

A CURE FOR AUTHORS

BY LOUIS SHERWIN

SCENE: *A street outside a studio not far from Gramercy Park. SAM and GEORGE emerge in a hurry and a gust of alcohol and tobacco fumes.*

SAM—Ouf! I hope to the good Lord Jehovah I don't see another painting for six months—and I don't care if I never see another painter.

GEORGE—Why, Sam? I like painters. I'd a damned sight sooner associate with them than with writers. They're so much better informed, and on a much wider range of subjects.

SAM—I don't think so. All they ever seem to talk about is their own rotten trade, and I'm sick to death of it.

GEORGE—My good fool, everybody talks shop. Even bartenders, who are unusually catholic in their conversation. But writers are impossible. They can't talk anything but shop. And always their own miserable little corner of the *bodega*. Besides, they're always jabbering about themselves when I want to discourse about me.

SAM—Well, I'll be fried in goose-grease if your painter friends are any better. You'd think civilization began and ended on their messy palettes.

GEORGE—On the contrary, I've found them singularly free from the egocentric absorption of us quill-driving gentry. Musicians are the only folk who equal our occupational monomania.

SAM—How about actors?

GEORGE—Don't be flippant—I'm discussing people. Most, no, I think *all* the painters of my acquaintance are not only articulate about their own craft—with a pretty good insight into sculpture and architecture as well—but can also converse

intelligently about music, languages, literature, baseball, dancing, box-fighting, the theatre and, above all, the one topic on which all men are fluent, women. You remember what Horace Walpole said: "At my table we always talk bawdy so that everybody can join in."

SAM—I've never seen a painter get a girl away from *me* yet. And I've seen several of them try.

GEORGE—Mm, yes, maybe. I've noticed you getting gosh-awful nervous whenever one of them asks a gal of yours to pose for him. Be that as it may, it stands to reason that painters should have a wider range than writers. Personally I consider them more literate. They are certainly more traveled. Oh, I know that since scribbling has become better paid many of us take an occasional dash abroad. That isn't traveling. The majority of painters have had to *live* abroad in order to learn their trade.

SAM—That's an exploded myth. There are good schools and teachers here now.

GEORGE—Even so, the man who hasn't studied the best canvases in Paris, Florence, Munich, Rome, Amsterdam, to say nothing of Madrid and London, must feel incomplete. You'll consequently find more of them able to talk at least one foreign tongue than you will among the ink-slingers.

SAM—I admit most writers don't even know English.

GEORGE—I'm not discussing newspaper men. For myself, as an erstwhile Englishman, I prefer the racy idiom of these United States. But that's not the question. The point is that the narrowness of most writers is as scandalous as the hats of

their wives. How many of them know anything about music? How many of them fail to make the most ludicrous blunders when they write about it? You may remember that when George Moore published "Evelyn Innes" it was almost sensational for a literary man to contrive a novel on the subject of music that was not downright idiotic. What musical tales can you recall, good or bad, prior to that? All I can think of were two of Balzac's worst, a third-rate opus called "The First Violin" by a Miss Fothergill, and "Knight Errant" by Edna Lyall, one of the scribbling dames who adorned Victorian literature in the pre-Marie Corelli days.

SAM—Now you're talking about the Dark Ages. Come down to modern times; be fair. If you're going to compare Michelangelo with Marie Corelli or Hall Caine of course you can prove that the painter's mind is superior.

GEORGE—I wasn't comparing them. I'm comparing the general run of men engaged in the pictorial and plastic arts with the general run of fairly successful writers. I admitted that the younger generation of the latter seem to be better informed than their forerunners. And if you try to throw Anatole France at my head I'll push you under that bus. Such as he are exceptions to everything. As a matter of fact, he was one of the few men, regardless of occupation, supposed to have "absolute" taste, if there is such an animal. His collection of beautiful things was priceless. I'm told that H. G. Wells, curiously enough, is another. Arnold Bennett, also, but that's not so surprising. And Shaw is well informed about all the arts. Of course, his taste is uneven and he is always making ludicrous breaks—as he did when he picked poor Henry Arthur Jones and Brioux as important playwrights.

SAM—Right you are, for once. But what does that prove?

GEORGE—Simply that you've got to exclude authors of the front rank from the argument. To do me justice, I didn't set out to prove anything. I was merely ex-

pressing a preference—or perhaps rather a prejudice, which is more enjoyable.

SAM—Why this fool prejudice against men of your own craft?

GEORGE—They make me sick.

SAM—That's not even a prejudice, that's an affliction.

GEORGE—*They* are an affliction, if you like. The apes always pick on *me* when they want to back somebody into a corner and tell him how good they are. Besides, you know how I hate to lose things. The Winter I went around in scribbling circles two years ago I had more belongings stolen from me than in four years of Hollywood.

SAM—Go on! You never had anything swiped at *my* house.

GEORGE—Two of the best walking-sticks that were ever given to me and at least three mufflers. Not to mention the crummy cap that was left me in place of a brand new Borsalino. And it was at your house that a gallant young Southern *literatorus* wanted to fight Ben de Casseres because he wouldn't admit that American womanhood was the noblest work of God, or that O. Henry was a great writer,—or something.

SAM—Oh well, Southerners! That lout wasn't invited, to tell the truth. I think Burton Rascoe brought him. But you're not trying to tell me there are no bounders among painters, I hope.

GEORGE—On the contrary, they are some of the most amusing specimens of the guild. But you are forcing me to prove a point and formulate an idea that I hadn't the slightest intention of attempting when we began this fracas. Come to think of it, it is inevitable that painters should have saner, better balanced, more disciplined minds than writers.

SAM—Rats! Most painters I know are crazy.

GEORGE—You're thinking of Gauguin and "The Moon and Sixpence." The so-called craziness of painters is just external and superficial. What you mean is that some of them are irascible and eccentric of

manner. Their customers expect it of them. The sad truth is that the most impossible human being in the world to live with is a writer.

SAM [*wincing*].—Now you're talking like a wife. But, for the sake of argument, how do you make out the famous inevitability of a painter's superiority?

GEORGE—Because he has to be not only an artist but an artisan. He has to be skilful with his hands. So does a sculptor. Almost all writers are positive dubs with their hands. They can't even operate a typewriter well, and their penmanship is abominable. The loons pride themselves on it.

SAM—Now, that's rot.

GEORGE—It's not rot. I'm one of them—so are you. Skill with the hands has a definite effect on the workings of the brain. Every man ought to be able to do something with his fingers. Observe the sureness of attack in the few of us who know how to do something beside write. McFee, for instance. A marine engineer, and a damned good one. Conrad, a master navigator. Jim Huneker, a pianist of no mean order. Joe Hergesheimer, a painter. Thackeray, a caricaturist of considerable skill. They bring to writing a quality of precision and incisiveness that the ordinary writer, who can do nothing but string words together, is conspicuously without.

SAM—Are you trying to tell me that a man should scatter his energies instead of concentrating?

GEORGE—I'm trying to tell you that the man who uses his hands merely to hoist victuals and drink has foregone a valuable faculty—valuable to his brain.

SAM—To hear you babble one would think the best way to become a writer is to begin life as a paper-hanger.

GEORGE—Most of us, my lad, should not only begin but end as paper-hangers. But the principal reason why I always feel respectful towards even a mediocre painter is that I never know when he isn't going to take it into his head to take up writing and beat my head off at my own trade.

SAM—Speaking for yourself, aren't you?

GEORGE—And quite a host of others.

SAM—What are you getting at now?

GEORGE—Where's your memory? It seems almost too obvious to remind you that the sonnets which Mr. Buonarroti contrived after he was sixty years old have been compared to Shakespeare's, or that El Greco's treatises were considered masterly. Of course anybody can remember Cellini. But I would call to the relics of your mind the case of Aubrey Beardsley who, on a challenge from Oscar Wilde, produced without effort some brilliant conceits written in modish Eighteenth Century English. I've mentioned Joe Hergesheimer. And Joseph Pennell's articles I considered most amusing. Have you heard of William Blake? Of Dante Gabriel Rossetti? Of a once fashionable contriver of portraits named Joshua Reynolds?

SAM—Not as a writer.

GEORGE—His "Discourses" were so lucid and of such excellent diction that Samuel Johnson was accused of having written them. The old grampus replied: "Sir Joshua, sir, would as soon get me to paint for him as to write for him." Then, who was the real author of Wilde's literary style? And of most of his more celebrated nifties?

SAM—Whistler, of course. But he was a feeble painter. Even painters admit today that Ruskin was right.

GEORGE—They admit nothing of the sort. What they say is that, so far from being a "pot of paint flung in the public face" his pictures were so thin that in a few years they'll be invisible. But, as Bob Chanler said tonight, Whistler was not so much a painter as a great decorator and lithographer. Moreover, don't forget his pastels and his etchings. At any rate, he helps to prove my point. Why, you and I know numbers of minor artists and illustrators who can throw their palettes down at a moment's notice and turn out a readable essay. I read a book review the other day by Ralph Barton that made me envious. Penrhyn Stanlaws has written a one-

act play that could become an ideal libretto for an American opera. I tell you, Sam, the men of paint take the conceit out of me as a writer. The list could be lengthened indefinitely. And will you kindly inform me how many of our craft can even draw a picture of a dog chasing a cat that will amuse the children? As for their becoming painters—even bad painters—I would as soon expect to meet a preacher who was a gentleman or a *militaire* who was intelligent.

SAM—Then what, if anything, do you propose? That a lad who wants to write shall qualify by first obtaining a card in the carpenters' union?

GEORGE—Damn good idea. How did you ever think of it?

SAM—It's not my idea, it's a *reductio ad absurdum* of your blatherings. To carry it out logically, after a day's work at the bench, how is this bright lad to have enough energy left to write with?

GEORGE—Well, look at James Stevens, the fellow who wrote "Paul Bunyan."

And again I have to remind you of McFee.

SAM—Exceptions, to use your own dialectic. You poor mule, have you no realization of human nature? Don't you see that most of them who begin as carpenters or any other mechanics will become caught up in their trade or bored with it or, at best, graduate into contractors?

GEORGE—Providing they have enough intelligence, you might add. All right, so much the better. To hell with them. Any process that weeds out thousands of scribbling dubs should be welcome. Those that survive will be a vast improvement on the herd now marring white paper.

SAM—As a matter of fact, any process that would reduce the ghastly torrent of printed stuff that floods the world not only should but would be welcome. But I've a better idea than yours. Why not make the writing of books a capital offense?

GEORGE—Sam, you've hit it. Anything you said after that would be an anticlimax. This is where I leave you.

SAM—Thank you! Good-night.

CLINICAL NOTES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

Psycho-Osteopathy.—It is passing strange that the moral police of the country have thus far overlooked those chiropractors of the subconscious who begin to flourish in every community that boasts so much as a brick railroad station and a gilt movie parlor, and whose occult enterprises constitute what is undoubtedly one of the high-voltage engines of sinfulness amongst us. I allude, of course, to the profession of psychoanalysis, an art that has summoned to it as professors such a body of quacks and charlatans as has not been heard of since Christian Science first got under full steam. There are, plainly enough, a few professional practitioners of the Freudian pathology who are competent men, but the great majority of fellows that one finds ploughing the field in search of easy pickings are simply so many illicit emotion plumbers, as devious and crooked as their colleagues in the gold brick, shell game and oil stock businesses.

The Freud-Jung-Adler psycho-pathological science has gradually passed out of the hands of those best fitted to understand and further interpret it—of those for whom it was designed—and has become simply a playing-ground for shrewd mountebanks. The latter have had an easy time of it, as the rank and file of half-wits have assimilated only the superficial elements of the doctrines and are hence ready and eager to swallow at one gulp anything that is told them. Many of these mountebanks do no actual harm, as their activities are confined to such absurdities as the confection of novels in which a bull-fighter afraid of cows is cured of his fear complex by being forced to eat a two-foot rump steak, and German moving pictures in which phallic symbolism is subtly indicated by a flash

of the Kochelbräu chimney. But there are others, and they outnumber the rest by twenty to one, who are breaking up more homes, assisting more greatly in the spread of muco-purulent inflammation and raising more hell generally than all the whiskey ever made in Kentucky or all the literature ever produced in France. I allude, it must be obvious, to the women's club lecturers and, more especially and directly, to those doctors and dentists who have lost their licenses and set up shop in the side-streets as psychoanalysts, and to the considerable company of fortune-tellers, osteopaths, phrenologists and Italian counts who, observing the ample supply of impressionable suckers, have closed their old places of business, sprouted whiskers and followed suit.

The procedure of this light-fingered gentry is simple. The women's clubs, to begin at the beginning, have long since tired of sitting through lectures on Jacob Wassermann under the delusion that it was August the orator on the platform was going to talk about. They have rebelled, as well, against sitting through two-hour lectures on Cabell for a measly five minutes confidential disquisition on the nature of Jurgen's implements of war. Deeply as it pains me to say it, it yet has always been plain to anyone acquainted with these women's clubs that what they really wanted was a little hot stuff carefully and politely wrapped in a literary, philosophical or scientific cloak, and that the payment of dues always fell off alarmingly when the lecturers engaged by the secretaries did not come up to expectations. These secretaries, who are customarily the only women in the clubs who get paid for their services, were not long in seeing