

# The Secret

BY ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE

**M**Y friend, will you take me by the hand  
And refrain from making easy fun of me  
If I speak to you frankly and ramblingly of the confusions,  
(Mine and yours, both)  
The moral doubts, the personal fears, the chaos of purposes  
Which, for me at least, make the raucous music  
Which our day plays for us  
While we, with what dignity we can,  
Dance our ceremonious dance called the Dance of Death?

Today as I sit, quiet and brooding,  
Here on a high hill overlooking miles of May-time valley,  
And the beauty of the flowers is beginning again,  
And the loathsome tent-worms are, as in no year past,  
Destroying all that is fair, stripping the trees to winter nakedness—

Here I wonder whether my nightmares are merely the dreams  
of a weakling  
And whether stronger and nobler men than I see a different vision.

If I am to speak to you at all, my friend,  
It must be frankly.  
So I tell you in advance that I have a life-long Secret.  
It is deeply buried—and all my days, all these fifty-two years,  
I have tried to discover that Secret.  
For I do not know what it is:  
I merely know that it is there.  
Nothing in the outside world can attract my attention for an instant  
Unless it is in some way revelatory and symbolic of that Secret.  
Wars, revolutions, politics,  
Vast economic changes, tremendous scientific discoveries,  
Earthquakes and famines and royal marriages,  
These may come and go, leaving me unmoved and uninterested  
Unless they whisper to me something about my Secret.

My Secret concerns some profound enigma;  
It has to do with the nature of the heart of man  
And the conditions of his essential happiness.  
It is a thing wholly within, wholly private and of the lonely spirit;  
The changes of events are not of its world.  
Sometimes I almost find a clue to it  
In a book or a painting or the words of a friend;  
But still it eludes me.  
If I knew it, I would tell it to you with joy,  
In the hope that it would be your Secret, too,  
And that you would be happy to have your Secret made clear to you  
And to have it shared by another.  
But I do not know my Secret  
And it may be that I shall never discover it.

I wonder whether we of today are alone in our confusions?  
I wonder whether all people, always,  
Have not been ill at ease in the centuries into which they were born?  
Did not Walter Scott hunger for the Middle Ages,  
And did not William Blake lust for a Paradise  
Where there was one Serpent and one naked woman?  
And did not Goethe believe that the Greeks were a pleasant people?  
Are the confusions really worse today,  
Or is it merely that it is we who now suffer from them?  
The Thirty Years War could not have been a nice epoch, for quiet people;  
And there was a period, while Rome tottered,  
That could hardly have been reassuring to anyone except the Goths.

I suspect that I am not alone in my loneliness,  
And that many minds are asking the same questions that I ask,  
And that many eyes stare into the same vacancy that I see.  
The world is loud with the voices  
Of many persons who assert that they know everything;  
But there are also silent places  
Where unspoken questions hang quivering in the air.

I cannot disclose to you your Secret nor my own.  
But this I can say with certainty.—  
I beg you, my friend, to build up no wall  
Between yourself and other men  
Or between yourself and your Secret.  
To do so would be easier, perhaps happier,  
But it would not be wise.  
Neither from within nor from without can we accept final defeat.  
No, in spite of confusions—  
No, though all the confusions hurl themselves upon us in our weakest moment  
They shall not prevail.  
You have your Secret: follow it, discover it,  
Hold it sacred through all the clamors and all the silences.

For the voices of terror are with us,  
And who is so strong that he can hold himself unshaken by fear and pity  
When they speak?

I recall a rainy night, late, in New York.  
As I rode through the shiny black streets in my taxi  
I asked the driver questions, as I always do,  
About life and death and himself.

He had a dark, sensitive face.  
He said: "Me, mister? Yes, I'm an American.  
I was born on the East Side, and I haven't ever been  
More than twenty miles away from Times Square.  
You can see that I'm a Jew, can't you? But just the same I'm an American.  
And I tell you, mister, that there is no longer  
Any beauty or honor left in my country,  
And I wish that I were dead."

I could not answer.  
He left me at the door of my hotel  
And whirled away into the chaos of the night.

One evening in a charming dining-room  
Where twelve people were talking, over their food and wine,  
A lady said to me:  
"I don't know how these working-people  
Expect us to be able to give them employment  
If they keep on asking such ridiculous wages  
And if we have to pay such big income-taxes."  
I did not reply, for I knew that the lady owned acres of mills  
And hundreds of workingmen's houses; and my reflections were unpleasant.  
But perhaps I did her an injustice—for today  
She is penniless, and her two thousand mill-employees  
Stalk desperate in the silence of that mill-town—  
Except for a favored few, who are growing fat  
In the sunlight transmitted from Washington to sterling party-members.  
And one of my friends is battered into a pulp by the police  
Because he dared to say in Indiana  
That it is indecent to starve men and women and children  
Who work in factories.  
And the nations are arming for more carnage.  
And the rich men are scurrying about, predatory or frightened,

Like foxes or rabbits or wolves or monkeys.  
And no man who is both good and wise has yet spoken.

I, like you, my friend, see much—and am powerless.  
I see the desperate houses of coal-miners in Pennsylvania  
And the bleak homesteads of farmers in Iowa.  
I see the faces of hopeless men in the streets of New York  
And the faces of lazy men everywhere who are fattening on the  
nation, like tent-worms.

The politicians run about making noises like hollow gourds that  
have gall-stones inside them,  
And the wisdom of today is the manifest folly of tomorrow.  
I hear of a great hope in Russia, and also of a great despair.  
Echoes come to me of an ideal, and of a bloodthirsty tyranny.  
And my Secret has not spoken to me of these things,  
And I am without guidance, in a day of general darkness and  
mist.

An old farmer whom I know  
Was sitting quietly on his porch  
As I approached his house  
To ask if I could buy some milk from him.

I said: "Good evening, Mr. Denkmann!  
I suppose that you are taking a little rest  
After your hard day's work?"  
He looked up at me from filmed eyes  
That had seen eight decades of toil;  
He replied: "I do not work; I do not rest; I just wait."

I felt that if he would speak, he could tell me more of my  
Secret  
Than all the rest of them put together.  
But I was aware that Mr. Denkmann, like you and myself,  
Did not know his Secret.

It is because of this that many of us must move with timorous  
footsteps.

Men who have no undiscovered Secret in their hearts  
Can advance boldly into the world of action—  
Cheer-leaders who know not and care not what the cheering  
is for.

These are the great men  
Who deal with events as the blacksmith deals with iron.  
They look outward, they see the glowing metal on the anvil,  
They strike firmly and violently, and they see that the shape of  
the metal is changed.  
The delight of the powerful arm-muscles, the sense of dominat-  
ing the iron,  
These things are enough for outward-looking men.  
But for men who have an undiscovered Secret, they are not  
enough.

And such a man will sometimes look at the iron for a long time  
in silence  
And then turn away, unable to touch the metal until the full  
nature of his Secret shall become known to him.

And that is why a Secret is so perilous a companion;  
For until our Secret has spoken, we dare not speak.  
We do not know what it may reveal when it utters itself;  
And if we should have erred, in the meantime,  
Then when it spoke  
Our minds would be instantly blown into fragments  
Never recoverable.

If you, my friend, also have a Secret that will not yet speak  
to you,

Do not despair.  
Perhaps in the loneliness of some terrible midnight,  
Or in the freshness of some windy dawn upon the hills,  
Or in a quiet room where a friend takes your hand in compassion,  
Or perhaps in the crowded noise of a city street when you stare  
bewildered

Into the faces of hundreds of hurrying strangers—  
Perhaps in one of these places, sometime, somehow,  
Your Secret will suddenly face you with shining eyes  
And say: "Behold! I am I! Follow me!"

## THE EDITORS RECOMMEND FOR CHRISTMAS

### OLD JULES

By MARI SANDOZ. Little, Brown. \$3. The biography of a red-blooded Nebraska pioneer.  
Reviewed November 2.

### LIFE WITH FATHER

By CLARENCE DAY, JR. Knopf. \$2. Reminiscences of a lovable family tyrant.  
Reviewed August 3.

### HISTORY OF EUROPE: ANCIENT AND MEDIAEVAL

By H. A. L. FISHER. Houghton Mifflin. \$4. The first part of an extensive history by one of England's ablest historians.

### THE SEVEN PILLARS OF WISDOM

By T. E. LAWRENCE. Doubleday, Doran. \$5. "Revolt in the Desert" in unexpurgated form.  
Reviewed September 28.

### MY COUNTRY AND MY PEOPLE

By LIN YUTANG. Reynal & Hitchcock. \$3. A penetrating interpretation of Oriental civilization.  
Reviewed September 19.

### R. E. LEE

By DOUGLAS SOUTHALE FREE-MAN. Scribners. 4 vols. \$3.75 each. The work which this year won the Pulitzer Prize for biography.  
Reviewed March 23.

### THE THOUGHT AND CHARACTER OF WILLIAM JAMES

By RALPH BARTON PERRY. Little, Brown. 2 vols. \$12. Unpublished correspondence of the philosopher carried along in a biographical narrative.  
Reviewed November 30.

### PERSONAL HISTORY

By VINCENT SHEEAN. Doubleday, Doran. \$3. Vivid reminiscences of persons and places by a journalist and correspondent.  
Reviewed February 2.

### THE COLUMBIA ENCYCLOPEDIA

Edited by CLARKE F. ANSLEY. Columbia University Press. \$17.50. A first-aid reference work.  
Reviewed October 19.

### EARLY ONE MORNING IN THE SPRING

By WALTER DE LA MARE. Macmillan. \$5. Childhood in literature and life.  
Reviewed October 19.

### SHAKESPEARE'S IMAGERY

By CAROLINE SPURGEON. Macmillan. \$4.50. A study of the background of the poet's mind and the sources of his imagery.  
Reviewed November 23.

### WINTER DIARY

By MARK VAN DOREN. Macmillan. \$2.50. A narrative poem descriptive of New England winter, and other verse.  
Reviewed February 9.

### MURDER IN THE CATHEDRAL

By T. S. ELIOT. Harcourt, Brace. \$1.25. A poetic drama with Thomas à Becket for hero.  
Reviewed October 12.

### THREE PLAYS

By CLIFFORD ODETS. Random House. \$3. The class struggle cast into drama.

### PROLETARIAN LITERATURE IN THE UNITED STATES

Edited by GRANVILLE HICKS. International Publishers. \$2.50. An anthology of proletarian writing.

### RATS, LICE AND HISTORY

By HANS ZINSSER. Little, Brown. \$2.75. A study of typhus enlivened by comment on life and letters.  
Reviewed February 9.

### ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Edited by E. R. A. SELIGMAN. Macmillan. 15 vols. \$7.50 each. The definitive work in its field.  
Reviewed on page 38 of this issue.

### NORTH TO THE ORIENT

By ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH. Harcourt, Brace. \$2.50. A charming record of an important international flight.  
Reviewed August 17.

### THE TALE OF GENJI

By LADY MURASAKI. Houghton Mifflin. \$5. This classic of Japanese fiction in a two-volume edition.  
Reviewed November 16.

### VEIN OF IRON

By ELLEN GLASGOW. Harcourt, Brace. \$2.50. A novel of Virginians meeting adversity with courage.  
Reviewed August 31.

### NATIONAL VELVET

By ENID BAGNOLD. Morrow. \$2.50. Children and horse racing in delightful combination.  
Reviewed May 4.

### OF TIME AND THE RIVER

By THOMAS WOLFE. Scribners. \$3. More slabs hewn from the quarry of Mr. Wolfe's experience.  
Reviewed March 9.

### IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE

By SINCLAIR LEWIS. Doubleday, Doran. \$2.50. How fascism came to America.  
Reviewed October 19.

### ROAD OF AGES

By ROBERT NATHAN. Knopf. \$2.50. The Jews of the world on hegira to Asia.  
Reviewed February 2.

# First Aid to Authors

*THIS TRADE OF WRITING.* By Edward Weeks. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. (Atlantic Monthly Press). 1935. \$1.75.

Reviewed by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

I DON'T know whether there are sillier books on writers and writing than there are on painters and painting, carpenters and carpentry, trout-breeders and trout-breeding. But I've seen more of them.

Here, however, is something different—an intelligent, candid, and illuminating book on the writer's trade. Its manner is pleasantly casual rather than didactic, and there are few thunders from Sinai. But it contains, to my mind, a great deal of What The Young Writer Ought To Know—about himself, about his work, about his publisher, about his possible public. Let me qualify that, hastily—chiefly for the author's sake. Mr. Weeks already reads a million words a year and I don't wish to swell his pile of unsolicited manuscripts. "This Trade of Writing" displays no royal road—no magic secret. It will not teach you how to become Marcel Proust in six easy lessons. But it does contain a great deal of salutary, sensible, and witty advice, information, and comment about the trade of writing by an editor who knows his business and has been able to preserve his enthusiasms and his sense of humor, in spite of the vast spate of material, good, bad, and indifferent, that passes over any editorial desk in the course of a year.

It is professional advice—and I use the word professional in its best sense. Few beginning short-story-writers could fail to profit by the brief but cogent section called "Women and Short Stories"—and a good many poets with nothing in them but a goat-cry or a formless desire to write verse of the "I asked the moon for a silver penny" school would profit by reading "The Unsuspected Poet." Not that Mr. Weeks is either harsh or unappreciative. He is sensible—and how rare a quality! It is the sort of talk that the novice ought to be able to get from a good agent or a good publisher—and very often can't because agent and publisher, by the mere press of work, are too busy. And if the person-who-wants-to-write doesn't come out at the end of this book with a much sounder idea both of the problems that face every writer and the problems connected with the merchandising of writing, he must be remarkably insusceptible to the impact of words.

I am also glad to see Mr. Weeks's extremely sane discussion of censorship and his excellent and clear exposition of the problem of the lending libraries—a problem which grows in importance and which few enough authors and very few laymen realize. Nor can I omit mention of his final chapter, "The Three Crises." For

what he says there is true—though, on one point, I am more of a fatalist than Mr. Weeks and believe that, in general, an author produces what he has it in him to produce and can claim very little excuse, except death, for not producing it. But it is an essay which both authors and readers should read over. And it ought to give the average reader a better and clearer understanding of the way in which writing is done, and the way in which reputations grow and fade, than a great many more portentous and pretentious volumes.

I think, as I have said, that this book is a very valuable one for anybody who wants to write. It seems to me a very valuable one, as well, for anyone who

wants to know the truth, not the fiction, about writing and publishing in this Year of Our Lord. Prize-contests, agents, best-sellers, worst-sellers, methods of work from Balzac's Dominican robe to Edgar Wallace's staff of stenographers—they are all here. Mr. Weeks knows a lot about writing. And what he knows, he has put down with concision, wit, and sense. The whole book is as compact as a first-aid kit—and quite as indispensable. And there is one thing about it which Mr. Weeks may not have realized. A lot of writers who are asked for advice about the *modus operandi* of the trade are going to steal from this volume from now on. I know of one, already.

*As a poet, a novelist, and a short-story writer for the large circulation magazines, Stephen Vincent Benét has had wide experience of the problems of authors.*

## Symptoms of Something Serious

*MRS. ASTOR'S HORSE.* By Stanley Walker. New York: Frederick A. Stokes. 1935. \$3.

Reviewed by OGDEN NASH

HOORAY, hooray, for Stanley Walker! He came all the way to New York all the way from Texas, But he doesn't write with a drawl even though he may have a drawl as a talker, Oh, no, on the contrary, his pen simultaneously strikes the funny bone and the solar plexus.

Mr. Walker gained fame as the wizard of the N. Y. *Tribune*, with which is combined the *Herald*,

Because he was an anomaly, because he was not only brilliant, but also methodical, And his reputation as a giant among newspapermen will by his new book be enhanced rather than imperaled,  
Because it certainly is the all-wool 14-Karat sterling genuine odical.

Mr. Walker proves himself a veritable Abou Ben Adhem  
Because he loves his fellow men and loves them most when they are at their most delirious,  
Despite which his approach is as tough and nubbly as macadam,  
Because he realizes that the fellow men he is writing about are symptoms of something that may turn out to be serious.

Here are the practically unexpurgated stories of Daddy Browning and Earl Carroll and Aimée Semple MacPherson,  
Here are estimates from contented undertakers of how much it costs to give a prominent gangster a befitting funeral,  
Here is a warning of if you need to wash your hands in a Hollywood chateau what crimes may be committed against your dignity and person,  
Here is the lowdown on testimonials and whether they are or are not remuneral.

Here is Mae West, and the Entrepreneur of Demi-Monde Attractions who attempted to make the country cockroach conscious, and tea room salads,  
Here is Walter Winchell and his influence on society, and the *Morro Castle* souvenir hunters, and Bernarr Macfadden,  
Here is the reason you may no longer hear the merits of laxatives wafted over the air in hill billy ballads,  
Here is the story of an America some of whose citizens had a tendency to swing a little off center, and it would have been a duller if wiser America if they hadden.  
Here in one volume is a helpful guide to our national strength and weakness, Our weakness being that like every other country we at times are pretty comical. And our strength being that we are always populated with somebody like Mr. Stanley Walker to point out our lapses, so I think Mr. Walker is a prominent part of American uniqueness,  
So I hope that he will never suffer any difficulties, either financial or anatomical.