

There Was a Young Englishman

BY CLARENCE DAY

IN 1766 a young Englishman, a clergyman's son, sailed away to seek his fortune in India. There, in spite of his youth, he was given the command of an unruly province. By the time he was twenty-seven he had "reduced" that province to order, made a fortune by trading, and gone back to England, to live the life of a well-to-do country squire without further toil.

Six of his sons went to India, hoping to repeat his experience. None of them did. Some died in battle, some from the climate, and one died of drink.

One of these active young soldiers, who had himself conquered a province as his father had done, fell in love with and married the most beautiful English girl in Calcutta. A few years later he died, like his brothers. He left a son four years old.

This little boy had some unhappy times after that. His mother carefully dispatched him in charge of a black Indian servant to England, where he was shuttled about from one elderly aunt to another. At the great school that he was then sent away to, he got into trouble because he was near-sighted and not very strong and not at all good at games. Also, one of the boys broke his nose for him, which spoiled his appearance for life. He didn't mind that so much, because he and the fellow who did it were friends; but the masters thrashed him a lot, and, as he was a weakling, he was kicked around and beaten by all the school bullies for years.

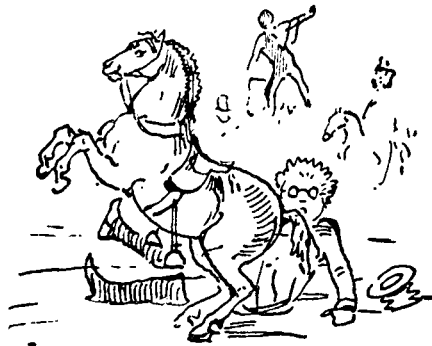
After awhile his mother, who had married an elderly major, came to England to live. She had become intensely religious; rather harshly so, it seemed to her son; but he loved her, and she loved and admired his stepfather, too.

At college he followed the hounds, drank and gambled, like other young men of fashion. He had grown strong, he was now six feet four, and his chest was broad in proportion. He travelled on the Continent, loved a princess, and attended Court Balls. He was a polished young buck in tight fitting trousers strapped under his boots, a long-tailed coat, a high collar, a big cravat-tie, and a monocle.

Soon after he was twenty-one and had come into possession of the money which his father had left him, he lost it. A friend of his, a young clergyman, who had a sleek, sanctified exterior and a smooth tongue, wheedled him into making an investment that completely collapsed. Another fellow he knew, a man of good family, fleeced him on a large scale at cards. Years later he pointed out this person to one of his friends. "I have not seen that man," he said, "since he drove me down in his cabriolet to my bankers in the City, where I sold out my patrimony and paid it over to him."

Not wishing to live on his stepfather, he looked around to see what a suddenly poor youth could do. He had already had a try at the law, but he hadn't worked hard at it. He now turned to journalism in his need. He didn't work hard at that either. Although almost penniless, he was still a young man of fashion at heart. It occurred to him that, as he had always liked drawing, art might be his best bet.

It wasn't. His amateur sketches were lifelike, they were full of freshness and fun, but they were far too unstudied to meet the demands of those conventional days. In his more ambitious moments, when he tried his hand at subjects like Hogarth's, his attempts were merely facetious, or prudish and weak. He was a splendid young man in his way, but he



An illustration by the subject of this memoir

was very English, and Art with a capital A brought out an inferior side of him. He sniggered at the nude, for example, and he sentimentalized beauty. Nevertheless he eagerly went over to Paris to paint.

While there he met a pretty Anglo-Irish girl with whom he fell in love.

This girl's mother had been watching and waiting to get her daughter a husband. She urged the youth to find some steady job at once so he could marry. He was vague about this at first. He gave up art and tried to do illustrations, but he sold very few. A man named Charles Dickens, whom nobody had ever heard of before, was writing the adventures of a character whom he called Mr. Pickwick; and the struggling would-be artist made a number of drawings to go with these Pickwick papers. They all were rejected.

He asked his stepfather to help him find some good position, to marry on. The kindly old Major hadn't much money left, owing to the failure of a bank out in India, but he precipitately took what he had and bought a newspaper with it, merely in order to make his stepson its French correspondent.

The girl for whose sake all this was so

imprudently done was going to be a wonderful wife for him, the young fellow thought. Perhaps for another husband she might have been; but although he didn't see it, she was narrow-minded, and she had had a bad training. She had been taught to be an artful young girl by her artful Mamma, who was as bad-tempered and vulgar a harridan as ever came out of Ireland. But Mamma could simper and be genteel when she tried; and neither her temper nor her matchmaking wiles were visible to the near-sighted young man. As for the girl, she didn't venture to talk much. He was drawn to her by her singing. She sang simple songs, she made eyes at him, she had lovely white arms, and he married her.

He was only twenty-five, and he didn't find out for some months that he had been cheated again.

It was poverty that opened his eyes. The newspaper on which he was dependent had never been a success, and, under his stepfather's soldierly management, after nine months it collapsed. When his wife's mother found that he was now going down-hill financially, and that his family was ruined, she reviled him so loudly and coarsely that she made his home life a hell.

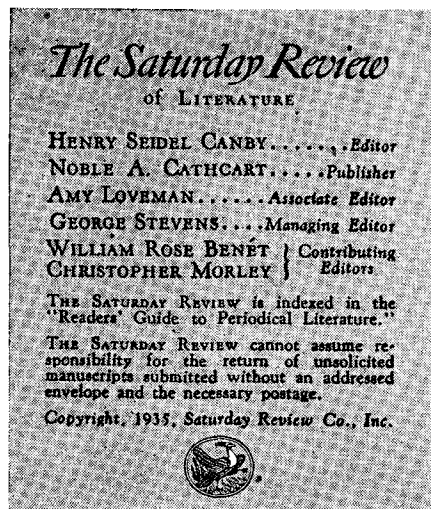
He hunted feverishly for a chance to do bits of ill-paid reviewing. His indolence utterly vanished. He set to work and worked hard, and for longer hours than most men would be able to, trying to sell things to magazine editors who felt lukewarm about him.

His young wife bore him two daughters. When one of these babies died, he wrote his mother, "I think of her only as something charming that for a season we were allowed to enjoy." He added that he could not ask to have her come back to a life of degradation and pain.

At the birth of their third little girl, his wife had an attack of insanity. She never recovered.

The elegant young buck was now down at heel, a hack and a drudge. His mother-in-law screamed tirades at him. His wife became sluggish and dense, like a half-witted child. He worked late into the night trying to support her and his two little girls; and as a matter of honor he felt that he must also pay his stepfather's debts.

After long years of struggle he managed to do this, and more. All England began talking about him, and reading his books. Yet when his first great novel appeared, its tone displeased many critics. It was the work of a man who had mellowed, and who had always had a warm heart, but there was a vein of cynicism in it, and sadness. The man was Thackeray, and the book was "Vanity Fair."



What Should We Do with Our Men of Letters?

WHAT is to be done about indigent poets, indigent novelists, indigent men and women of letters in general? It is not a question of relief. Saving a writer from the grindings of a badly functioning economic system is like saving a non-writer. If the money is available, something can readily be done to avert actual starvation. Mr. Alsberg's proposal to have a new (and much needed) guidebook compiled by the W. P. A., with the forty-eight states as subject, is good enough, and if that field is exhausted, there are many others where writers can be put to work.

The real problem is with *important* poets, *first-rate* novelists, *distinguished* men-of-letters, whose talents rank them in eminence with presidents of great industries, statesmen, and leading scientists. Only the naive believe that it is easy to live upon first-rate literary work. It may be hard to starve, but it is not easy to live like a successful person, not easy to live the kind of life which cultivated tastes and the author's zest for experience demand. Some first-rate literary work has a wide market; some equally good, and perhaps in originality or sheer depth of thought much more important, can appeal only to those qualified to absorb it, which never in any civilization are many. Some—and this is especially true of the essay and of poetry, is disqualified for financial success by its form which is not what current taste most easily assimilates. The content of an essay can find other modes of expression, perhaps equally good; but this is never true of real poetry, which, by definition, says best what it has to say. To ask a poet to widen his audience by writing in prose, is simply to ask him not to write at all, or to write in a fashion inferior for him and probably inferior from any point of view.

Readers of Edgar Lee Masters's life of Vachel Lindsay or of Hazelton Spencer's review of that book in last week's *Saturday Review*, must have been saddened by the evidence there presented. Here was a

poet who in his peculiar and very valuable genre was first-rate, a poet of fire, imagination, and extraordinary fancy, a patriotic poet, a popular poet, who could earn by his talents as a reciter as well as by his genius as an author. And yet he had a life-long struggle and died in despair. There were contributory reasons—of course, there always are, for anyone. A man whose heart is obsessed with creative work is seldom a good investor, seldom a penurious saver, although no one ever accused Lindsay of extravagance. His fault, if fault it be, was to have a renaissance mind, interested in everything that had the blood of creation in it, and inclined to spend itself largely in fields where others were more competent than he. It was generosity of the intellect, a myopia of the reason.

The good poet, the good novelist who cannot write for the masses, the man-of-letters whose audience must be intellectual—what they all need is a small but steady income, earned easily and worthily by some task which interferes as little as possible with creative work, or given outright. Burns was a gauger, and it was good luck for him, Wordsworth had a subvention, Emerson an income, Shakespeare an actor's job, Trollope an educational inspectorship, Hawthorne was customs officer and consul. Poe never had a steady income and was wrecked by its lack. So have been many of our very best writers.

Prizes are illusory. Divide a prize by the number of months which it takes to win it, and see what a pitiable and uncertain income results. The financial success of a book of poems, or of a novel or biography, even a best-selling novel, as best-selling goes nowadays, is almost equally illusory. A book that sells 5,000 copies is regarded as a success. But how much will 5,000 copies bring to the author? Probably less than \$2,000—and how long does it take to write such a book? A year probably, perhaps more. Here is no guarantee of economic security for a man with a family, and we are writing not of beginners but of established practitioners in the art. Geniuses are like other men in their everyday needs; they react even more sharply to discouragement, neglect, and the circumstances of failure.

It is not a question here of writers in general. Whatever could discourage nine writers out of ten from writing at all, would probably be good for civilization, provided they were not starved in the process. We write here of creative, original authors, capable of giving instruction and delight to their times. If they could delight all in their times there would be no problem. But that for the erudite, the critical, the fastidious, or for the subtle, the profound, or the highly original will nearly always be impossible.

A solution of the problem may perhaps be found in an asset which such writers are very likely to possess. For they instruct in the best sense. Contact with a

creative mind is not only refreshing, it is stimulating. Such a mind in the somewhat arid regions where instruction is practised is like a live coal in an ashy fire, or a breeze from the sea in an August noon. Our universities and colleges are increasingly drawing upon such minds for stimulus and variety. A score of names come to mind of poets, scientists, critics, specialists in advanced knowledge or in the human imagination, who visit educational institutions regularly as out-members of their faculties. A wise government, desirous of conserving its talent as it is beginning to conserve its forests, would extend this practice to the educational system in general. If our democratic state objects to pensions let it make its first-rate writers part of the educational scheme of the country. Put them on salary, small but certain. Ask them to share their personality with those who have a right to see what is at least relative greatness in their time. Demand of them no routine job, no teaching that others could do as well, most of all no "masterpiece" for which the state pays on completion. Leave their talents as authors to their own exploitation. Keep hands off these. But make them, as the Provençal courts did with their poets, paid guests, paid for being what they are, and because contact with them is a part of education. It would be cheap as relief goes, for real talents worth saving for art's sake or the mind's sake are not so numerous. But it would not be relief, it would be investment.

There is one indispensable requirement if this plan is to succeed. The choice of the authors to be enlisted must be in the hands of a competent and nonpartisan committee. Otherwise the jobs will go to favorite sons, to charlatans, and to the adepts in publicity; and the creative artist will be left in neglect and shame.

Ten Years Ago

Late in the Fall of 1925, *The Saturday Review* recommended the third and final volume of "The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page," edited by Burton J. Hendrick. Bainbridge Colby, who wrote the review, emphasized the fact that the book reflected "great credit on the literary craftsmanship of Mr. Hendrick."

Today

On page 5 of this issue, Douglas Southall Freeman reviews Burton J. Hendrick's latest book, "The Lees of Virginia." Mr. Freeman compares this book with James Truslow Adams's "The Adams Family," and says further: "By their well articulated treatment of two of the greatest American families, Mr. Hendrick and Mr. Adams . . . have opened a new field of biographical study. Development of that field may yield a new appraisal of the influence of aristocracy on our national life."