

# Fake Authors

BY FREDERICK LEWIS ALLEN

A FEW years ago Gertrude Atherton, the novelist, received a letter from a man in Chicago imploring her to stop ruining his son's life. To her amazement she learned from the letter that she was living in Chicago, as was the Canadian gentleman's son; that she had been trying to coax the son to give up his business career and become a writer like herself, assuring him that she could make his way easy for him; that she had taken him with her on a trip to St. Paul; and that altogether she was demoralizing him. Wouldn't she please stop it?

Mrs. Atherton promptly replied that she had not only never met the Canadian gentleman's son but had not been in Chicago for years. Plainly somebody was impersonating her. And she did one more thing. At that time she was writing a column in the Hearst newspapers. In her column she suggested that the young man in Chicago take his "Gertrude Atherton" to call upon a relative of hers, Ashton Stevens, dramatic critic of the *Chicago American*.

Needless to say, the call was not made. So far as Mrs. Atherton was concerned, the incident ended right there—though one may reasonably wish that one might know exactly what happened between the young man and young woman when that item in Mrs. Atherton's column appeared.

An altogether exceptional incident, would you think? On the contrary: the strangest thing about it is that it is not exceptional at all, except in detail. At least half of the most widely known writers in America have at one time or another discovered that somebody, somewhere, was assuming their identity for purposes of his own.

Why should this happen to authors any more than to other people? Very few of them are rich. Most of them are notoriously indigent. And even the exceptional author who makes a good living has no better access to wealth and privilege than thousands of business men.

The reason may be apparent if we analyze a hypothetical case of impersonation—in its most innocuous form. Let us say that a young man whose name



Frederick Lewis Allen

happens to be Wilder goes to a party in a small town where he is not known. As the evening progresses, somebody asks him if he is the author of "The Bridge of San Luis Rey." If he is by this time in a devil-may-care mood, and particularly if his questioner is attractive and seems ready to believe anything, he may admit that he is—or at least may bridle becomingly, look confused, and murmur something that is taken for a modest confession of authorship. The girl is impressed; and as the news goes about the room, young Mr. Wilder finds himself the focus of the party.

Why, he thinks, it's child's play! If he has claimed to be a well-known musician, somebody may thrust a violin into his hands or lead him to a piano or expect him to warble a few native wood-notes wild. If he has claimed to be an actor, somebody may realize that he doesn't look his part. If he has claimed to be a big business man, he may be expected to spend money—and anyhow, only the names of the very biggest business men are widely known. But novelists' faces are not widely known; their names, on

the other hand, are. They cannot be made to perform at short notice; nobody is going to set up a typewriter and ask a novelist to run off a chapter of fiction to entertain the company. And they do command a certain deference, ranging all the way from a distrustful embarrassment in their presence to a sentimental and uncritical adulation. Realizing this, Mr. Wilder begins to play the part of Thornton Wilder with more abandon.

That, I dare say, is how most literary impersonations begin—in sheer vanity. There was, for instance, an actual case somewhat similar to the hypothetical one I have just cited; and the young man (whose name really was Wilder) did very well with it until a day or two later, when Thornton Wilder's presence in town had been featured in the local paper and a resident of the town had informed the paper by letter that she had given Thornton Wilder's mother the bassinet which had held him forty years before. This worried the young man, for he was only

twenty-one: the discrepancy in dates was uncomfortable. He thereupon confessed all to the real Thornton Wilder and begged for mercy.

Or take an experience of Kenneth Roberts's. A few years ago he took a night train from Maine to Philadelphia, went direct from the station to the office of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and was talking with George Horace Lorimer, the editor, when he was told there was a telephone call for him. A girl's voice then informed him over the telephone that she was going to accept his invitation to lunch. When he said that there must have been some mistake, the voice assured him there was not; she was the girl who had come up from Charleston with him the night be-

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WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP?

By HOWARD MUMFORD JONES

WICKFORD POINT

By J. P. MARQUAND

Reviewed by Stephen Vincent Benét



Pedar Brugière  
Gertrude Atherton



Royal Atelior  
Ben Ames Williams



Blank & Stoller  
Ray Stannard Baker



Harold Stein  
Kenneth Roberts



Clinedinst  
Mary Roberts Rinehart

fore. Hadn't he told her that he could be reached by telephone at the *Post*?

Further questioning brought the information that her Kenneth Roberts was tall and blond and had been in Charleston getting information for a series of articles on the Civil War. No, he had not tried to borrow any money from her. Apparently his assumption of authorship had been made purely as an aid to conquest.

Not all impostors, however, are content with the rewards of feminine attention. Often they lecture under their assumed names, or accept lavish hospitality, or cash checks, or try otherwise to make money on their false pretenses; and sometimes their behavior is, if not scandalous, at least embarrassing to the real possessor of the name they adopt.

Thus, while it was simply amusing to Mary Roberts Rinehart to learn that the governor of one of the Western states, during a large round-up, had received a letter signed with her name and had thereupon asked the lady to sit in his box, it was somewhat disquieting to learn that a "Mary Roberts Rinehart" other than herself had lectured at a large Western college. And once Mrs. Rinehart discovered, quite by accident, that a woman had been using her name to give instructions to literary novices. It happened that Mrs. Rinehart and her husband were taking their 38-foot boat from Washington to New Bedford. Near Wilmington they had engine trouble, and they went to a hotel in Wilmington while repairs were made. At the hotel Mrs. Rinehart found a letter addressed to her and waiting to be called for—and the letter thanked her for her advice and said that the twenty-five dollars was on its way. Mrs. Rinehart did not recognize the signature of the letter, had never charged anybody for literary advice, had never stopped in Wilmington before, and had, of course, arrived there only by an unpredictable accident; clearly an impostor was making money on her reputation.

The spurious lecturers are many. That they not only dare to face an audience which might—for all they know—contain an acquaintance of the author whose name they assume, but that they actually succeed in bamboozling their auditors,

is testimony both to their boldness and, I am afraid, to the gullibility of some lecture-goers. One of the lecturing impostors, who assumed the name of Edna Ferber, behaved so badly that outraged citizens of various towns she had visited wrote to Miss Ferber's publishers to protest at her rowdiness. It is said, incidentally, that this "Edna Ferber"—or another one—once spoke before a women's club in a small Texas city on the same platform with a spurious "Octavus Roy Cohen," and that neither of them knew that the other was not genuine.

Why, you may ask, aren't such impostors brought to book by the law? Well, in the first place, under the common law a man may change his name at will unless he does it for a fraudulent purpose. I can call myself Sinclair Lewis so long as I don't cash in on the claim or behave in such a way as to do real damage to the real Mr. Lewis. In the second place, if I masquerade as Sinclair Lewis, run up a board bill in an Idaho town, try to make love to the landlady, and then decamp—as somebody once did—the real Mr. Lewis has only a somewhat dubious claim for damages; it is the landlady against whom I have chiefly offended. Similarly it is the lecture audiences who are defrauded by the phony lecturers. And in the third place, even if the people who have thus been actually victimized are able to catch the offender, they usually hesitate to confess their gullibility in court—though they may long for a chance to use a horsewhip.

No horsewhip was used on the fake "Kenneth Roberts" who lectured at Titusville, Florida, but he was made distinctly aware of the community's displeasure.

In the spring of 1939 [writes the real Mr. Roberts] on my return from Italy, I found a number of letters from the Chamber of Commerce of Titusville, asking me to telegraph them where I had been on the night of April 12th. I telegraphed back that I had been on the *S. S. Saturnia* between Algiers and Gibraltar; and shortly thereafter I received several letters from Titusville informing me that I had been living for the past winter in that vicinity under the name of Silas Perkins. Early in April I had volunteered to address the Titusville Chamber of Commerce on

the subject of *My Art*, and my offer had been accepted. Mr. Perkins appeared and explained in detail how and why he had taken the pen-name of Kenneth Roberts, and all about the arduous labor and interesting experiences that fall to the lot of a moderately successful novelist.

Something about me had impressed the editor of the *Titusville Star-Times* as being not quite in character. Perhaps I was too well dressed; perhaps I didn't look sufficiently worried; at all events, he decided to take the matter up with the *Saturday Evening Post* and find out where I really was. When the *Post* replied that I was on my way home from Italy, the officers of the Chamber of Commerce joined the editor in a determination to unmask the impostor. . . . They lured Silas Perkins-Kenneth Roberts into Titusville, forced the poor fellow to apologize to everybody who had attended his lecture, and made things so uncomfortable for him that he shortly thereafter vanished.

Apparently there is something irresistible to impostors in the very idea of a pen-name. It simplifies matters for them. Ben Ames Williams's novel, "The Great Accident," was laid in an Ohio town. Shortly after it was published, Mr. Williams's father was in northern Ohio and heard the book mentioned. "Yes," remarked a local man, "a fellow here in town wrote it." "Is his name Ben Ames Williams?" asked Mr. Williams's father. "No," was the answer; "he writes under a pseudonym."

An ingenious variant of this device is reported by Booth Tarkington. Let Mr. Tarkington himself tell the story:—

Long ago, I'd written and published a little book called "Monsieur Beaucaire," and the girls seemed to like it. One day after it had been out a few months I had a letter and simultaneously a telegram from classmates of mine on the West Coast; a young man from New York was out there, telling the girls he was the "real Booth Tarkington"; and he was giving away copies of "Monsieur Beaucaire" signed with his own name and mine after it in quotation marks.

His explanation was that he came of a proud old New York stock and they couldn't bear to have an author in the family, so he'd gone to Indiana and employed me, not to write for him—far be it!—but to publish his manu-

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# Wilson's Side of the Story

MY MEMOIR. By Edith Bolling Wilson.  
Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Com-  
pany. 1939. \$3.50.

Reviewed by WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

MRS. EDITH BOLLING WILSON, the second wife of President Woodrow Wilson, has written a most important book. It is her side, and presumably President Wilson's side, of the controversy which arose between November 11, 1918 and his death.

In Wilson's life were three or four major clashes. But the great clash—great in that it affected the destiny of his country and the world—came after the Armistice when President Wilson, afire for his dream of universal peace, consented to a treaty full of the poison of future wars, and tried to force the treaty and the covenant of the League of Nations upon his country. In all his controversies, Wilson parted with friends, made new ones, and went on, generally victoriously. But in the last clash, his body broke, his will was thwarted. And some of the importance of this book which his widow has written lies in the fact that it presents his side of that last great battle for what he deemed were peace and freedom.

The two friends who fell away in the final clash were, first, Joseph Tumulty, his private secretary, who had come with him out of the Governor's office in New Jersey and had been with him eight years; and second, Colonel E. M. House, who had organized his victory in the Presidential nominating convention, as much as any other one man, and who had been his faithful servant from the day he entered the White House until he returned from Paris with the Treaty of Versailles.

Mrs. Wilson, in her Memoir, contends that at crucial moments these two men were unfaithful to the President. She sets down at some length the story of her rupture with Colonel House. In Paris, the newspapers, particularly the American and English newspapers, were giving Colonel House credit for more power than he had. Mrs. Wilson felt that it was unfair for these newspapers to describe the Colonel as "the brains of the Commission." In Paris, one day, Colonel House called upon the President in Mr. Wilson's absence and found Mrs. Wilson opening a package of papers which had proclaimed that Colonel House was indeed the brains of the Commission. She had it out with him on the spot. She read to the Colonel several paragraphs from the newspaper clippings she had just opened. His face, she writes, "turned crimson." He asked if President Wilson had seen one of the objectionable articles. Being told he had not seen it, the Colonel

"sprang up; taking his coat in one hand he held out the other" and fled. By the time he had reached the door he "fled as though pursued." Anyone who knew the meek and mousy little Colonel can see him skedaddling before what he probably had evidence to believe was a woman's scorn. Then in came Admiral Grayson and there is a page of dialogue in which she makes it evident that he attempted to soothe Mrs. Wilson. And in the midst of the scene her husband entered. Mrs. Wilson records that the President said: "I am sorry you hurt House. I would as soon doubt your loyalty as his. All this is an attempt to misrepresent things at home."



Harris & Ewing  
President and Mrs. Wilson in the  
White House Study, June, 1920.

"But," she writes in her Memoirs, "the conversation of the afternoon when he fled my drawing room proved to be my last with Colonel House." By a curious coincidence, it was the beginning of the end of the friendship between the Colonel and the President. A hundred pages later in her book, the story moves to the years after Woodrow Wilson had left the White House. Here is the record of the break with Joseph Tumulty. It was in April, 1922, that Joseph Tumulty had his last interview with the President. Tumulty at that interview tried to get the President to send a message to an important formal Democratic dinner in Washington. The President refused. Tumulty, when he went to the dinner in Washington, in the ardor of his enthusiasm, being Irish, gave the toastmaster an anonymous message which was in itself trivial and unimportant, which merely kept the President's name before

the party satraps. But alas, it was construed as an endorsement of Mr. Cox, the Presidential candidate who had been defeated in 1920. The President, of course, was angry. Very soon the authorship of the anonymous greeting which had been sent to the dinner was traced to Tumulty. Wilson's indignant repudiation of the message of course put Tumulty in an unpleasant light. Tumulty was excited and there was a great to-do in the Tumulty and Wilson households. Tumulty asked the President to lighten the blow. The President would not do it. Tumulty made a clean breast of it, told the reporters that the President sent no telegram and that the whole thing was the result of a casual conversation in which a casual "message" was sent in a casual manner. Probably there was no formal "message." The President asked his wife to "let the unpleasant affair fade out. Tumulty will sulk for a few days and then come like a spanked child to say that he is sorry and wants to be forgiven." The Tumulty correspondence which has been given to the press recently indicates that Tumulty tried to see the President and did try to patch the matter up, and to resume the old relation. He wrote a beautiful letter to Mrs. Wilson, obviously seeking a personal interview. But probably she felt properly that her husband's health would not stand the strain of an emotional scene. A year later the President wrote a letter to James Kerney, a powerful Democratic leader in New Jersey, suggesting Tumulty as the Democratic candidate for United States Senator. But Tumulty never saw the President again after the break.

These breaks between the President and his old friends may not be properly laid to the door of Mrs. Wilson. Similar breaks came in Princeton and in Trenton when Wilson was Governor. He was proud to boast that he had a single-track mind and he could not "tolerate fools gladly" nor distinguish between a man who differed from him and an enemy. Each to that single-track mind was equally untrustworthy. The greatness of Woodrow Wilson will not be gainsaid. His service to humanity is still to find its last reward in a renewing fame which must come when the nations of the world see the wisdom of his course. But he was what he was and had to act as he must act with his endowment.

These stories of the President's affairs with House and Tumulty, more or less typical of others, however authentic they may be, do not encompass the real value of Mrs. Wilson's "Memoir." Her book is full of historical background. And she has told her story unconsciously out of her heart. The man in another day who writes the great story of the Wilsonian tragedy, will have to turn to "My Memoir" of Edith Bolling Wilson, for the color of the times.

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