Parallel with improvement in skill as a photographer, I developed a working plan to insure more profitable excursions afield. My interested friends among editors and reporters gladly gave me hints about possible out-of-town sources of "stories," and I studied the news columns, even to the fine type of the Missouri and Kansas state notes, with all the avidity of an aged hobo devouring a newspaper in the public library. For every possibility I made out a card index memorandum, as—

KANAPOLIS, KAS.

Geographical center of the country. Once proposed as the capital of the nation—
and of the state of Kansas. Now a whistling station and a rock salt plant.

For each memorandum I stuck a pin in the state maps pasted on the wall of my workshop. When there were several pins in any neighborhood, I would sling my kodak over my shoulder, the carrying case strapped to the tripod-top, like a tramp with a bundle at the end of a stick. And then away, with an extra pair of socks and a harmonica for baggage. Besides the material that I felt certain of finding through advance information, luck always could be trusted to turn up some additional "stories." The quickest way to find out what there was to write about in a town was simply to walk into the local newspaper office, introduce myself and ask for some tips about possible "features." I cannot recall that any one ever refused me, or ever failed to think of something worth while.

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I do not know yet whether what I discovered then is a business or not, but I made a living out of it. Whereas reporting on a salary had begun to be something of a grind, the less profitable roamings of a free lance furnished a life that had color and everlasting freshness.

Sometimes, trusting in the little gods of the improvident, I was lured into the backwoods of the Ozarks by such a name as "Mountain Home," which caught my fancy on the map; and with no definite "stories" in mind I would go sauntering from Nowhere-in-Particular in Northern Arkansas to Someplace Else in Southern Missouri, snapping pictures by the roadside and scribbling a few necessary notes. One of those excursions, which cost \$24.35, has brought a return, to date, of more than \$250, which of course does not include the worth of a five days' lark with a young Irishman who went on the trip as a novel form of summer vacation.

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He found all the novelty he could have hoped for. After some truly lyric passages of life in

Arkansas, when we felt positively homesick about leaving one town to go on to another, we reached a railroad-less county in Missouri infested with fleas; and to secure a discount on the stage fare on the thirty-five-mile drive from Gainsville to West Plains (we *had* to have a discount to save enough to buy something to eat that night) we played the harmonica for our driver's amusement until we gasped like fish. His soul was touched either by the melody or by pity, and he left us enough small change to provide a supper of cheese and crackers.

Some happenings that must sound much more worth while in the ears of the mundane have followed, but those first days of free lancing seem to me to be among the choicest in a journalistic adventurer's experience. Encounters with a variety of celebrities since then have proved no whit more thrilling than the discovery that our host, Jerry South of Mountain Home, was lieutenant-governor of Arkansas; and though I have roamed in five nations, no food that I ever have tasted so nearly approaches that of the gods as the strawberry shortcake we ate in Bergman.

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Even in the crass matter of profits, I found the small town richer in easily harvestable "stories" than the biggest city in the world. A few years later I spent a week in London, but I picked up less there to write about than I found in Sabetha, Kansas, in a single afternoon. Sabetha furnished:

Half of the material for a motor car article. (When automobiles were still a novelty to the rural population.) This sold to *Leslie's*.

An article on gasoline-propelled railway coaches, for *The Illustrated World*.

A short contribution on scientific municipal management of public utilities in a small town, for *Collier's*.

A character sketch about a local philanthropic money lender, for *Leslie's* and the *Kansas City Star*.

An account of the Kansas Amish, a sect something like the Tolstoys, for *Kansas City*, *St. Louis* and *New York* newspapers.

Short Sunday specials about a \$40,000 hospital and a thoroughly modern Kansas farm house for *Kansas City* and *St. Louis* Sunday sections.

The profits of these excursions were not always immediate, and until after I had worked many weeks at the trade there were periods of serious financial embarrassment. To cite profitable trips too early is to get ahead of my story, but the time is none the less propitious to remark that a country town or a small city certainly is as good a place for the free lance to operate (once he knows a "story" when he sees it) as is New York or Chicago, Boston, New Orleans or San Francisco. I often wonder if I would not have been better off financially if I had kept on working from a Kansas City headquarters instead of emigrating to the East.

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I might have gone on this way for a long time, in contentment, for my profits were steadily mounting and my markets extending. But one day my wanderings extended as far as Chicago, and there I ran across an old friend of student days. He had been the cartoonist of the college magazine when I was its editor. He wore, drooping from one corner of his face, a rah-rah bulldog pipe; an enormous portfolio full of enormities of drawing was under one arm, and, dangling at the end of the other, was one of the tiniest satchels that ever concealed a nightgown.

In answer to questions about what he was doing with himself, he confessed that he was not making out any better than most other newly graduated students of art. I argued that if Chicago did not treat him considerately, he ought to head for New York, where real genius, more than likely, would be more quickly appreciated. Also, if this was to his liking, I would invite myself to go along with him.

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We went. Now sing, O Muse, the slaughter!

CHAPTER VI

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IN NEW YORK'S "FLEET STREET"

The inexperienced free lance who attempts to invade New York, as we did, with no magazine reputation and no friends at court among the experts of the periodical market, may be assured that he will receive a surprising amount of courtesy. But this courtesy is likely to be administered to help soften the blows of a series of disappointments. Anybody but a genius or one of fortune's darlings may expect that New York, which has a deep and natural distrust of strangers, will require that the newcomer earn his bread in blood-sweat until he has established a reputation for producing the goods. Dear old simple-hearted Father Knickerbocker has been gold-bricked so often that a breezy, friendly manner puts him immediately on his guard.

Most of the editors with whom you will have to deal are home folks, like yourself, from Oskaloosa and Richmond and Santa Barbara and Quincy. Few are native-born New Yorkers, and scarcely any of them go around with their noses in the air in an "upstage Eastern manner." Most of them are graduates of the newspaper school, and remnants of newspaper cynicism occasionally appear in their outspoken philosophy. But be not deceived by this, for even in the newspaper office the

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half-baked cub who is getting his first glimpses of woman's frailties and man's weak will is the only cynic who means all he says. All reporters who are worth their salt mellow with the years; and editors who amount to much usually are ex-reporters trained to their jobs by long experience. The biggest editors and the ones with the biggest hearts have the biggest jobs. Most of the snubs you will receive will come from little men in little jobs, trying to impress you with a "front." The biggest editors of the lot are plain home folks whom you would not hesitate to invite to a dinner in a farmhouse kitchen.

What you ought to know when you invade New York without much capital and no reputation to speak of is that you are making a great mistake to move there so early, and that most of the editors to whom you address yourself know you are making a mistake but are too soft-hearted to tell you so.

Like most other over-optimistic free lances, we invaded New York with an expeditionary force which was in a woeful state of unpreparedness. [Pg 45]

In a street of brownstone fronts in mid-town Manhattan, a hurdy-gurdy strummed a welcome to us in the golden November sunlight, and a canary in a gilt cage twittered ecstatically from an open window. This moment is worthy of mention because it was the happiest that was granted to us for a number of months thereafter. We rented a small furnished room, top floor rear, and went out for a stroll on Broadway, looking the city over with the appraising eyes of conquerors. We were joyously confident.

One reason why we thought we would do well here was that the latter months of the period preceding our supposedly triumphal entry had seen me arrive at the point of earning almost as much money at free lancing as I could have made as a reporter. Meantime, I had thrilled to see my name affixed to contributions in *Collier's*, *Leslie's*, *Outlook* and *Outing*, not to mention a few lesser magazines. I thought I knew a "story" when I saw one. I knew how to take photographs and prepare a manuscript for marketing, and New York newspapers and magazines had been treating me handsomely. What we did not realize was that while the New York markets were hospitable enough to western material, they required no further assistance in reporting the activities of Manhattan Island. We had moved away from our gold mine. [Pg 46]

Our home and workshop now was a cubbyhole so small that every piece of furniture in the place was in close proximity to something else. My battered desk was jam against my roommate's drawing table, and his chair backed against a bed. Then, except for a narrow aisle to the door, there was a chair which touched another bed, which touched a trunk; the trunk touched ends with a washstand, which was jam against a false mantel pasted onto the wall, and the mantel was in juxtaposition with a bureau which poked me in the back. The window looked south, and adjacent buildings allowed it to have sunlight for almost half an hour a day.

Yet it would have been a cheerful enough place if our mail had not been so depressing. Everything we sent out came right back with a bounce, sometimes on the same day that we posted it. With indefatigable zeal we wrote feature "stories" about big topics in America's biggest city and furnished illustrations for the text. But the manuscripts did not sell. For two bitter months we kept at it before we discovered what was wrong. You may wonder how we could have been so blind. But there was no one to tell us what to do. We had to find out by experience. [Pg 47]

In November our income was \$60.90, all of it echoes from the past for material written in the west.

"How that crowd in the old office would laugh at us when we trailed back home, defeated!"

That was the thought which was at once a nightmare and a goad to further desperate effort. Day after day the Art Department and the kodak and I explored New York's highways and centers of interest. The place was ripe with barrels and barrels of good "feature stories," and I knew it; and the markets were not unfriendly, for by mail I had sold to them before. But now we could not "land."

On Christmas Day there was a dismal storm. Our purses were almost flat, and my box from home failed to arrive. To get up an appetite for dinner that night we went for a walk in a joy killing blizzard. I wanted to die and planned to do so. The only reason I did not jump off of a pier was the providential intervention of several stiff cocktails. (I am theoretically a prohibitionist, but grateful to the enemy for having saved my life.) The black cloud that shut out all sunlight was our measly total for December—\$18.07.

One glimmer of hope remained in a growing suspicion that perhaps some of the "stories" we had submitted had seen print shortly before we arrived. Possibly some other free lances—I would now estimate the number as somewhere between nine hundred and a thousand—had gone over the island of Manhattan with a fine tooth comb? I began haunting the side streets to seek out the most hidden possibilities, and ended in triumph one afternoon in a little uptown bird store. [Pg 48]

For two hours the young woman who was the proprietor of the store submitted to a searching interview, and I emerged with enough material for a full page spread. Then, taking no chances of being turned down because the contribution was too long, I condensed the "story" into a column. The manuscript went to the Sunday Editor of the New York *Sun*, with a letter pleading that "just this once" he grant me the special favor of a note to explain why he would not be able to use what I had to offer.

"Well enough written," he scribbled on the rejection slip, "but Miss Virginia has been done too many times before."

With that a great light dawned. Further investigation discovered that we had run into the same difficulty on numerous other occasions. We newcomers had no notion of how thoroughly and often the city had been pillaged for news. We could not tell old stuff from new. Manhattan Island is, indeed, the most perilous place in all America for the green and friendless free lance to attempt to earn a living. There is a wonderful abundance of "stories," but nearly all of them that the eye of the beginner can detect have been marketed before. Any other island but Manhattan! When dog days came around, I took a vacation on Bois Blanc in the Straits of Mackinac, and found more salable "stories" along its thinly populated shores than Manhattan had been able to furnish in three months. Everything I touched on Bois Blanc was new, and all my own. Anything on Manhattan is everybody's.

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But to return to our troubles in New York. The only hope I could see was to create a line of writing all our own. This determination resulted in a highly specialized type of "feature" for which we found a market in the morning New York *World*. It combined novelty with the utmost essence of timeliness. For example, precluding any possibility of being anticipated on the opening of Coney Island's summer season, we wrote early in February:

"If reports from unveracious employees of Coney Island are to be trusted, the summer season of 1910 is going to bring forth thrilling novelties for the air and the earth and the tunnels beneath the earth."

We listed then the Biplane Hat Glide (women were wearing enormous hats that season) and Motor Ten Pins—get in a motor car and run down dummies which count respectively, a child, ten points; a blind man, five; a newsboy, one. Then the Shontshover. We explained the Shontshover in detail because it was supposed to have a particularly strong appeal to the millions who ride in the subway:

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"New York's good-natured enjoyment of its inadequate subway service is responsible for the third novelty of the season. In honor of a gentleman who once took a ride in one of his own subway cars during the rush hour, the device has been named the 'Shontshover' (from 'Shonts' and 'shover'). It is the sublimation of a subway car, a cross between a cartridge and a sardine can. The passengers are packed into the shell with a hydraulic ram, then at high speed are shot through a pneumatic tube against a stone wall. Because of the great number of passengers the Shontshover can carry in a day, the admission price to the tube is to be only twenty-five cents."

We suggested on other occasions that new churches should have floors with an angle of forty-five degrees, on account of the prevailing fashion of large hats among women; that City Hall employees were outwitting Mayor Gaynor's time clock by paying the night watchman to punch it for them at sunrise, and that beauty had become a bar to a job as waitress in numerous New York restaurants. (O shades of George Washington, forgive us that one, at least!) These squibs did nobody any harm, and did us on the average, the good of the price of a week's room rent. We never meant them to be taken seriously or ever supposed that any one in the world would swallow them whole. But among our readers was a square-headed German; and one of the most absurd of our imaginings turned out, as a result, to be a physical possibility.

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"Ever since it was announced, a few days ago, that hazing in a modified modernized form is to be permitted at West Point," we related, "a reporter for the *World* has been busily interviewing people of all ages and interests to find the latest ideas on the subject.... Some small boys in Van Cortlandt Park yesterday afternoon, diabolo experts, suggested 'plebe diabolo.' It is simply diabolo for grown-ups. A rope takes the place of the customary string and a first year man is used for a spool. Any one can see at a glance what a great improvement this would be over the old-fashioned stunt of tossing the plebe in a blanket."

A few months later I picked up a copy of the *Scientific American* and chortled to read the account of a German acrobat who was playing in vaudeville as the "Human Diabolo."

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But this sort of thing was merely temporizing, and we finally had to abandon it for subjects more substantial. By a slow and harrowing process we learned our specialties and made a few helpful friends in New York's Fleet Street. The fittest among the many manuscripts turned out by our copy mill survived to teach us that the surest way into print is to write about things closest to personal knowledge—simple and homely themes close to the grass roots. We turned again to middle western topics and the magazines opened their doors to us. We plugged away for six months and cleared a profit large enough to pay off all our debts and leave a little margin. Then we felt that we could look the west in the face again, and go home, if we liked, without a consciousness of utter defeat. For though we had not won, neither had we lost. Our books struck a balance.

When the Wanderlust began calling again in May, I sat many an evening in the window of our little room, gazing down into the backyard cat arena or up at the moon, and dragging away at a Missouri corn cob pipe in a happy reverie. Some of my manuscript titles of editorial paragraphs contributed to *Collier's* trace what happened next:

Longings at the Window.
Packing Up.
A Mood of Moving Day.
From Cab to Taxi.

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Which is to say that it was sweet to see the home folks again, to eat fried chicken and honest homemade strawberry shortcake and to slumber on a sleeping porch. Our forces had beat a strategic retreat, but the morale was not gone. Our determination was firm to assault New York again at the first favorable opportunity. Meanwhile, we had learned a thing or two.

CHAPTER VII

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SOMETHING TO SELL

Six months back home, toiling like a galley slave, furnished requisite funds for another fling at New York. If ever a writer *burned* with zeal, this one did. Mississippi Valley summers often approach the torrid; this one was a record breaker; and I never shall forget how often that summer, after a hard day's work as a reporter, I stripped to the waist like a stoker and scribbled and typed until my eyes and fingers ached.

It was wise—and foolish. Wise, because it furnished the capital with which every free lance ought to be well supplied before he attempts to operate from a New York headquarters. Foolish, because it took all joy of life out of my manuscripts while the session of strenuousness lasted and left me wavering at the end almost on the verge of a physical breakdown. Nights, Sundays and holidays I plugged and slogged, nor did I relent even when vacation time came round. I sojourned to the Michigan pine woods, but took along my typewriter and kept it singing half of every day.

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The new year found me in New York again, alone this time and installed in a comfortable two-room suite instead of an attic. A reassuring bank account bolstered up my courage while the work was getting under way.

This time I made a go of it; and such ups and downs as have followed in the ten years succeeding have not been much more dramatic than the mild adventures that befall the everyday business man. "Danger is past and now troubles begin." That phrase of Gambetta's aptly describes the situation of the average free lance when, after the first desperate struggles, he has managed to gain a reasonable assurance of independence.

Confidence comes with experience, and when you no longer have any grave fears about your ability to make a living at the trade, your mind turns from elementary problems to the less distracting task of finding out how to make your discovered degree of talent count for all that it may be worth. After trying your hand at a variety of subjects, you will find your forte. But take your time about it. Every adventure in composition teaches you something new about yourself, your art and the markets wherein you gain your daily bread. The way to learn to write—the only way—is by writing, and you never will know what you might do unless you dare and try.

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Both as a matter of expediency and of getting as much fun out of the work as possible, it is well in the beginning to be versatile. Eventually, the free lance faces two choices: He may become a specialist and put in the remainder of his life writing solely about railroads, or about finance, or about the drama. Or he may, as Robert Louis Stevenson did, turn his hand as the mood moves him, to fiction, verse, fables, biography, criticism, drama or journalism—a little of everything. For my own part, I have always had something akin to pity for the fellow who is bound hand and foot to one interest. Let the fame and the greater profits of specialization go hang; "an able bodied writin' man" can best possess his soul if he does not harness Pegasus to plow forever in one cabbage patch.

Like the Ozark Mountain farmer who also ran a country store, a saw mill, a deer park, a sorghum mill, a threshing machine and preached in the meetin' house on Sunday mornings, I have turned my pen to any honest piece of writing that appealed strongly enough to my fancy—travel, popular science, humor, light verse, editorials, essays, interviews, personality sketches and captions for photographs. Genius takes a short cut to the highroad. But waste not your sympathy on the rest of us, for the byways have their own charm.

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While one is finding his footing in the free lance fields, he had best not hold himself above doing any kind of journalistic work that turns an honest dollar. For he becomes richer not only by the dollar, but also by the acquaintances he makes and the valuable experience he gains in turning that dollar. There was a time—and not so long ago—when, if the writer called at the waiting room of the Leslie-Judge Company, the girl at the desk would try to guess whether he had a drawing to show to the Art Editor, a frivolous manuscript for *Judge* or a serious article for *Leslie's*. At the Doubleday, Page plant the uncertainty was about whether the caller sought the editor of *World's Work*, *Country Life*, the *Red Cross Magazine* or *Short Stories*—he had, at various times, contributed to all of these publications.

Smile, if you like, but there is no better way to discover what you can do best than to try your 'prentice hand at a great variety of topics and mediums. The post-graduate course of every school of journalism is a roped arena where you wrestle, catch as catch can, for the honors bestowed by experience.

This experience, painfully acquired, should be backed up by an elementary knowledge of salesmanship. Super-sensitive souls there are who shudder at the mere mention of the word; and why this is so is not difficult to understand—their minds are poisoned with sentimental misapprehensions. Get rid of those misapprehensions just as swiftly as you can. If you have something to sell, be it hardware or a manuscript, common sense should dictate that you learn a little about how to sell it.

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Expert interviewers prepare themselves both for their topic and their man before they go into a confab—a practice which should be followed to some extent by every writer who sets out to interview an editor about a manuscript. What you have to offer should be prepared to suit the needs of the editor to whom the contribution is addressed. So you should study your magazine just as carefully as you do the subject about which you are writing. In your interview with the editor or in the letter which takes the place of an interview, state briefly whatever should be useful to his enlightenment. That is all. There you have the first principles of what is meant by "an elementary knowledge of salesmanship." If you don't know what you are talking about or anything about the possible needs of the man to whom you are talking, how can you expect to interest him in any commodity under heaven? Say nothing that you don't believe—he won't believe it, either. Never fool him. If you do, you may sell him once, but never again.

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There is no dark art to salesmanship; it is simply a matter of delivering the goods in a manner dictated by courtesy, sincerity, common sense and common honesty. Be yourself without pose, and don't forget that the editor—whether you believe it or not—is just as "human" as you are, and quick to respond to the best that there is in you. Shake off the delusion that you need to play the "good fellow" to him, like the old-fashioned type of drummer in a small town. Simply and sincerely and straight from the shoulder—also briefly, because he is a busy man—state your case, leave your literary goods for inspection and go your way.

He will judge you and your manuscript on merits; if he does not, he will not long continue to be an editor. The two greatest curses of his existence (I speak from experience) are the poses and the incurable loquaciousness of some of his callers and correspondents. Don't attempt to spring any correspondence school salesmanship on a real editor. Learn what real salesmanship is, from a real salesman—who may sell bacon, or steel or motor cars instead of manuscripts. He lives down your street, perhaps. Have a talk with him. He will tell you of the profits in a square deal and in knowing your business, and what can be accomplished by a little faith.

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If you are temperamentally unfit to sell your own writings, get a competent literary agent to do the job for you. But don't too quickly despair, for after all, there is nothing particularly subtle about salesmanship. Sincerity, however crude, usually carries conviction. If you know a "story" when you see it, if you write it right and type it in professional form and give it the needed illustrations; then if you offer it in a common sense manner to a suitable market, you can be trusted to handle your own products as successfully as the best salesman in America—as successfully as Charles Schwab himself. For, above all, remember this: the editor is just as eager to buy good stuff as you are to sell it. Nothing is simpler than to make a sale in the literary market if you have what the editor wants.

CHAPTER VIII

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WHAT THE EDITOR WANTS

Suppose you were the manager of an immense forum, a stadium like the one in San Diego, California, where with the aid of a glass cage and an electrical device increasing the intensity of the human voice, it is possible to reach the ears of a world's record audience of 50,000 persons. What sort of themes would you favor when candidates for a place on your speaking program asked you what they ought to discuss? "The Style of Walter Pater?" "The Fourth Dimension?" "Florentine Art of the Fourteenth Century?" Not likely! You would insist upon simple and homely themes, of the widest possible appeal.

A parallel case is that of the editor of a magazine of general circulation. He manages a forum so much larger than the famous stadium at San Diego that the imagination is put to a strain to picture it. On the generally accepted assumption that each sold copy of a popular magazine eventually reaches an average of five persons, there is one forum in the magazine world of America which every week assembles a throng of ten million or more assorted citizens, gathered from everywhere, coast to coast, men and women, young and old, every walk of life. A dozen other periodicals address at least half that number, and the humblest of the widely known magazines reaches a quarter of a million—five times as many persons as jammed their way into the San Diego stadium one time to hear a speech by the President of the United States.

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Put yourself into the shoes of the manager of one of these forums, and try to understand some of his difficulties.

A dozen times a day the editor of a popular periodical is besieged by contributors to make some sort of answer to the question: "What kind of material are you seeking?"

What else can he reply, in a general way, but "something of wide appeal, to interest our wide

circle of readers"?

There are times, of course, when he can speak specifically and with assurance, if all he happens to require at the moment to give proper balance to his table of contents is one or two manuscripts of a definite type. Then he may be able to say, off-hand: "An adventure novelette of twenty thousand words," or, "An article on the high cost of shoe leather, three thousand five hundred words." But this is a happy situation which is not at all typical. Ordinarily, he stands in constant need of half a dozen varieties of material; but to describe them all in detail to every caller would take more time than he could possibly afford to spare.

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He cannot stop to explain to every applicant that among what Robert Louis Stevenson described as "the real deficiencies of social intercourse" is the fact that while two's company three's a crowd; that with each addition to this crowd the topics of conversation must broaden in appeal, seeking the greatest common divisor of interests; and that a corollary is the unfortunate fact that the larger the crowd the fewer and more elemental must become the subjects that are possible for discussion.

Every editor knows that a lack of judgment in selecting themes of broad enough appeal to interest a nation-wide public is one of the novice scribbler's most common failings. It is due chiefly to a lack of imagination on the part of the would-be contributor, who appears to be incapable of projecting himself into the editorial viewpoint. I can testify from my own experience that a single day's work as an editor, wading through a bushel of mail, taught me more about how to make a selection of subjects than six months of shooting in the dark as a free lance.

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Every editor knows that nine out of ten of the unsolicited manuscripts which he will find piled upon his desk for reading to-morrow morning will prove to be wholly unfitted for the uses of his magazine. The man outside the sanctum fails utterly to understand the editor's dilemma.

This is the situation which has produced the "staff writer," and has brought down upon the editor the protests of his more discriminating readers against "standardized fiction" and against sundry uninspired articles produced to measure by faithful hacks. The editor defends his course in printing this sort of material upon the ground that a magazine made up wholly of unsolicited material would be a horrid *mélange*, far more distressing to the consumer than the present type of popular periodical which is so largely made to order. All editors read unsolicited material hopefully and eagerly. Many an editor gives this duty half of his working day and part of his evenings and Sundays. All of the reward of a discoverer is his if he can herald a new worth-while writer. Moreover, the interest of economy bids him be faithful in the task, for the novice does not demand the high rates of the renowned professional.

Yet even on the largest of our magazines, where the stream of contributions is enormous, the most diligent search is not fruitful of much material that is worth while. The big magazines have to order most of their material in advance, like so much sausage or silk; and much of the contents is planned for many months ahead. Scarcely any dependence can be placed upon the luck of what drifts into the office in the mails.

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Inevitably, the magazines must have large recourse to "big names," not because of inbred snobbishness on the part of the editors but because the "big name," besides carrying advertising value, is more likely than a little one to stand for material with a "big" theme, handled by a writer of experience. A surer touch in selecting and handling topics of nation-wide appeal is what counts most heavily in favor of the writer with an established reputation. Often enough it is not his vastly superior craftsmanship. I know of several famous magazine writers who never in their lives have got their material into print in the form in which it originally was submitted. They are what the trade calls "go-getters." They deliver the "story" as best they can, and a more skillful stylist completes the job.

Success in marketing non-fiction to popular magazines appears to hinge largely upon the quality of the thinking the writer does before he sets pen to paper. A classic anecdote of New York's Fleet Street may illustrate the point:

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The publisher of a national weekly was hiring a newspaper man as editor.

"Is this a writing job?" the applicant inquired.

"No!" growled the publisher, "a thinkin' job!"

The writer of non-fiction is in the same boat with the editor who buys his articles; he calls himself a writer, but primarily he is up against a thinking job. The actual writing of his material is secondary to good judgment in selecting what is known as a "compelling" theme. If he can produce a "real story" and get it onto paper in some sort of intelligent fashion, what remains to be done in the way of craftsmanship can be handled inside the magazine office by a "re-write man." Make sure, first of all, that what you have to say is something that ought to interest the large audience to which you address it.

Nobody with a grain of common sense would attempt to discuss "The Style of Walter Pater" to fifty thousand restless and croupy auditors in the vast San Diego stadium, but the average free lance sees nothing of equal absurdity about attempting to cram an essay on Pater down the throats of a miscellaneous crowd in a stadium which is from a hundred to two hundred times as large—the forum into which throng the thousands who read one of our large popular magazines.

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Much as we may regret to acknowledge it, there is no way to get around the fact that the larger

and more general the circulation of a periodical, the more universal must be the appeal of the material printed and the fewer the mainstays of interest, until in a magazine with a circulation of more than a million copies the chief classifications of non-fiction material required can easily be counted upon the fingers. The editor of such a publication necessarily is limited to handling rather elemental topics; so it is not to be wondered at when we hear that the largest publication of them all makes its mainstays two such universally interesting and world-old themes as business and "the way of a man with a maid."

Examine any popular magazine which has a circulation of general readers, speaking to a forum of anywhere from a quarter of a million to ten million assorted readers, and you will find that the non-fiction material which it is most eager to buy may easily be classified into half a dozen types of articles, all concerned with the ruling passions of the average American, as:

1. His job.
2. His hearthstone.
3. His politics.
4. His recreations.
5. His health.
6. Happenings of national interest.

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Examine a few of these types of contributions to arrive at a clearer understanding of why they are so justly popular. Your average American is, first of all, keenly interested in his job. It is much more to him, usually, than just a way to make a living. It fascinates him like a game, and you often hear him describe it as a "game." What, then, is more natural than that he should eagerly read articles of practical helpfulness concerned with his activities in office or store, factory or farm? The largest of our popular magazines never appear without something which touches this sort of interest, stimulating the man of affairs to strive after further successes and advancement in his chosen occupation. Many specialized business and trade publications and more than a score of skillfully edited farm magazines thrive upon developing this class of themes to the exclusion of all other material.

A second vital interest is the hearthstone—suggesting such undying topics as love and the landlord, marriage and divorce, the training of children, the household budget, the high cost of living, those compelling themes which have built up the women's magazines into institutions of giant stature and tremendous power.

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Politics is another field of almost universal interest, broadening every day now that women have the ballot and now that our vision is no longer limited to the homeland horizon, but finds itself searching eagerly onward into international relationships. Once we were content, as a national body politic, to discuss candidates for the Presidency or what our stand should be upon currency and the tariff. To-day we are also gravely concerned to know what is to become of Russia and Germany, or how the political and social unrest in France and Italy and England will affect the peace of the world.

As a fourth point, your average American these days is quick to respond to anything worth while concerning his recreations. As a consequence, much space is reserved in the big magazines for articles on society, travel, the theater and the movies, motor cars, country life, outings, and such popular sports as golf, baseball and tennis. Every one of these topics, besides being dealt with in the general magazines, has its own special mouthpiece.

Health always has been a subject constantly on the tip of everybody's tongue, but never before has so much been printed about the more important phases of it than appears in the popular magazines of to-day. Knowledge of the common sense rules of diet, exercise, ventilation and the like are becoming public possession—thanks largely to the magazines and the newspaper syndicates.

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A sixth mainstay of the magazines is in the presentation of articles dealing with happenings of national interest or personalities prominent in the day's news. This task grows increasingly difficult as the newspapers tighten their grip upon the public's attention and as the news pictorials of the moving picture screen gain in popular esteem by improved technical skill and more intelligent editing. The magazine of large circulation must go to press so long before the newspapers and the films that much perishable news must be thrown out, even though it is of nation wide appeal. The magazines are coming to find their greatest usefulness in the news field in gathering up the loose ends of scattered paragraphs which the daily newspapers have no time to weave together into a pattern. In the magazine the patchwork of daily journalism is assembled into more meaningful designs. Local news is sifted of its provincialism to become matter of national concern. Topics which you rapidly skimmed in the afternoon newspaper three or four weeks ago are re-discussed in the weekly or monthly magazines in a way which often makes you feel that here, for the first time, they become of personal import.

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The purpose of the suggestions sketched above is not to supply canned topics to ready writers, but to set ambitious scribblers to the task of doing some thinking for themselves. Instead of shiftlessly tossing the whole burden of responsibility for choice of topics to a hard driven editor, and whining, "Please give me an idea!", search around on your own initiative for a theme worth presenting to the attention of a throng of widely assorted listeners—for a "story" that ought to appeal to America's multitudes. If your topic is big enough for a big audience, your chances are prime to get a hearing for it. Dig up the necessary facts, the "human interest" and the national significance of the case. Then, rest assured, that "story" is what the editor wants.

CHAPTER IX

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AND IF YOU DO—

Something in the misty sunshine this morning made you restless. Vague longings, born of springtime mystery, stirred your blood, quickened the imagination. Roads that never were, and mayhap never will be, beckoned you with their sinuous curves and graceful shade trees toward velvety fields beyond the city's skyline. The sweet fragrance of blossoming orchards tingled in your nostrils and thrilled you with wanderlust. Haunting melodies quavered in your ears. Your old briar pipe never tasted so sweet before. Adventure never seemed so imminent. A golden day. What will you do with it?

You could write to-day, but if you did, you know you could support no patience for prosy facts, statistics and photographs. Whatever urge you feel appears to be toward verse or fiction. Well, why not? Try it! You never know what you might do in writing until you dare.

Verse is largely its own reward.

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Fiction, when it turns out successfully, fetches a double reward. It pays both in personal satisfaction, as a form of creative art, and also as a marketable commodity, which always is in great demand, and which can be cashed in to meet house rent and grocers' bills.

It is not within the scope of this little book—nor of its author's abilities—to attempt a discussion of fiction methods. Too many other writers, better qualified to speak, have dealt with fiction in scores of worth while volumes. Too many successful story tellers have related their experiences and treated, with authority, of the short story, the novelette and the long novel.

The purpose here can be only to urge that an attempt to write fiction is a logical step ahead for any scribbler who has won a moderate degree of success in selling newspaper copy and magazine articles. The eye that can perceive the dramatic and put it into non-fiction, the heart that knows human interest, the understanding that can tell a symbol, the artist-instinct that can catch characteristic colors, scents and sounds, all should aid a skilled writer of articles to turn his energies, with some hope of achievement, toward producing fiction. The hand that can fashion a really vivid article holds out promise of being able to compose a convincing short story, if grit and ambition help push the pen.

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The temptation to dogmatize here is strong, for the witness can testify that he has seen enviable success crown many a fiction writer who, apparently, possessed small native talent for story telling, and who won his laurels through sheer pluck and persistence. One of these pluggers declares he blesses the rejection slip because it "eliminates so many quitters."

But of course it would be absurd to believe that any one with unlimited courage and elbow grease could win at fiction, lacking all aptitude for it. Just as there are photographers who can snap pictures for twenty years without producing a single happy composition (except by accident), and reporters who never develop a "nose for news," there are story writers who can master all the mechanics of tale-telling, through sheer drudgery, and yet continually fail to catch fiction's spark of life. They fail, and shall always fail. Yet it is better to have strived and failed, than never to have tried at all.

Why? For the good of their artists' consciences, in the first place. And, in the second, because no writer can earnestly struggle with words without learning something about them to his trade advantage.

A confession may be in order: your deponent testifies freely, knowing that anything he may say may be used against him, that for years he has been a tireless producer of unsuccessful fiction, yet he views his series of rebuffs in this medium calmly and even somewhat humorously. For, by trade, he is a writer of articles, and he earnestly believes that the mental exercise of attempting to produce fiction acts as a healthy influence upon a non-fictionist's style. It stimulates the torpid imagination. It quickens the eye for the vivid touches, the picturesque and the dramatic. It is a groping toward art.

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"Art," writes one who knows, "is a mistress so beautiful, so high, so noble, that no phrases can fitly characterize her, no service can be wholly worthy of her."

Perhaps such art as goes into the average magazine article is not likely to merit much high-sounding praise. In our familiar shop talk we are prone to laugh about it. But even the most commercial-minded of our brotherhood cherishes deep in his heart a craftsman's pride in work well done. So your deponent testifies in his own defense that his copybook exercises in fiction, half of which end in the wastebasket, seem well worth the pains that they cost, so long as they help keep alive in his non-fiction bread-winners a hankering after (if not a flavor of) literary art.

And now must he apologize further for using a word upon which writers in these confessedly commercial days appear to have set a *taboo*? Then a passage from "The Study of Literature" (Arlo Bates) may serve for the apology:

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"Life is full of disappointment, and pain, and bitterness, and that sense of futility in which all of these evils are summed up; and yet were there no other alleviation, he who knows and truly loves

literature finds here a sufficient reason to be glad he lives. Science may show a man how to live; art makes living worth his while. Existence to-day without literature would be a failure and a despair; and if we cannot satisfactorily define our art, we at least are aware how it enriches and ennobles the life of every human being who comes within the sphere of its gracious influence."

So, we repeat: for the good of the artist's self-respect as well as for his craftsmanship it is worth while to attempt fiction. If only as a tonic! If only to jog himself out of a rut of habit!

If he succeeds with fiction he has bright hopes of winning much larger financial rewards for his labor than he is likely to gain by writing articles. Non-fiction rarely brings in more than one return upon the investment, but a good short story or novel may fetch several. First, his yarn sells to the magazine. Then it may be re-sold ("second serial rights") to the newspapers. Finally, it may fetch the largest cash return of all by being marketed to a motion picture corporation as the plot for a scenario. In some instances even this does not exhaust all the possibilities, for if British magazines and bookmen are interested in the tale, the "English rights" of publication may add another payment to the total.

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Not all of the features of this picture, however, should be painted in rose-colors. A disconcerting and persistent rumor has it that what once was a by-product of fiction—the sale of "movie rights"—is now threatening to run off with the entire production. The side show, we are warned, is shaping the policy of the main tent. Which is to say that novelists and magazine fiction writers are accused of becoming more concerned about how their stories will film than about how the manuscripts will grade as pieces of literature. To get a yarn into print is still worth while because this enhances its value in the eyes of the producers of motion pictures. But the author's real goal is "no longer good writing, so much as remunerative picture possibilities."

We set this down not because we believe it true of the majority of our brother craftsmen, but because evidences of such influences are undeniably present, and do not appear to have done the art of writing fiction any appreciable benefit. If your trade is non-fiction, and you turn to fiction to improve your art rather than your bank account, good counsel will admonish you not to aim at any other mark than the best that you can produce in the way of literary art. For there lies the deepest satisfaction a writer can ever secure—"art makes living worth his while."

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CHAPTER X

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FOREVER AT THE CROSSROADS

Keep studying. Keep experimenting. Set yourself harder tasks. Never be content with what you have accomplished. Match yourself against the men who can outplay you, not against the men you already excel. Keep attempting something that baffles you. Discontent is your friend more often than your enemy.

From the moment that he is graduated out of the cub reporter class, every writer who is worth his salt is forever at the crossroads, perplexed about the next turn. Nowhere is smugness of mind more deadly than in journalism. To progress you must forever scale more difficult ascents. The bruises of rebuffs and the wounds of injured vanity will heal quickly enough if you keep busy. Defeated or undefeated, the writer who always is trying to master something more difficult than the work he used to do preserves his self-respect and the respect of his worth-while neighbors. The fellow with the canker at his heart is not the battler but the envious shirker who is too "proud" to risk a fall.

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Swallow what you suppose to be your pride; it really is a false sense of dignity. Make a simple beginning in the university of experience by learning with experiments what constitutes a "story" and by drudging with pencil and typewriter to put that "story" into professional manuscript form. Get the right pictures for it; then ship it off to market. If the first choice of markets rejects you, try the second, the third, fourth, fifth and sixth—even unto the ninety-and-ninth.

Few beginners have even a dim notion of the great variety of markets that exist for free lance contributions. There are countless trade publications, newspaper syndicates, class journals, "house organs," and magazines devoted to highly specialized interests. Nearly all of these publications are eager to buy matter of interest to their particular circles of readers. Every business, every profession, every trade, every hobby has its mouthpiece.

Remember this when you are a beginner and the "big magazines" of general circulation are rejecting your manuscripts with a clock-like regularity which drives you almost to despair. Try your 'prentice hand on contributions to the smaller publications. That is the surest way to "learn while you earn" in free lancing. These humble markets need not cause you to sneer—particularly if you happen to be a humble beginner.

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Every laboratory experiment in manuscript writing and marketing, though it be only a description of a shop window for a dry goods trade paper, or an interview with a boss plumber for the *Gas Fitter's Gazette*, will furnish you with experience in your own trade, and set you ahead a step on the long road that leads to the most desirable acceptances. The one thing to watch zealously is your own development, to make sure that you do not too soon content yourself with achievements beneath your capabilities. Start with the little magazines, but keep attempting to attain the more

difficult goals.

Meanwhile, you need not apologize to any one for the nature of your work, so long as it is honest reporting and all as well written as you know how to make it. Stevenson, one of the most conscientious of literary artists, declared in a "Letter to a Young Gentleman Who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art," that "the first duty in this world is for a man to pay his way," and this is one of your confessed purposes while you are serving this kind of journalistic apprenticeship.

Until he arrives, the novice must, indeed, unless he be exceptionally gifted, "pay assiduous court to the bourgeois who carries the purse. And if in the course of these capitulations he shall falsify his talent, it can never have been a strong one, and he will have preserved a better thing than talent—character. Or if he be of a mind so independent that he cannot stoop to this necessity, one course is yet open: he can desist from art, and follow some more manly way of life." [Pg 82]

In short, so long as you *keep moving* toward something worth attaining, there is nothing to worry about but how to keep from relapsing into smugness or idleness. The besetting temptation of the free lance is to pamper himself. He is his own boss, can sleep as late as he likes, go where he pleases and quit work when the temptation seizes him. As a result, he usually babies himself and turns out much less work than he might safely attempt without in the least endangering his health.

When he finds out later how assiduously some of the best known of our authors keep at their desks he becomes a little ashamed of himself. Though they may not work, on the average, as long hours as the business man, they toil far harder, and usually with few of the interruptions and relaxations from the job that the business man is allowed. Four or five hours of intense application a day stands for a great deal more expenditure of energy and thought than eight or nine hours broken up with periods when one's feet are literally or metaphorically on the desk and genial conversation is flowing. Most of the men and women who make a living out of free lancing earn every blessed cent of it; and the amount upon which they pay an income tax is, as a rule, proportioned rather justly to the amount of concentrated labor that they pour into the hopper of the copy mill. [Pg 83]

You who happen to have seen a successful free lance knock off work in mid-afternoon to play tennis, or to skim away toward the country club in his new motor car are too likely to exclaim that "his is the existence!" Forgetting, of course, the lonesome hours of more or less baffling effort that he spent that day upon a manuscript before he locked up his workshop. And the years he spent in drudgery, the bales of rejection slips he collected, the times that he had to pawn his watch and stick pin to buy a dinner or to pay the rent of a hall bedroom.

Young Gentlemen Who Propose to Embrace the Career of Art might be shocked to learn—though it would be all for their own good—that a great many writers who are generally regarded with envy for their "luck" take the pains to follow the market notes in the Authors' League *Bulletin*, the *Bookman* and the *Editor Magazine* with all the care of a contractor studying the latest news of building operations. Not only do these writers read the trade papers of their calling; they also, with considerable care, study the magazines to which they sell—or hope to sell—manuscripts. They do not nearly so often as the novice make the *faux pas* of offering an editor exactly the same sort of material that he already has printed in a recent or a current issue. They follow the new books. They keep card indexes on their unmarketed manuscripts, and toil on as much irksome office routine as a stock broker. A surprisingly large number of the "arrived" do not even hold themselves above keeping note books, or producing, chiefly for the beneficial exercise of it, essays, journals, descriptions, verse and fiction not meant to be offered for sale—solely copybook exercises, produced for self-improvement or to gratify an impulse toward non-commercial art. [Pg 84]

For instances I can name a fiction writer who turns often to the essay form, but never publishes this type of writing, and an editorial writer who, for the "fun of it" and the good he believes it does his style, composes every year a great deal of verse. A group of six Michigan writers publish their own magazine, a typewritten publication with a circulation of six.

These men are not content with their present achievements. They regard themselves always as students who must everlastingly keep trying more difficult tasks to insure a steady progress toward an unattainable goal. "Most of the studyin'," Abe Martin once observed, "is done after a feller gets out of college," and these gray-haired exemplars are—as all of us ought to be—still learning to write, and forever at the crossroads. [Pg 85]

FINIS

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IF YOU DON'T WRITE FICTION ***

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