



O. HENRY'S FAVOURITE PORTRAIT

to be affable: "What nice blotters these are! One can't get them at the stationers—they never have anything but great big sheets that you have to cut into pieces." Whereupon I observed some commotion in the rear of the shop, and presently the proprietor appeared. "Mrs. Watts, isn't it?" "Yes." "Well now, Mrs. Watts, I just want to say, you take all of those blotters you want, and any time you're passing, stop in, and get blotters whenever you need them. Anybody that does all the writing you do, must need blotters!"

However, I grieve to say this generous gentleman has gone into bankruptcy since. The business of supplying blotters free as air to literary celebrities was too much for him. The last person from whom I got a kind word was my dressmaker. She says she's going to read *Nathan Burke*; and I suppose she must be reading it, because she's put me off several times lately. She inquired what time in the day I did my work, volunteering the information that she did all her designing in the evenings—"after the day's work is all over, you know, I wouldn't feel my mind free to create, if I was worrying about it all during my fittings. Sometimes I design a little Sunday, too, if I get an idea. It's best if you get an idea to go right ahead and develop it, don't you think so?" I told her that was exactly the way

I worked, and we looked at each other quite soulfully. *Arcades ambo!*

It is time, I think, to use one of those over-worked blotters.

The very talented writer of short stories, the creator of Jefferson Peters, of "Beelzebub" Blythe, of Johnnie Atwood, of Colonel Telfair, of Jimmie Valentine, of "Sham-

O. Henry

rock" Clancy, of Willie Robbins, and a score—nay—ten score more—who wrote under the pseudonym of O. Henry, and whose real name was William Sidney Porter, died in New York on the 5th of last month in the forty-fourth year of his age. He had for some time been an exceedingly sick man, but he retained his consciousness to the last. Just before the end came he asked that the curtains of the room be raised. "Because," he whispered with a smile, "I don't want to go home in the dark."

It is somewhat difficult now to appraise Mr. Porter's work in its entirety, or to say what position he will hold twenty years hence. That position, we

think, will either be a very much higher one than the one he occupied in those last years of his life, when he was in the full flush of success and recognition, or else he will be almost entirely forgotten. So much of his work depended upon the mood of the moment, the latest bit of catchy slang, the week's sensation at Washington or Cairo or Berlin. To follow him always one has to be an assiduous newspaper reader, and to know all the moods and phases of the Wonderful Bagdad on the Hudson that was so near his heart. To illustrate how much depended on timeliness, let us take one of the most characteristic of his stories. "The Rose of Dixie" tells of an old Southern colonel who edited a magazine that was of the South and was exclusively for the South's "fair daughters and brave sons." Sidney Porter was himself a Southerner, just as Alphonse Daudet was a Southern Frenchman. Like Daudet, Porter loved the South, but while loving, delighted in chastising it. "The Rose of Dixie," limited by the sectional prejudices of Colonel Telfair, is far from being a success, and at the suggestion of some of the stockholders a circulation booster by the name of Thacker visits the office to offer some very radical remedies. The Colonel rejects the proffered assistance but hints mysteriously at a wonderful article that he is considering, an article that discusses every phase of human life wisely, calmly and equitably—in short, apparently the most amazing article ever penned. His only hesitation is that he has not yet sufficient information about the author to give his work publicity in the magazine. We shall not attempt to tell the tale. What decision the Colonel finally reaches will be found in the story itself. It depends for its effect upon typography. But the point that we wish to make is that this tale, so uproariously humorous at the moment of its publication, would have been flatly unintelligible had it been written ten years before, and will have probably very little meaning to the readers of twenty years hence. To a lesser degree this is so of most of what O. Henry has written.

For years every book of his stories has been eagerly seized and quickly read. He has never exactly set banquets before us, after the fashion of the good Dumas, but what delightful titbits he has provided for the literary appetite! Then, too, his first book, *Cabbages and Kings*, was so cleverly worked into an entity that it might reasonably be regarded as a very satisfactory course dinner. And the best of his stories is that we not only enjoy them ourselves but that they are the kind that we delight in retelling verbally for the benefit of our friends. On numerous occasions we have sat in company, made up for the most part of professional writing men, and every man has hastened to tell his own particular favourite O. Henry story. "Do you remember the time that Jeff Peters and his partner go after the Modern Agriculturist, and where they decide that only one shall undertake the work because for two to go would be as unfair as for Roosevelt to use two hands to strangle a grizzly?" "Do you recall the millionaire painter who fell in love with the girl behind the glove counter and who was rejected because she thought that his word picture of Venice and Egypt and India meant a proposal that she marry him and that they go to Coney Island on their honeymoon?" "But let me tell you the story of 'The Shamrock and the Palm and how Clancy got even with the Central American General who had put him to work on the railroad instead of giving him the desired opportunity to liberate a nation from the poisonous breath of a tyrant's clutch.'"

Just before he died O. Henry was planning to write his first long novel. He had, we understand, finished just eight pages of it in manuscript. What he had in mind is indicated in the following unfinished letter:

MY DEAR MR. —: My idea is to write the story of a man—an individual, not a type—but a man who, at the same time, I want to represent a "human nature type," if such a person could exist. The story will teach no lesson, inculcate no moral, advance no theory.

I want it to be something that it won't or can't be—but as near as I can make it—the TRUE record of a man's thoughts, his descrip-

We owe a personal debt to O. Henry, and are in a mood to express appreciation.

tion of his mischances and adventures, his *TRUE* opinions of life as he has seen it and his *absolutely honest* deductions, comments and views upon the different phases of life that he passes through.

I do not remember ever having read an autobiography, a biography or a piece of fiction that told the *TRUTH*. Of course, I have read stuff such as Rousseau and Zola and George Moore and various memoirs that were supposed to be window-panes in their respective breasts; but, mostly, all of them were either liars, actors or posers. (Of course, I'm not trying to belittle the greatness of their literary expression.)

All of us have to be prevaricators, hypocrites and liars every day of our lives; otherwise the social structure would fall into pieces the first day. We must act in one another's presence just as we must wear clothes. It is for the best.

The trouble about writing the truth has been that the writers have kept in their minds one or another or all of three thoughts that made a handicap—they were trying either to do a piece of immortal literature, or to shock the public or to please editors. Some of them succeeded in all three, but they did not write the *truth*. Most autobiographies are insincere from beginning to end, and about the only chance for the truth to be told is in fiction.

It is well understood that "all the truth" cannot be told in print—but how about "nothing but the truth?" That's what I want to do.

I want the man who is telling the story to tell it—not as he would to a reading public or to a confessor—but something in this way. Suppose he were marooned on an island in mid-ocean with no hope of ever being rescued; and, in order to pass away some of the time he should tell a story *to himself*, embodying his adventure and experiences and opinions. Having a certain respect for himself (let us hope) he would leave out the "realism" that he would have no chance of selling in the market; he would omit the lies and self-conscious poses, and would turn out to his one auditor something real and true.

So, as truth is not to be found in history, autobiography, press reports (nor at the bottom of an H. G. Wells), let us hope that fiction may be the means of bringing out a few grains of it.

The "hero" of the story will be a man born and "raised" in a somnolent little Southern town. His education is about a common school one, but he learns afterward from reading and

life. I'm going to try to give him a "style" in narrative and speech—the best I've got in the shop. I'm going to take him through all the main phases of life—wild adventure, city, society, something of the "under world" and among many characteristic planes of the phases. I want him to acquire all the sophistication that experience can give him, and always preserve his individual honest *human* view and have him tell the *truth* about everything.

It is time to say now, that by the "truth" I don't mean the objectionable stuff that so often masquerades under the name. I mean true opinions, a true estimate of all things as they seem to the "hero." If you find a word or a suggestive line or sentence in any of my copy, you cut it out and deduct it from the royalties.

I want this man to be a man of natural intelligence, of individual character, absolutely open and broad minded; and show how the Creator of the earth has got him in a rat trap—put him here "willy nilly" (you know the Omar verse); and then I want to show what he does about it. There is always the eternal question from the Primal Source—"What are you going to do about it?"

Please don't think for the half of a moment that the story is going to be anything of an autobiography. I have a distinct character in my mind for the part, and he does not at all—

One evening a few years ago Brander Matthews and Francis Wilson were dining together at the Players Club of New York, when the former made the suggestion that they write a letter to Mark Twain. "But," objected Mr. Wilson, "we don't know where he is," for it was at a time when Mr. Clemens was away travelling somewhere. "Oh," said Professor Matthews, "that does not make any difference. It is sure to find him. I think he is some place in Europe so we had better put on a five-cent stamp." So the two sat down and composed a letter which they addressed to:

MARK TWAIN,

GOD KNOWS WHERE.

Within three weeks they received a reply from Mr. Clemens which said briefly: "He did." The letter had been sent by the New York Post Office to Harper and Brothers; thence to Chatto and Windus