

HOW TO WRITE A SHORT STORY.

A SYMPOSIUM.

I.

BY ROBERT BARR, AUTHOR OF "A
WOMAN INTERVENES," ETC.

There was a man once who, wishing to engage a coachman, took the applicants for that position to a road bordering a cliff, so that each might show how near he could drive to the edge with safety. One competitor brought the wheels of his vehicle within a foot of the precipice; another had nine inches margin; a third, six inches; while another daring individual left barely an inch between himself and destruction. The final aspirant, however, crossed to the other side of the road, and drove as far from the precipice as possible, and him the man engaged as coachman.

I don't know that this fable has any direct application to what I am about to say concerning short stories, but it came into my mind on reading the comment of an editor on a short story I have written, and which I believe appears in *The Temple Magazine* for March. The editor wrote: "It occurs to me that your story ends rather too abruptly. Will you pardon my suggesting this, and will you see whether another hundred words added to the proofs would not improve it somewhat?"

Now, I leave it to any sensible author, in a fair way of trade, if the suggestion that his story *can* be improved does not come upon him with a shock of surprise. Nevertheless, I gave what time I possessed to the problem, and after mature deliberation admit the story may be strengthened, but not by lengthening it. My contract was to get those two young people over the border safely, and that done, my task ended; yet must I go maundering on telling what became of the innkeeper, which had nothing to do with the story; therefore, cut a hundred words off, Mr. Editor, if you like; but any addition to the narrative, it seems to me, would make it worse than it now is.

I think a rightly constructed short story should always allow the reader's imagination to come to the aid of the

author. I am myself thoroughly convinced that those two young people married each other, and doubtless lived happily, in less tumultuous lands than France, ever afterward; but I submit that my commission extended not so far as that. I saw them secure across the boundary, and after that, God bless you both! My undertaking was to save their necks from the sharp blade of the guillotine by whatever means was practicable, and if, afterward, they threw their arms round the spot where the axe might have fallen, that was not my affair, so I turned my back and looked the other way—an action which, I doubt not, all true lovers will commend.

I think it will be generally admitted that up to a few short years ago the English storyteller was outdistanced by his brother of France or of America. If I were put to it to find an English writing compeer of Guy de Maupassant, I should have to go to California and select Ambrose Bierce. America has been particularly notable in her short stories, from the time of Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe to the to-day of Howells, Stockton, Aldrich, and Henry James. It would be difficult to find the equal in ingenious short stories of *Margory Daw*, by T. B. Aldrich, or *The Lady or the Tiger*, by Frank Stockton; while as far as serious short stories are concerned, *A Man without a Country*, by the Rev. Edward E. Hale, and some of the short stories by Mary E. Wilkins, reach a very high level.

I take it that the reason of this discrepancy is because the Englishman has been hampered by tradition, while the Frenchman and American have not. Up to a very recent date a story of less or more than six thousand words was hardly marketable in England. I have in my possession a letter written by the editor of a first-class London periodical to whom I sent a story of two thousand four hundred words. The editor wrote that he was pleased with the story, and that if I would make it six thousand words in length he would take it.

It would have been an easy matter to have padded the effort several hundred

per cent., with the result of spoiling the story, but much as I desired to appear in that celebrated journal—for I was young then—I had the temerity to point out to the editor that this was a two-thousand-four-hundred word idea, and not a six-thousand-word idea; whereupon he promptly returned the manuscript for my cheek.

I am pleased to see that the younger periodicals are driving from the field the stodgy old magazines that have done so much to handicap the English writer of short stories, and so we may look upon the six-thousand-word tradition as sadly crippled, if it is not yet dead. But the tradition is still rampant in England, and nowhere else, in other fields of writing industry. The Englishman dearly loves to have things cut into lengths for him. In the sixpenny reviews you will find articles all of a size, while in the great dailies, I suppose the heavens would fall if the leading article were more than an exact column in length; therefore a ten-line idea has to be rolled exceedingly thin to make it run to a column of space. Then among the horrors of London is the "turn-over" in some of the evening papers. I often picture to myself the unfortunate wretches who labour upon these deplorable articles. They must toil away, piling word on word, till they slop over the leaf, and then their task is ended.

The body of French and American short-story writers is largely recruited from the brilliant young men of the press; but if you put upon young men the iron fetters which English newspaper work imposes, they soon become fit for nothing else than the production of stories six thousand words in length, to the letter.

Five years ago the editor of a magazine sent me a note asking me to write for him a five-thousand-word story. I promised to do so as soon as a five-thousand-word idea came to me. He wrote frequently for that story during the first three years, but lately he seems to have given it up. He is not more discouraged than I am: he might as well have expected a man to eat an eight-course dinner with a four-course appetite. To my sorrow, I haven't met with a five-thousand-word idea since 1891.

It seems to me that a short-story writer should act, metaphorically, like this—he should put his idea for a story into

one cup of a pair of balances, then into the other he should deal out his words; five hundred; a thousand; two thousand; three thousand; as the case may be—and when the number of words thus paid in, causes the beam to rise on which his idea hangs, then is his story finished. If he puts a word more or less, he is doing false work.

I have, finally, a serious complaint to make against the English reader of short stories. He insists upon being fed with a spoon. He wants all the goods in the shop window ticketed with the price in plain figures. I think the reader should use a little intellect in reading a story, just as the author is supposed to use a great deal in the writing of it. While editor of a popular magazine, I have frequently been reluctantly compelled to refuse my own stories, because certain points in them were hinted at rather than fully expressed, and I knew the British public would stand no nonsense of that sort. The public wants the trick done in full view, and will have no juggling with the hands behind the back.

I often think there was much worldly wisdom in a remark the late Captain Mayne Reid once made to me. "Never surprise the British public, my boy," he said; "they don't like it. If you arrange a pail of water above a door so that when an obnoxious boy enters the room the water will come down upon him, take your readers fully into your confidence long before the deed is done. Let them help you to tie up the pail, then they will chuckle all through the chapter as the unfortunate lad approaches his fate, and when he is finally deluged they will roar with delight and cry, 'Now he has got his dose!'"

I believe if I had accepted this advice, I might have been a passably popular short-story writer by this time.

In a recent book, the name of which I shall not mention, for I cannot conscientiously recommend it to the gentle reader, dealing, as it does, with envy, malice, and all uncharitableness, I endeavoured to give a series of stories told without a superfluous word, and in the writing of this book I had a model. Our world has been a going concern too long for any effort to claim originality. My model is Euclid, whose justly celebrated book of short stories, entitled *The Elements of Geometry*, will live when most of us who are scribbling

to-day are forgotten. Euclid lays down his plot, sets instantly to work at its development, letting no incident creep in that does not bear relation to the climax, using no unnecessary word, always keeping his one end in view, and the moment he reaches the culmination he stops. My own book, based on this model, was reviewed at some length by the critic of one of the sixpenny reviews. Now, one may perhaps be justified in expecting that a man who is paid for giving his estimate of stories will peruse them with more care than one who buys the book and reads them for nothing; yet this critic, although highly commending the book, and desiring not only to be just but generous to the author, selects two stories, the first and the last in the volume, and in each case completely misses the point on which each story hinges. The first is an unpleasant story about a man and his wife, who hate each other so thoroughly that each resolves to murder the other—the man by brutally flinging his wife over a precipice in Switzerland; the woman by flinging herself over the same precipice under circumstances that will convict her husband of her murder. The story hinges on the fact that neither suspects the other of murderous thoughts, and this, so far as the woman is concerned, is shown by her last words, "I know there is no thought of murder in your heart, but there is in mine;" yet the critic says, "In 'An Alpine Divorce' we have a wife who divines that her husband means to throw her over a precipice."

In the second story are a Russian wife, a French husband, and a French girl, who is the wife's rival. They are seated together at lunch in a room belonging to the wife. The Russian has saturated the carpet and walls of the room with naphtha, which, as every one knows, is a volatile substance, and when so used would at once fill the room with an inflammable gas ready to destroy all within if a match were struck. The cause of the final catastrophe is hinted at in the conversation between husband and wife:

"What penetrating smell is this that fills the room?" asked Caspiller.

"It is nothing," replied Valdoreme, speaking for the first time since they had sat down. "It is only naphtha. I have had the room cleaned with it."

The critic, speaking of this story, says: "'Purification' turns upon the revenge of a Russian wife upon her rival, which she secures by the means of an explosive cigarette."

These instances, and other indications similar to them, lead me to the opinion that if a man wishes to be successful as a short-story writer he must lay it on with a trowel. If he is going to consume his characters with naphtha, he must state the number of gallons used and the method of its application. All of which goes to show that that eminent writer of romance, Euclid, is an unsafe model for the modern short-story writer to follow.

II.

By HAROLD FREDERIC, AUTHOR OF "THE DAMNATION OF THERON WARE," ETC.

I don't know that I have anything luminous to offer in comment upon the sprightly remarks of my dear friend Robert Barr. Here, as everywhere else, what he says is all his own. When I listen to him, my delight in the direct and smashing way in which he goes at things—the sense of charm that I get from his methods of debate, from his forms of expression, from the man himself—are so great that I have never formed the habit of regarding critically the substance of his propositions. Moreover, he is a captain among wags. How can even the editors be sure that he is not joking at the present moment?

Apparently, his general point is that a short story should be short; in particular, he insists that the author should be the judge of its size, and that in deciding upon this, he should consider nothing save the horse-power capacity, so to speak, of the idea, otherwise the engines which he puts inside the story.

This seems all to be sound enough, so far as it goes. But when you come to details, I do not see just how he fits his illustrations and his deductions together. He is of opinion, again I say apparently, that six thousand words is too much for a short story: in his own practice, he has for five years kept himself well within the limit of five thousand. But of the "short stories" which he selects as models of their kind, Mr. Aldrich's *Marjory Daw* and Mr. Hale's *A Man without a Country* (that is to say, two out of his three examples) are sure-