



W. D. HOWELLS

THERE was once an aged author, mainly a novelist, who lived in a dream of wide, if quiescent, recognition. He was fearful that modern editors and their public did not want him, and that the general reader's generalship did not extend to his novels and other things, but he soothed his sense of isolation with the belief that if people did not know his work they knew about it. He had abundant proofs of this, which need not be alleged here, but which may be readily imagined by those who knew that he had published, in former times, some hundred books, big and little. His name was in all the encyclopedias, anthologies, and Who's Whoses, with the titles of many of his many works, and he rested fairly content with the state unto which he seemed to be finally called, when one day the morning's mail brought him a letter which cruelly burst his dream of wide, if quiescent, recognition. In the superscription his name was correctly spelled, and the address was without that postal evidence of wandering from town to country which his letters often bore. When opened, it proved to have come from a "Home Correspondence School," for the culture of students in the arts and sciences, and within he was informed in very neat typewriting that there had just come to his correspondent's desk a letter from a pupil of one of the school's instructors, bearing the glad news that the writer had just sold to a leading magazine a short story framed upon this instructor's theory of short-story writing and the teachings of his forty-lesson course. "At the same time," the Home Correspondent added, there had come "a letter from another pupil reporting

the sale of over thirty stories to various magazines. These things are of daily occurrence," the Home Correspondent remarked, and "Although you have not yet enrolled, I am taking it for granted that you are interested in keeping in touch with the progress that we are making, and I am hoping that we shall shortly have the pleasure of welcoming you to membership in our school. As a special midsummer inducement, I am pleased to renew our offer of our old rates, *provided your application is received on or before . . .* As you have doubtless noted, there are three courses in Story Writing outlined in our catalogue. I imagine that it is Professor Ampersand's regular forty-lesson course that you will probably wish to take. The introductory course is intended for young pupils and for those who are otherwise poorly prepared. Only a few of Professor Ampersand's pupils, even of those who are most successful in selling, take the advanced course, which is strictly post-graduate. The regular forty-lesson course is complete in itself. It will not only give you a mastery of every point of short-story technique, but your talent will be greatly cultivated and your selling ability tremendously increased. Beginning with about the fifth lesson, you will be occupied with the actual writing of stories or parts of stories."

The aged author's breath was quite taken away by an invitation which would have been so winning if it had been given to a novelist under his years and not widely recorded in the encyclopedias and anthologies, or formally known to the readers of polite literature, if he might believe the well-remembered

favorable notices of other times and the flattering returns of royalties from his publishers. Something better than his vanity, we hope, was wounded in him by that proposal of the Home Correspondent to renew the offer of those old rates for the regular forty-lesson course in short-story writing, which it was surmised he would wish to take. It is true that the proposal carried with it a brevet of eternal youth, in assuming that he was a beginner of fiction, but this could not soothe the pain it gave. Had he, then, been writing fifty or sixty years and piling story upon story so much in vain that he could be seriously offered a chance at that forty-lesson course as if he were starting in literary life? Or was it all a joke, a sorry joke, a bitter gibe at the cost of a dotard who had outlived himself? He had almost rather it were that; he would still, in that case, be well enough remembered to form the target of mockery, and that would be better than oblivion.

After duly suffering in this question, he turned from it and began to wonder what that course of forty lessons for his instruction in short-story writing could be. If he were the beginner he was imagined, could he really learn a branch of the literary art from it? Would he profit by it in some such sort as the students who frequent the *atelier* of a great painter and draw from his model under his criticism of their sketches? The aged author did not quite see how the method could be applied to literary art; but he did not deny that it could; and he asked himself if the great Russian, French, Spanish, and Scandinavian writers of short stories had arrived at their primacy by such means. When he got to our own mastery in short stories he was lost in helpless doubt if Mary Wilkins Freeman, or Sarah Orne Jewett, or Miss Alice Brown, or Miss Edith Wyatt, or Bret Harte, or Aldrich, or Mr. G. W. Cable, or even Hawthorne or Poe, had formed themselves on some forty-lesson course in the art which they shone in. He was obliged in mere

fairness to reflect that these writers were all people of genius who had only to go to nature for their instruction, and to suppose that merely talented or merely commonplace people might very usefully or profitably take such a course.

The demand for short stories, he considered, was unlimited, and somehow the supply must be adequate. It was not to be supposed that it could be wholly met by people of genius, and there was no good reason why the less naturally gifted should not contribute to it from the overflowing yield of their skilled industry. The more the aged author considered the situation the more lenient he grew. The sting to his vanity abated; he no longer suffered from being taken for one of the undistinguished multitude of youth eager to prepare themselves for writing down to the level of the myriad public who asked nothing better than the commonplace of tales ten thousand times told. He would have computed the numbers of this populace if it had been within the scope of arithmetic or even algebra. When he tried, he ran into the figures of billions which the world war has cost our part in it, and he cheerfully relinquished the struggle, and acquiesced in the situation. He reflected that there need be nothing really new in the short stories produced for this myriad public, and little formally new. Nature would go on from generation to generation proffering novelty, but art, the art of the standardized short story did not need novelty, and any sort of originality would have revolted the standardized short-story public.

He put his painful question altogether aside and consented to rejoice in the short story written by writers of genius for readers of genius. He thought with rapture of how these short-story writers consented to treat only some theme which first entreated them from their observation or experience of life, and then wrought in the love of their art with a divine simplicity, trusting that wholly and solely for the effect of that beauty

which is truth. Of course we speak here of the masterpieces of the supreme artists, but all are artists who work in the imitation of nature, and of the school which exacts the appearance of life, but does not assume to teach it. There may be incident, or there may not be incident, but there must be character, there must be verisimilitude, fidelity to recognized or recognizable conditions. Here all schooling ends, except as it also exacts the utter avoidance of anything or everything like effort or straining.

A little before the aged author received that appeal to his latent youth and obscurity in the form of an invitation to enroll himself among the students of the forty-lesson course of short-story writing, he had been struck with a study of the short story much beyond the ordinary. This essay, as we made out, did not pretend to teach the art by the registration of certain principles, but invited the reader to its study by the analysis of some eminent examples illustrated by diagrams. The chief of these was Maupassant's famous story of "The Piece of String," which is almost as good as some of the greatest Russian or American short stories. There can hardly be a thing more touching, and it is of an entire decency very rare in the *chefs d'œuvre* of that master to whose mastery Tolstoy was willing to forgive many sins. Yet, shall we own to the ingenious analyst that the life of the thing seemed to have escaped in the course of his Twelve Analytical Steps, much as the famous Fourteen Points vanished in the final League of Nations? No one will learn to write great short stories by analyzing the short stories of Maupassant and imitating his method in the result, for no master of the art has any plan but to imitate nature, with an unconsciousness perhaps inconceivable to the analyst, but veritable all the same.

We were about to bid the lover of the art ambitious to excel in it, take the good old way which has been open from the first, and which ourselves pointed out for many years with an unswerving finger-

post. We were going to bid him "look into his heart and write," after looking all about him into the hearts of his neighbors and creating a life in art from the life common to himself and them, when there burst upon us from the managing editor of a neighboring periodical a cry which seemed the echo of our own voice from the corridors of time long past. This neighbor had apparently suffered intolerably from short stories mostly and almost solely about New York, and he shouted in a publicity-page of rare sincerity, "Why don't some of our promising new writers stay in their own home town and write about the people, the environment, and the atmosphere seen from their own front door? Why can't we get a story of the prairies, or the Mississippi River, or New Orleans, or Portland (Maine or Oregon, it doesn't matter which)? Why can't we get stories that reflect life in the thousands of cities and villages in the United States apart from New York City and Greenwich Village? We will welcome such stories—with good characterization and plots that contain action, but stories that, first of all, are representative of American life to-day."

Will the home-town writers respond to this outburst of anguished promise? We are sure they will wish to do so, but they will not make themselves heard if they have formed their vocal chords upon the methods which that Home Correspondent invited our aged author to embrace in the belief that he was a youthful writer in the first bloom of ambition. We would like, even in our doubt, to join our voice to that of the managing editor we have echoed here, and repeat the time-worn tenets of a creed where the only hope of salvation lies. "Life," we should like to say for the thousandth time, "is a very beautiful thing, even when it is very ugly, if it is made the stuff of art. There is no other stuff which will lastingly avail either the actual or the conjectured beginner—the youth of eighteen or the dotard of eighty. The life-stuff will avail not only the

earliest beginner, but the latest keep-onner, and we should say to the last what we say to the first if we could imagine him trying to open the vein of his shriveled invention. Either endeavorer must first make sure that he wishes to write a certain story, and it will be best for him to prefer the very simplest story. Do not let him try for the thing that will surprise the reader by its strangeness; the commonest thing will surprise the reader most, for in fiction the commonest thing is the rarest. Then let him seriously, prayerfully, question himself at each step of the experiment whether he really enjoys taking it. Do not let him think of an instant sale for his product. Probably, most probably, no editor will hasten to buy it, but will fondly delay and perhaps altogether forbear to buy, if he finds something good, something true in it, for he will perceive that it is not that trash demanded by the taste of the general, the universal, reader which his conscience occasionally keeps him from gratifying. His conscience will also keep this only too possible editor from praising the scanty worth of the work which comes to him. He will say to himself, "Here is a fellow, or a dear, who has something genuine in him or her, which will keep him or her in heart amidst the disappointment which I shall inflict, in withholding all encouragement. I will not encourage him or her; rather I will censure the work at certain points and he or she will divine from this that I think the thing worth while in other points. I will act the faithful part of that painter who most flattered his girl pupils when he made them cry, for then they knew that they had at least failed worthily. I need not be afraid of killing my contributor with unkindness; it is the breath of premature praise which blows out the vital spark."

The editor may be right or he may be

wrong in his theory; but in either case he will keep a good conscience, and his contributor will keep on contributing and working in the right way. There may be black moments when he or she will be tempted to join the army of trash-writers; but on trying to write trash he or she will find it impossible. They will have been born to write truth, and if they cannot help mixing some grains of it with the trash it will spoil the trash for the trash-lover. But in supposing this instance we would not shrink from facing a certain possibility. It is possible that the actual beginners of eight or eighteen will have grown eighty or eighty-eight before they have made a name in short-story writing; and the actual octogenarian who was invited to take that forty-lesson course by the Home Correspondent will have been dead at least half a century before he has the first short story, or part of a short story, accepted by our high-conscienced editor. Both the real and the unreal beginners must reflect that they were not born immortal; that they will only become so by taking the greatest pains, by going to the greatest trouble. They were born mortal, these truth-writers, just as the trash-writers who can never become immortal, no matter how incessant, how immeasurable their output of trash. In the mean while we do not deny that these may be having a very good time, so far as living in luxury and lolling in the highest-priced motors imply a good time, while the truth-writer beats on his way through life in a low-priced flivver which he drives himself, at his own risk and the risk of others. All the same, though he may not have a good time, he will have been or will be well on the way to the immortality open to the sage mistaken for a beginner in literature, the immortality open to us all if, when a man dies, he shall live again.

EDITOR'S DRAWER

BEING A LANDLORD

BY ALBERT BIGELOW PAINE

I KNEW I was going to be a landlord when our own landlord raised the rent. I said there were clearly two sides to this rent question, and the way to break even was to be on both of them. We would buy something tempting—tempting to a tenant—furnish it up a little to make it still more seductive, establish relations with the first desirable applicant, and forget care. When the annual boost came around we would pass it along to our tenant, without a murmur. It seemed the simplest thing in the world—we wondered why everybody hadn't thought of it. Of course it would require a bit of capital to start with—perhaps that fact had deterred some. Fortunately, we had our little bunch of savings in fluid form—in a savings-bank, I mean, where they could be drawn at any time. We would only have to make a first instalment and pay for the trifles of paint and paper. The rent would easily take care of future payments and interest. You see yourself it was a fine idea. Elizabeth and I could hardly sleep for discussing it.

Any doubts we may have had vanished when I consulted our real-estate man. He was enthusiastic over it. He said it solved the whole problem. It was one of those big revolutionary ideas, he said—so simple that nobody had thought of

it. It had come along at a psychological moment, too. Houses were renting like hot cakes, and he happened to have one for sale that was the very thing—handy to the station—small payment down—neat as a button. His car was at the door; he would take us to see the bargain.

It did seem like one. It was a pretty little bungalow affair, facing a sort of park, and it had handy-looking improvements, including a furnace that was set in a kind of sub-cellar—the agent said to more efficiently conserve and co-equalize the heat units,



IT WAS A PRETTY LITTLE BUNGALOW AFFAIR