



SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE

September 1928

VOL. LXXXIV

NO. 3



The Lost Novel

BY SHERWOOD ANDERSON

HE said it was all like a dream. A man like that, a writer. Well, he works for months and, perhaps, years on a book and there is not a word put down. What I mean is that his mind is working. What is to be the book builds itself up and is destroyed.

In his fancy figures are moving back and forth.

But there is something I neglected to say. I am talking of a certain English novelist who has got some fame, of a thing that once happened to him.

He told me about it one day in London when we were walking together. We had been together for hours. I remember that we were on the Embankment of the Thames when he told me about his lost novel.

He had come to see me early in the evening at my hotel. He spoke of certain stories of my own. "You almost get at something, sometimes," he said.

We agreed that no man ever quite got at—the thing.

If some one once got at it, if he really

put the ball over the plate, you know, if he hit the bull's-eye.

What would be the sense of any one trying to do anything after that?

I'll tell you what, some of the old fellows have come pretty near.

Keats, eh? And Shakespeare. And George Borrow and DeFoe.

We spent a half-hour going over names.

We went off to dine together and later walked. He was a little black, nervous man with ragged locks of hair sticking out from under his hat.

I began talking of his first book.

But here is a brief outline of his history. He came from a poor farming family in some English village. He was like all writers. From the very beginning he wanted to write.

He had no education. At twenty he got married.

She must have been a very respectable, nice girl. If I remember rightly, she was the daughter of a priest of the Established English Church.

Just the kind he should not have married. But who shall say whom any

one shall love—or marry? She was above him in station. She had been to a woman's college; was well educated.

I have no doubt she thought him an ignorant man.

"She thought me a sweet man, too. The hell with that," he said, speaking of it. "I am not sweet. I hate sweetness."

We had got to that sort of intimacy walking in the London night, going now and then into a pub to get a drink.

I remember that we each got a bottle, fearing the pubs would close before we got through talking.

What I told him about myself and my own adventures I can't remember.

The point is he wanted to make some kind of a pagan out of his woman, and the possibilities weren't in her.

They had two kids.

Then suddenly he did begin to burst out writing—that is to say, really writing.

You know a man like that. When he writes he writes. He had some kind of a job in his English town. I believe he was a clerk.

Because he was writing he, of course, neglected his job, his wife, his kids.

He used to walk about the fields at night. His wife scolded. Of course she was all broken up—would be. No woman can quite bear the absolute way in which a man who has been her lover can drop her when he is at work.

I mean an artist, of course. They can be first-class lovers. It may be they are the only lovers.

And they are absolutely ruthless about throwing direct personal love aside.

You can imagine that household. The man told me there was a little bedroom up-stairs in the house where they were living at that time. This was while he was still in the English town.

The man used to come home from his job and go up-stairs. Up-stairs he went and locked his door. Often he did not stop to eat, and sometimes he did not even speak to his wife.

He wrote and wrote and wrote and threw away.

Then he lost his job. "The hell," he said when he spoke of it.

He didn't care, of course. What is a job?

What is a wife or child? There must be a few ruthless people in this world.

Pretty soon there was practically no food in the house.

He was up-stairs in that room behind the door, writing. The house was small and the children cried. "The little brats," he said, speaking of them. He did not mean that, of course. I understood what he meant. His wife used to come and sit on the stairs outside the door back of which he was at work. She cried audibly and the child she had in her arms cried.

"A patient soul, eh?" the English novelist said to me when he told me of it. "And a good soul, too," he said. "To hell with her," he also said.

You see, he had begun writing about her. She was what his novel was about, his first one. In time it may prove to be his best one.

Such tenderness of understanding—of her difficulties and her limitations, and such a casual, brutal way of treating her—personally.

Well, if we have a soul that is worth something, eh?

It got so they were never together a moment without quarrelling.

And then one night he struck her. He had forgotten to fasten the door of the room in which he worked. She came bursting in.

And just as he was getting at some-

thing about her, some understanding of the reality of her. Any writer will understand the difficulty of his position. In a fury he rushed at her, struck her and knocked her down.

And then. Well, she quit him then. Why not? However, he finished the book. It was a real book.

But about his lost novel. He said he came up to London after his wife left him and began living alone. He thought he would write another novel.

You understand that he had got recognition, had been acclaimed.

And the second novel was just as difficult to write as the first. It may be that he was a good deal exhausted.

And, of course, he was ashamed. He was ashamed of the way in which he had treated his wife. He tried to write another novel so that he wouldn't always be thinking. He told me that, for the next year or two, the words he wrote on the paper were all wooden. Nothing was alive.

Months and months of that sort of thing. He withdrew from people. Well, what about his children? He sent money to his wife and went to see her once.

He said she was living with her father's people, and he went to her father's house and got her. They went to walk in the fields. "We couldn't talk," he said. "She began to cry and called me a crazy man. Then I glared at her, as I had done that time I struck her, and she turned and ran away from me back to her father's house, and I came away."

Having written one splendid novel, he wanted, of course, to write some more. He said there were all sorts of characters and situations in his head. He used to sit at his desk for hours

writing and then go out in the street and walk as he and I walked together that night.

Nothing would come right for him.

He had got some sort of theory about himself. He said that the second novel was inside him like an unborn child. His conscience was hurting him about his wife and children. He said he loved them all right but did not want to see them again.

Sometimes he thought he hated them. One evening, he said, after he had been struggling like that, and long after he had quit seeing people, he wrote his second novel. It happened like this.

All morning he had been sitting in his room. It was a small room he had rented in a poor part of London. He had got out of bed early, and without eating any breakfast had begun to write. And everything he wrote that morning was also no good.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, as he had been in the habit of doing, he went out to walk. He took a lot of writing-paper with him.

"I had an idea I might begin to write at any time," he said.

He went walking in Hyde Park. He said it was a clear, bright day, and people were walking about together. He sat on a bench.

He hadn't eaten anything since the night before. As he sat there he tried a trick. Later I heard that a group of young poets in Paris took up that sort of thing and were profoundly serious about it.

The Englishman tried what is called "automatic writing."

He just put his pencil on the paper and let the pencil make what words it would.

Of course the pencil made a queer

jumble of absurd words. He quit doing that.

There he sat on the bench staring at the people walking past.

He was tired, like a man who has been in love for a long time with some woman he cannot get.

Let us say there are difficulties. He is married or she is. They look at each other with promises in their eyes and nothing happens.

Wait and wait. Most people's lives are spent waiting.

And then suddenly, he said, he began writing his novel. The theme, of course, was men and women—lovers. What other theme is there for such a man? He told me that he must have been thinking a great deal of his wife and of his cruelty to her. He wrote and wrote. The evening passed and night came. Fortunately, there was a moon. He kept on writing. He said it was the most intense writing he ever did or ever hoped to do. Hours and hours passed. He sat there on that bench writing like a crazy man.

He wrote a novel at one sitting. Then he went home to his room.

He said he never was so happy and satisfied with himself in his life.

"I thought that I had done justice to my wife and to my children, to every one and everything," he said.

He said that all the love he had in his being went into the novel.

He took it home and laid it on his desk.

What a sweet feeling of satisfaction to have done—the thing.

Then he went out of his room and found an all-night place where he could get something to eat.

After he got food he walked around the town. How long he walked he didn't know.

Then he went home and slept. It was daylight by this time. He slept all through the next day.

He said that when he woke up he thought he would look at his novel. "I really knew all the time it wasn't there," he said. "On the desk, of course, there was nothing but blank empty sheets of paper."

"Anyway," he said, "this I know. I never will write such a beautiful novel as that one was."

Of course when he said it he laughed.

I do not believe there are too many people in the world who will know exactly what he was laughing about.



Four Hearths

BY LUCY BARNARD

SPRING's wood was all too green to burn,
But fires in summer hotter grow,
And autumn's flames leapt up to set
These stern hillsides aglow.
Now through the silent valley drifts
The winter smoke of snow.