

TEACH YOURSELF  
TO WRITE

By  
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TO  
JOHN  
(NOW EIGHT MONTHS OLD)  
IN SPITE OF WHOM  
THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN

LEAD HINDS

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## PREFACE

ALDOUS HUXLEY, questioned on how to become a writer, recommended buying pen, paper, and a bottle of ink—sound advice, indeed, but so bald as to be perhaps unhelpful. This book is designed for those who, having made their purchase, sit with pen poised wondering where to begin.

Let no one, however, read farther without solemn warning. No book can teach you how to write, much less how to succeed as a writer. It can teach you only how to teach yourself to write : the rest depends on you. Literary success springs from an unusual combination of originality, luck and industry—especially industry. If you are bent on achieving it, you must be prepared for endless hard work, disappointments innumerable, and maybe no great profit, after all. (Indeed, if you compare your total earnings with the amount of labour you have expended on the task of writing, you will realize that you would have been better off as a plumber or a good plain cook.) No sensible person ever writes solely for money, or even prestige. If you write, it must be for the fun of it, or because you simply cannot help it.

Writing as a pastime has everything to recommend it. It can bring you infinite pleasure, even if your *magnum opus* has but one admiring reader—yourself. At the least, it is less expensive than bridge, more stimulating than knitting, less exhausting than golf. At the most, it can enlarge your view of life and give you a sharper perception of its tragi-comedy. The attempt to write

satisfies that need for self-expression, latent in everyone, which turns to sourness and frustration when left unsatisfied. For the shy or the lonely, in particular, or for those whose days are passed in a wearisome routine, it opens a window on a world of delight. Even if your works never see print, and all you produce is a handful of stories or a half-finished novel, you will be the happier and healthier for your spell of creative effort.

Many people feel the impulse to write but get no farther because the impulse is undirected. It is for these that this book is written. It attempts to cover a wide field in order that the beginner may discover where his aptitude lies, and it is concerned with the principles, and the difficulties, inherent in current literary forms. Its scope being so wide, it necessarily treats each part of its subject superficially. Weightier and more serious books have therefore been recommended at the end of each chapter. Of these, three deserve more urgent recommendation—"The Art of Writing," by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, E. M. Forster's "Aspects of the Novel," and "The Craft of Fiction," by Percy Lubbock. For these the author expresses her particular gratitude, not only for the help, but also for the great pleasure they have given. Apart from the practical advice they give, they are valuable for the amateur in that they make clear that writing is an exacting craft, requiring long apprenticeship and an endless capacity for taking pains. There is a too general belief that writing is easy, given inspiration (that cloudy term) or, at the least, native wit. It is, on the contrary, an occupation that calls for the continual exercise of critical intelligence, unbiassed judgment and considerable technical skill. Anyone can write badly (and it is true that many badly-written books enjoy a ready sale), but real delight and satis-



faction, in writing as in all else, come only from producing your very best.

Space has been given in each chapter to the discussion and analysis of works by good modern authors. This is by no means intended to encourage imitation; for imitation, even of the best authors, is fatal to creative effort. Much, nevertheless, may be learnt about the technique of writing—especially the technique of construction and plot—from critical study of other people's work. If, then, it seems that undue space has been given to critical analysis, this is because it seemed a necessary means of showing the reader how to criticize for himself.

Suggestions for practice in writing are given at the end of most chapters, but they are, of course, only suggestions. It is much better to write on a subject of your own choosing than to write to order, but it is better to write to order than to waste hours in looking for a suitable subject, and then perhaps never to write at all. Such tasks must be regarded only as practice; you will never write anything worth while unless you follow your own fancy, and finding a good subject is half the business of writing.

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# CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE . . . . .	V
PART ONE	
CHAP.	
I. MAKING A START . . . . .	II
II. STYLE . . . . .	17
III. THE ARTICLE . . . . .	25
IV. FICTION (GENERAL) . . . . .	39
V. THE SHORT STORY . . . . .	48
VI. THE NOVEL . . . . .	70
VII. HISTORICAL FICTION . . . . .	99
VIII. DETECTIVE FICTION . . . . .	112
IX. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND BIOGRAPHY . . . . .	130
X. WRITING FOR CHILDREN . . . . .	154
XI. VERSE . . . . .	178

## PART TWO

I. THE WRITER AND THE PRESS . . . . .	184
II. THE WRITER AND THE PUBLISHER . . . . .	188

### *Appendices.*

A. REPORTS . . . . .	195
B. EXAMINATION ESSAYS . . . . .	200



## PART I

### CHAPTER I

# MAKING A START

WRITING—prose-writing, at any rate—is only significant as means of transmitting thoughts, ideas, experience: it is the last, and perhaps least important, stage in a complex creative process. It is of little use to be able to write fluently and well unless you have something worth writing about, and that you will rarely find by drawing patterns on the blotting-paper in the serious silence of your room. So the first advice to any young writer must be to live as fully as possible, seeking new experiences, making new friends, keeping all your faculties open to the ceaseless activity of life. Some would go farther and say, “Go out and fall in love, sow your wild oats, run away to sea.” This is excellent advice, no doubt, if you have time and energy in plenty, though if followed too literally it may leave you with neither leisure nor inclination for writing, after all. Let us, then, be more cautious, and rest content with urging that the would-be writer should move freely in the world, should walk and talk and argue and, in short, embrace all experience, painful or pleasant, that will enlarge his heart and understanding.

In this quest for experience, however, there must be no deliberate seeking after “copy”. Once you begin to observe the idiosyncrasies of your friends, or to analyse your own emotions, with a view to turning them to profit in some projected novel, then your vision becomes unconsciously distorted, your emotions falsified. It is



necessary to cultivate instead that quality of detached observation latent in everyone and generally quiescent. Most people, town-dwellers especially, go through life deaf and blind to all that does not immediately affect them. Travelling from home to office, they read the morning paper, and never notice the interesting old lady in the seat opposite; they order lunch, and as often as not cannot remember what the waitress looked like as soon as she has attended to their wants; travelling home among a crowd of diverse humanity, they brood abstractedly on the international situation or the latest cricket scores. Yet these blind, blank intervals of existence can become valuable and significant once you cultivate your gifts of observation and open your eyes to the people about you, noting their gestures and expressions as they talk, speculating on what lies behind features passive in repose. Stevenson counselled carrying a notebook and jotting down observations on fellow-travellers, just as an artist makes sketches of whatever catches his eye. You will find, indeed, that such note-taking, unobtrusively concealed perhaps under the guise of letter-writing, can greatly reduce the tedium of a long journey, and Aldous Huxley in his book "Along the Road" assigns much of his pleasure in foreign travel to the fun of observing his fellow-passengers.

This study of your fellow-beings is important, but it is not in itself enough. All the senses must play their part too. Close your eyes and try to separate all the various sounds that a moment before seemed only a loud, indistinct babble: a girl's laugh, the squeak of a nervous lady as the train lurches, the rattle of doors, a dog scratching, the rustle of newspaper, the cry of a baby, and over and under them all the sing-song beat of the moving train. Now add all your sensations of touch

and smell (and here it is a pity that you have not a dog's nose or a cat's awareness to serve you), and you will have experienced some of the multiform impressions that make up one moment of living. Now take each in turn and find for each the exact word, the perfect phrase, and by the time you reach your journey's end you will have taught yourself a quite considerable amount about the art of writing.

The power of observation, at first consciously cultivated, will very soon become instinctive and unconscious, and in the more important moments of living will operate without your being aware of it. You will no longer spoil the moment of experience by the conscious effort to store it in your memory, yet every significant detail will remain in your subconscious mind to be summoned back again at need.

Observation is best cultivated if it is coupled with some method of recording, for otherwise it easily degenerates into mere day-dreaming. An easy method, often recommended, is to keep a diary, and this is helpful as long as diary-keeping remains an enjoyment, not a mechanical duty. Some people are natural diarists, others not. To the introvert, the private journal is a necessary outlet for reflection and emotion; to the extrovert it is more often a daily task begun in enthusiasm and abandoned in distaste even before January is out. The most useful form of diary should combine exact but straightforward description of the day's affairs with a little honest personal reflection and self-analysis, a combination rarely found. (One might go further, and suggest that the introvert should confine himself in his diary to a record of external facts, and the extrovert should try to analyse and record his feelings—a salutary practice for them both.) For a diary that does combine



sensitive observation with acute self-analysis the reader is recommended to W. N. P. Barbellion's "Journal of a Disappointed Man".

Some may find letter-writing more congenial because it also serves a practical end, but it is essential that you should be able to write freely without the cramping sense of being laughed at or secretly criticized. As a medium for recording trivial everyday incidents letters can hardly be bettered, and for the would-be author there is the added stimulus of writing not merely to please himself, but also to entertain someone else. Beware, however, of thinking that the good letter-writer or diarist will be equally successful in other forms of writing. An article or story or novel demands a different technique and different talents. ✓ Letters and diaries serve merely as the means of cultivating observation and easy self-expression. They are the first rung on a very tall ladder. Nevertheless the value of writing long letters and intimate journals, and of keeping a notebook or commonplace book always at hand, can hardly be overstated. Make thumbnail sketches of your employers, your lecturers, your cousins, your aunts; write down your exact impressions of a bathe in the river, a day at the Zoo, the feel of a snail, the smell of a bean-field; record, as honestly as possible, the phases of a friendship or a love affair: then, when you come to write a story or a novel, there is a fair chance that the characters may be alive, the descriptions vivid, and the emotional passages based, not, as so often, on fiction, but on experience of fact. ✓

Direct observation is all-important. To see life at second-hand through the medium of books is like looking at a view through panes of coloured glass. You see the writer's view of life, not your own. But personal observation is limited, and the would-be writer must

recognize the value of good wide reading and a sound general education whereby to widen and enrich his vision. This may sound frightening : you have probably forgotten all you learnt at school ; and how, you may ask, is it possible to re-learn it ? Or you may never have had the luck to be well and soundly taught at all, and how can you possibly start from scratch ? The answer is that the best kind of education is rarely acquired in the school-room or the college lecture-room. It is self-acquired, out of love and enthusiasm, not for examinations ; there are many people who left school at fourteen and are yet more truly educated than others who have been to Eton and to Oxford. A good education, however and wherever acquired, is an essential part of the writer's equipment, and in these days of free libraries and adult education classes no one need be without it.

If you are to accomplish anything, it is important to set aside a definite time for writing each day, or, at least, each week, and to persevere in writing even if you are not in the mood. (To be "in the wrong mood" often merely means that you would prefer to listen to the wireless or read a detective story.) Inspiration never comes by sitting about and waiting for it ; it comes unsolicited, when you are already hard at work. Good writers are rarely temperamental. They know that writing is a job, like cooking or stockbroking, and they apply themselves to it without display or fuss. It is good also to cultivate the gift of concentrating in the midst of noise. If you are able to write only in an atmosphere of complete quiet, then you are unlikely to write very much ; and if you are bad-tempered when the baby cries or someone in the next room turns on the wireless, then it would perhaps be better if you did not write at all. In



such circumstances you should bethink yourself of Jane Austen scribbling notes for a masterpiece on a corner of the mantel-piece in a room full of chattering people, or of Henry Williamson rocking a fractious baby in the crook of his arm while he toiled at nights over "Tarka the Otter".

## CHAPTER II

# STYLE

IT would be pleasant in a book of this kind to dispense with a chapter on style altogether. The question of style and how to acquire it has been discussed so often and so glibly that it begins to appear as something concrete and tangible, a kind of pigment to be applied to the subject in hand in the same way as varnish is applied to cheap furniture or cosmetics to a somewhat plain face. And what is the recipe for this useful and remarkable pigment? Read good books, say the wise ones, imitate great writers, copy now this style, now that, and above all, practise, practise, practise.

Now, this advice is sound and valuable enough, provided that we realize, first, that the style is inseparable from the subject (that it is, in fact, not the coat of varnish, but the grain in the wood), and secondly, that it must always be subordinate to the subject, since the thing said is more important than the manner of saying it. Above all, let it be plain that without clear thinking, accurate observation and real feeling we cannot attain to good style, since these are its basic elements.

Speech is the most direct form of expression, and can also be the closest form of contact, between one person and another. The writer's aim is to achieve this directness of approach, this intimacy of contact, through the cold medium of printed words: his difficulty that, instead of addressing someone he knows, he must write for a diverse multitude of unseen, unknown readers. He has gained his objective when the reader has ceased to be aware of the words themselves, but is directly



conscious of the ideas and images which they present. Thus style at its highest becomes translucent; the gulf between writer and reader has vanished, their vision is the same. Here is a simple passage from a good, though not great, writer where this closeness of contact has, I think, been achieved. It is a description of the end of a day's hunting :

“ The walk became a trot—the trot a canter. Then a faint melancholy shout at a distance, answered by a ‘ Stole away ! ’ from the fields ; a doleful ‘ Toot ! ’ of the horn ; the dull thunder of many horse-hoofs rolling along the further woodside. Then redcoats flashing like sparks of fire across the grey gap of mist at the ride’s mouth, then a whipper-in, bringing up a belated hound, burst into the pathway, smashing and plunging with shut eyes, through ash-saplings and hassock-grass ; then a fat farmer, sedulously pounding through the mud, was overtaken and be-spattered in spite of all his struggles ;—until the line streamed out into the wide rushy pasture, starting up peewits and curlews, as horsemen poured in from every side, and cunning old farmers rode off at inexplicable angles to some well-known haunts of pug : and right ahead, chiming and jangling sweet madness, the dappled pack glanced and wavered through the veil of soft grey mist.” \*

What is the secret of this communication of vision ? Much of it is mysterious, inexplicable even to the writer himself, but we can at least lay a finger on certain essential qualities. Clarity and coherence are the first of these, for obscurity of language or of thought creates a fog between writer and reader in which both are lost.

\* Charles Kingsley, “ Yeast.”

Even in the simplest kind of writing clarity is often difficult to attain. Thoughts and impressions rarely present themselves in coherent order; they must be deftly sorted, and until they can be arranged in orderly sequence, it is of little use to try to put them on paper. Make it a rule, therefore, never to begin writing until you have a clear plan of what you are going to say. If you are writing an article or a report, first write down your main points and arrange them in a logical scheme before you begin; if a description (like that quoted above), be sure that the scene is spread before your mind's eye with every detail sharp and clear; if a narrative, 'live' in it yourself until you know instinctively how the incidents occurred.

Clarity of language follows naturally from clarity of thought. If you think clearly and honestly you will never need to fall back on vague, woolly phrases that seem invented only to conceal woolliness of thought. If your ideas are your own you will be able to find a personal way of expressing them. Leave the cliché, the windy circumlocution, the dead metaphor to the tired after-dinner speaker or the fifth-rate politician, who must needs use them to fill up the interstices of thought or conceal the fact that he is incapable of original thinking. When you find yourself writing *to all intents and purposes, through thick and thin, through fire and water*, when you seek to *rivet the attention, explore every avenue, apply the acid test*, then it is time for you to put down your pen and reconsider what you have written. If, after this reconsideration, you can find no more vigorous way of expressing yourself, then you may be sure that you have nothing vigorous or original to say, and had better abandon the subject altogether.

Equally to be avoided are those exaggerated phrases



of which modern speech is so fond. The writer to whom everything is *extraordinarily interesting, quite fantastic, amazingly brilliant*, is no whit less absurd than the young man at a party who finds everything "so *awfully jolly*". Such exaggerations destroy themselves by excess; *colossal, stupendous, magnificent* (that trio beloved of the film magnate) fail to stupefy; under the repeated bludgeonings of such phrases the reader's head is bloody but unbowed. As for the unfortunate writer, when he has something really impressive to describe, there is scarcely one forceful epithet left him. For the sake of the English language, therefore, as well as for your own, avoid exaggeration.

If it is important for the writer to express himself clearly, it is almost as important for him to express himself pleasantly and persuasively. We tolerate a good deal of dullness in daily talk, either from regard for the talker or because we have no other alternative, but nothing will oblige us to read anything that fails to interest us by its subject or repels by its style. Much of the charm of a pleasant speaking voice depends on its variety of tone, just as an unattractive voice is usually noticeable for its flatness. The writer, like the speaker, must avoid flatness and seek variety, and he will do this best if he remembers that all written words are unconsciously translated into sounds as they are read. Consequently, anything that does not sound well when read aloud should be patiently altered until it does. Monotony of style springs in part from the use of hackneyed phrases, partly from the repetition of certain rhythms or of sentences and clauses of approximate length and structure. Such repetition occurs most often when the writer is tired and the writing has become mechanical. It is best corrected by reading aloud next

day what you have written the night before, and noting carefully its effect on the ear. In good writing varying rhythms and sentence patterns are intermingled. This delicate variation of rhythm and pattern is largely instinctive, but it can be cultivated by reading aloud and criticizing your own work, and by accustoming the ear to the rhythms of good prose.

The use of sentences of varying length and structure is again largely dependent on instinct, and the writer himself will know what is appropriate to his purpose. Certain general tendencies may, however, be noted. A succession of short, simple sentences (*i.e.*, sentences consisting of single statements, unexpanded by clauses) lends swiftness to narrative passages, lucidity to passages of explanation and description, although when used too frequently they may become monotonous. Used alone at the beginning of a paragraph, a short, simple sentence gives emphasis to the thought that is to be developed in the longer complex and compound sentences that follow. Similarly, it can be used at the end of paragraph to sum up the thought and to stress the climax, its shortness contrasting effectively with the longer sentences that precede it. Short sentences should be used in dialogue also, since they reflect the ease and naturalness of ordinary speech. Longer complex and compound sentences are more appropriate for the elaboration of thought and argument. Earlier writers (such as Gibbon and Macaulay) delighted in such sentences, because their clauses could be built up into elaborate patterns, clause balancing clause, each one forming an integral part of a complex architectural whole. Contemporary writing on the whole prefers ease and naturalness to symmetry and balance, but you will find that the use of balanced clauses in moderation gives clearness and precision to



your style. They are bad only when they force you to pad out the meaning of a sentence in order to complete its structural pattern.

Appropriateness of style and language is a quality natural in speech, but, it would seem, often difficult to attain in writing. Some people, it is true, will talk at a family party as if they were addressing a public meeting, but there are many more who, though mild and modest in talk, cannot refrain from writing in a grandiose style on any and every occasion. This tendency is especially strong among young writers: no subject seems too humble for their eloquence; one twitch at the reins of Pegasus and away they gallop. Figurative language fascinates them; every plain statement must be amplified by a metaphor, and they cannot bear to abandon a good one until they have elaborated it out of all proportion to the fact it illustrates. Coleridge himself was not proof against this temptation, as the following absurd and solemn passage shows. He is describing his carelessness about his literary works:

“ I have laid too many eggs in the hot sands of this wilderness, the world, with ostrich carelessness and ostrich oblivion. The greater part indeed have been trod under foot, and are forgotten; but yet no small number have crept forth into life, some to furnish feathers for the caps of others, and still more to plume the shafts in the quiver of my enemies, of them that unprovoked have lain in wait against my soul.” \*

It is almost inevitable that every young writer should pass through a stage of writing purple prose, but it is essential to his progress that he should adopt “ Q ”’s

\* Coleridge, “ Biographia Literaria.”

advice to write it to his heart's content and then score out what he has written. It is good to be able to write in a grand rhetorical manner when occasion demands, but the occasions in these days are few.

Clearly the subject must determine the style. An article on plumbing will demand a different style from a treatise on metaphysics, and between these two extremes there are infinite gradations. A short story and, in a far greater degree, a novel need constant variation in style to suit the changing moods and situations with which they deal, and this demands discretion and judgment in addition to the writer's natural instinct for what is fitting. It is a safe rule, however, to write as simply and naturally as possible, and never to strain after ornament or rhetoric. 'Applied' ornament is as tasteless in writing as in art, as irrelevant and absurd as the sham Jacobean timbering that adorns the exterior of a suburban villa.

Correctness in grammar, language and spelling may seem a negative quality, but is an essential one. True, a vigorous and original writer may split infinitives and confuse the sequence of tenses in a way that would outrage the grammarians, yet we still continue to read him. We should, however, read him with even greater pleasure if he troubled a little more about grammar and style. Grammatical mistakes, misused words, bad punctuation, mis-spellings break the continuity of contact between writer and reader. They jar on the ear like a dropped 'h'. Such faults, moreover, are found more often in feeble and slipshod writing than in what is forceful and vigorous. They can be cured (except perhaps bad spelling, which is a chronic disease with many) by quite simple methods—by reading good prose, by careful re-reading of your own work, and by



the purchase of H. W. Fowler's "Modern English Usage" and a good English dictionary.

Whether a good style can be gained by imitating that of others is a controversial question. Stevenson, indeed, advised that the beginner should "play the sedulous ape" to the great masters of prose, but how often is this successful in practice? Only a strong and vigorous style, such as his own, could survive the process. Almost inevitably the imitator reproduces the mannerisms of his original and misses its essential qualities. He tends moreover to imitate writers like Henry James, G. K. Chesterton, or Ernest Hemingway, whose style is strongly marked by personal idiosyncrasy, forgetting that the subtle involuted style of James emanated from a subtle involuted mind, that Chesterton's verbal pyrotechnics are a manifestation of his flamboyant character. A good style must be an individual style, and it is as foolish for you to try to write in the manner of the great masters as for the film-struck schoolgirl to adopt the mannerisms of her favourite star. Write naturally; avoid exaggeration, 'fine' writing and the lavish use of epithets; read good prose, since this will help you to form good standards and to acquire a good ear for prose rhythms, but do not be betrayed into sedulous imitation. Style should be the reflection of mind and temper: you will cultivate a good style only by being yourself.

#### SUGGESTED READING

- "The Art of Writing." Sir Arthur Quiller Couch.
- "Modern Prose Style." Bonamy Dobrée.
- "A Writer's Notes on his Trade." C. E. Montague.

#### REFERENCE BOOKS

- "The King's English." H. W. and F. G. Fowler.
- "The Concise Oxford Dictionary." H. W. and F. G. Fowler.

### CHAPTER III

## THE ARTICLE

IF you are to succeed as a writer of articles you must make it your daily business to study the newspapers and periodicals in order to realize their requirements, the public they cater for, the style and subjects they favour, and the idiosyncrasies of particular editors. "The Writers' and Artists' Year Book" will help you here in supplying detailed information about the requirements of different papers, length of contributions, and (not least important) rates of payment, but it must be supplemented by your own personal observation. Articles are more likely to sell if they are written with a particular newspaper or journal in mind; if rejected, they may possibly suit the requirements of other editors; but if they are written without a definite objective they are unlikely to suit anyone. Restrictions in length and style may appear cramping at first, but they usually prove a stimulus rather than a burden.

In the choice of subjects topicality is more important than anything else—hence the necessity for keeping abreast of all news, the trivial as well as the significant. The difficulty of producing an article at top speed on any subject which has become "news" overnight appears at first overwhelming. In certain cases you may have special qualifications to help you. A Provençal village, for instance, or a Middle Eastern kingdom, comes suddenly into the news; everyone is interested in it; no one knows anything about it; you have actually been there; your article is as good as sold before it is written. Failing such luck, which you can hope



for only rarely, you may have recourse to the shelves of your local library and find your information there. Your task, however, is now more difficult. Nothing is more depressing than an article which smells of the guide-book or the "Encyclopædia Britannica". The information you have found must be modified, transformed, amplified by the patient pursuit of cross-references, lightened by imagination and wit, so that the reader is not only saved the trouble of seeking information for himself, but has it presented to him in an easy and entertaining manner. An article compiled in this way will never have the freshness of one based on actual experience, but it may well prove saleable if written with imagination and skill, and sent to the editor while interest in the subject is still hot. In using this method of collecting material, you must be on your guard against writing above the heads of your prospective readers. It is natural after reading learned works in a library for your style unconsciously to reflect theirs, or, because you have newly acquired large dollops of knowledge, to assume a similar knowledge in others.

Out-of-the-way facts on any subject are always likely to prove useful, and if you are taking journalism seriously you should adopt some method of classifying and recording them. A notebook is useful in which subjects may be arranged in alphabetical order, and items may be entered, or newspaper cuttings pasted in, under their appropriate headings. A more efficient, though more cumbrous, method is that of the card index, which can be bought inexpensively or made at home, and is in the long run more satisfactory. In either case, whenever a subject becomes topical, you have only to look up the appropriate entry and, within a few hours, turn your accumulated information into

an article. Many of the recondite and entertaining paragraphs in the *Manchester Guardian* miscellany column have clearly been compiled in this way. It is a mistake to try to cover too wide a field, and you should confine yourself to facts that you find interesting or amusing, whether they concern eighteenth-century dentures, the origin of skittles, the christening of race-horses, or even odder subjects.

If you have special knowledge in any field, make the most of it, and when you submit your contribution to an editor state clearly and briefly any special qualifications you may possess; he will then, as a layman, be more readily convinced as to the accuracy of your statements. The opportunities for using special knowledge are infrequent in the daily Press, although occasionally a technical subject may become of popular interest for a time—the vogue for hydroponics is a recent example. There are, however, many more opportunities to be found in technical or professional journals, or in those which deal with particular hobbies; these should be carefully studied. In writing for these be careful to adopt a suitable style. For a daily paper you need to write as simply as possible, avoiding all technicalities; but the readers of a technical paper are all in some degree experts, and will despise anything written in a popular vein.

Although the length of the article must depend largely on its subject and on the requirements of the paper for which it is written, the beginner will be well advised to confine himself at first to short articles. Space, especially in a daily paper, is precious, and editors are unlikely to accord very much of it to unknown contributors. (This will be clear enough when you see how your accepted articles are often, to your chagrin, cut down merely to



make way for news of a murder or an advertisement for pills.)

Warning should perhaps be given about the use of the first person in articles for the Press. The lively and exuberant writer may prefer it for the vividness it gives, but, except in certain cases, it is a wiser plan to write impersonally. A repeated "I" may unintentionally appear egocentric and conceited, while phrases like "it seems to me", "in my opinion" (with its Heepish brother, "in my *humble* opinion") will certainly appear pompous when used by an unknown and insignificant writer. It must be remembered that to the general reader the writer *is* insignificant, unless he happens to be a celebrity, or be known by name as a regular correspondent; the beginner must therefore efface himself with due humility. Certain types of article do, of course, demand the use of the first person. The light, humorous article owes part of its charm to its revelation of the author's character through this method. Again, in describing some exciting personal experience, use of the first person is essential to the narrative, but you must see that the narrative is vivid and arresting enough to justify its use. In a practical article in which the writer is describing some unusual process, use of the first person may help to clear the reader's doubts concerning it. (A recent article in a woman's paper, describing the washing of a tweed skirt in, somewhat surprisingly, a solution of Epsom salts, was an instance of this necessary use of the first person.) Whatever the subject on which a celebrity writes, the use of the first person is amply justified, because the article has then a double interest, both from its subject and from its author. Thus, when Ursula Bloom described in a woman's paper how she cut out and made a nightgown,

the public was interested both in the nightgown and in the novelist; had you or I been writing, the subject would have demanded a brief and impersonal treatment, and use of the first person would be out of place.

Titles need careful choice; they should be brief, stimulating and to the point. They may have the plain intention of indicating the subject-matter, in which case conciseness is the first essential, with emphasis on whatever aspect of the subject is likely to interest the reader most. Thus, for a cookery article, when eggs are scarce, the title "One-egg omelette" is more likely to tempt the housewife than the title "Tasty supper dish". You may wish, on the other hand, to tantalise the reader by concealing the subject; for this you must choose an enigmatic title which will whet his curiosity. Wit in a title may count almost as much with an editor as solid merit in the article itself. A familiar quotation, a neat literary allusion, a terse, alliterative phrase may all serve the purpose, provided they are apt to the subject. Again, it should be noted that some editors like witty or enigmatic titles, others prefer straightforward ones, so study your market and choose your title accordingly.

Practical articles have usually a ready sale, provided they are sound and original. It is no use offering information that could be found in any recipe book or handyman's guide in the hope that the editor will not know. He probably will not, but he will certainly pass your contribution on to somebody who does. There is perhaps greater scope for articles on women's subjects, but the demand is wide, not only for articles on dressmaking, cookery, housewifery, the care of children and other exclusively feminine subjects, but



also for articles on woodwork, gardening, wireless, electricity, poultry-keeping, pets, and the like. The demand for information on these different subjects fluctuates according to fashion, season and the requirements of the time. It is of no use explaining how to make felt flowers, if felt flowers are out of fashion, or home-made candies, if sugar is scarce. Articles on spring-cleaning and house-decoration will be in greatest demand in April and May, gardening articles in spring and summer. Common-sense and, as always, study of the market will determine your choice.

Articles such as these must, of course, be based on actual practical experience, and they should aim at brevity, clearness and exactitude. Frequently those who are expert in any process tend to leave out essential steps in it to the confusion of the uninitiated, or their directions lack precision because, knowing so clearly what they mean, fuller explanation seems unnecessary. Cookery recipes are often deplorably vague. They say "bake in a moderate oven" when they should also add the exact oven temperature or the "regulo" setting for electric and gas ovens, or write "sugar" without explaining what kind of sugar is needed. All measurements given in practical articles should be exact, all directions unambiguous and foolproof. Diagrams, though useful, should be avoided where possible, since they take up valuable space. If you are uncertain whether your article will be entirely clear to a layman, submit it to a friend who knows nothing of the subject and accept his verdict.

The writer of practical articles must assume a certain ignorance in his readers; the writer of serious articles (on politics, economics, education, music, literature and kindred subjects) must, on the contrary, assume

in them a certain intelligence, since without it they are unlikely to read anything serious at all. The degree of their intelligence can be estimated only by general study of the newspaper or journal for which the article is written; it will probably vary in proportion to the paper's circulation. The paper that caters for a wide public, of varying grades of education and intelligence, will demand articles written in a popular vein, intelligent and sound in themselves, but not requiring too much previous knowledge in the reader. That with a small circulation may be judged to reach a circle of readers with a more uniform educational standard, and the writer can therefore presuppose in them a fair standard of knowledge, and write his article accordingly. No editor of a popular paper will accept an article that seems above the head of his public; no editor of an "intelligent" weekly can accept one that carries with it the unflattering implication that his readers are simpletons or ignoramusēs; no reader, however long-suffering, will put up with patronage, or tolerate the man who "writes down" to him.

Whatever the subject covered, the writer must possess real, not superficial, knowledge. The subject must be topical, though his treatment of it need not be original, but may be simply a summary of recently known facts and ideas. If the writer wishes to put forward an original viewpoint, it must be based on fact, not on theory or on ignorance. Every editor likes originality, but none will wish to stir up a hornet's nest of angry correspondents, all better informed than the writer of the offending article. The writer must distinguish, too, between real originality and the mere pig-headed prejudice which often passes for it. Once gain a reputation for having a bee in your bonnet and



you will find it very difficult to shake off. It needs restraint and sound judgment to write an article on politics, or literature, or music, or any other even faintly controversial subject, which will combine individual thought and opinion with lack of personal bias.

In planning the article, pay especial attention to its proportions, and do not be ensnared into over-lengthy discussion of a particular aspect of the subject that interests you solely. Spend time in finding an arresting opening and a satisfying, and not too abrupt, conclusion; but let both be strictly relevant, or you may find your fine opening and sonorous close snipped away by an unimpressionable sub-editor, who cares more for space than style.

The book review deserves separate discussion since it has its own peculiar pitfalls. Of reviewers it has been written—

“ People with a turn for spite  
Write about what others write,  
And their still more spiteful brothers  
Write on those who write on others . . . ”

but they do in fact deserve a far kinder epigram. They work hard for a modest reward, and their task is a responsible one that earns little praise in return. Lucky fellows, some may think, to be *paid* for the pleasure of reading. Let those who think so try reading a dozen novels, mostly bad, in a week or less, and see if they are not suffering from mental dyspepsia at the end of it. The reviewer's difficulties are further complicated by the fact that he must frequently pack his comments on a batch of novels into a quite inadequate space, so that he can give full discussion to one only at the expense of the rest. He is expected to be just to the authors, and equally just to the public that relies on his judgment,

and he has, in addition, to be entertaining. It is not surprising that he is often tempted to be harsh and sarcastic, even to the point of injustice, for it is much easier to be amusingly malicious than to deal out honest criticism in the small space at his command, and, oddly enough, people are far more likely to respect his judgment when he damns a book than when he does not. A reviewer *must* have integrity and do justice both to author and public; to write interestingly is important also, but it must be a secondary consideration.

The contrary temptation must also be withstood, that of praising indiscriminately what is not worth praise. Amiability or self-interest may drive a reviewer into a habit of giving easy commendation. He may be an author himself and wish to conciliate fellow-authors who may one day review his own work; or he may be anxious to conciliate the publishers on whose advertisements the paper depends. Both motives are unsound and rarely accomplish their ends. The practice of pleasing the publishers is common enough, but in the long run the favourable judgment of one honest critic will do more to sell a book than the commendations of ten such venal ones. Above all, beware of discovering "masterpieces" once a week: they are too soon discredited.

The purpose of a review is to inform the reader of the quality of the book and to give him some notion of its subject. This does not mean, as some appear to believe, that a review should give a résumé of its contents. The common practice of outlining the plot of a novel is to be deplored by reader and author alike. Nothing is more insipid than a bald narrative summary, and the reader, feeling that he knows all that happens in the story, is not tempted to buy the book. Such



summaries, moreover, occupy disproportionate space, so that there is little room left to discuss aspects of the novel that are of greater importance than the plot. The reviewer must, of course, indicate the theme and setting of the novel, but he should reveal no more of the plot than is necessary to whet the reader's curiosity or to make clear what he himself has to say by way of criticism.

Non-fiction, especially of a serious or controversial kind, requires a different treatment from the novel. It is usually given for reviewing to a specialist in the subject who will be able to judge how far the author has covered new ground and to discuss any controversial questions raised. In writing such reviews it is important to remember that they will be read by laymen as well as specialists, and that they must be comprehensible to both. In too many learned reviews the critic seems to be conducting a private argument with the author without any thought for the general reader at all.

In judging the qualities of a book, personal taste must play a large part, but the reviewer must also try to gauge public taste and must put himself into the place of the common reader. It may be asked how far he may introduce general topics into his discussion of particular books, but this is a question best answered by the editor, since it is dependent on the space at his disposal and on the merit and reputation of the reviewer. We are well content to read Mr. Agate's views on the theatre and on Mr. Agate; we are as much interested in Mr. Desmond McCarthy's general criticism as in his criticism of particular books; from an unknown and less accomplished writer, however, little more is expected than a straightforward review of the book in question. Introductory discussion may be allowed if there is room enough, but it must be relevant, sound, and must not

occupy disproportionate space. The unpractised reviewer is ill advised to imitate the discursive method of Mr. Agate and Mr. McCarthy.

The most difficult article to write, and the most difficult to write about, is the light humorous essay, or, in technical jargon, the "light middle". It is best defined by illustration. The essays of Robert Lynd (or "Y.Y.") in the *New Statesman* fall into this category, as do also his Saturday essays in the *News Chronicle*; the "fourth leader" in *The Times* is another example, the mildly humorous or gently satiric article that follows the serious leading articles. Ivor Brown has a weekly contribution of the same kind in the *Manchester Guardian*, and most periodicals, and most newspapers on at least one day in the week, find space for writing of this kind. The authors are frequently old hands, essayists of standing, but there is room for the newcomer too, provided he shows real skill in this difficult genre.

The "light middle" is the lineal descendant of the periodical essay of Addison and Steele, and to a great extent it demands the same qualities that they so notably possessed. Humour there must be, or at least a very pretty wit; grace and ease of style (no showy writing here); if not solid learning, a familiarity with learning's lighter side; neatness of phrase; lightness of touch; above all, the ability, of which we spoke before, to win the reader's confidence and talk to him as a friend.

The subject is unimportant, and may be as trivial as you please. Steele, in Queen Anne's day, wrote about the fine lady's patches and her great hooped petticoats; the modern essayist is as happy writing about her cosmetics or her hats. Or he may prefer to write about the joys of breakfast in bed or crumpets for tea, or the



virtue of laziness or the vice of punctuality. His subject may be topical, or it may be suggested by some personal incident that concerned himself alone. Thus Robert Lynd breaks his spectacles and consoles himself by turning the accident into an essay. G. K. Chesterton, losing his ticket in a train, turns out all his pockets and reflects on what he found there. In all such essays manner is more than matter; the treatment is everything.

Much of the charm of such essays lies in their intimacy: the writer, one feels, might be sitting by one's own fireside, pipe in mouth, feet on mantelpiece. Warning has been given earlier in the chapter about the dangers of using the first person in the wrong place; in the light familiar essay it comes into its own. But, since it expresses the writer's personality so directly, it is essential that his personality be a likeable one. The use of the first person is all-revealing; the slightest trace of pomposity or of conscious cleverness is immediately perceptible. If it is essential in this form of essay that the writer should look with a humorous eye upon the world, it is equally essential that he look humorously upon himself. Robert Lynd's attitude is always one of mild self-deprecation. We are made to look through his own eyes at his tall, angular figure, his untidy clothes; his addiction to patent medicines, his weakness for tobacco; we see him as a small boy, greedy for sweets, nervous of dogs, dominated by literary ambition, dogged by a devout presbyterian fear of Hell. We know him and like him for his weaknesses. Should we ever enjoy his humour so much if it were always directed against others, never against himself?

Personality, however, must not obtrude so much that it becomes egotism; the personal and the impersonal must be nicely blended. Let us take, by way of illustra-

tion, Robert Lynd's essay "Forgetting" \* and analyse its structure, noting the way in which these two elements are intermingled.

It opens on a topical note. A long list, recently published, of property lost on the railway leads him to consider whether absent-mindedness is nevertheless really common. The memory of modern man is astonishing—"How many men forget a single item of their clothing when dressing in the morning?" From this he proceeds to a discussion of matters most easily forgotten—the taking of medicines, the posting of letters, especially other people's letters; and of things most easily lost—umbrellas, walking-sticks, cricket bats, tennis racquets. Absent-mindedness can be all but a virtue—"Who would have trusted Socrates or Coleridge to post a letter? They had souls above such things." Good memories, he concludes, are so common in these days that forgetfulness is regarded as eccentricity, and he closes with an anecdote illustrating surpassing absent-mindedness.

In this essay the discussion has been general, the illustrations largely drawn from his own experience—his forgetfulness, for instance, in posting letters, his inability, in spite of his devotion to the medicine bottle, to take his medicine regularly. The structure, casual at first sight, is cunningly concealed: he passes by easy transitions from one point to another, and finally returns to the point at which he started, clinching it with an absurd and charming anecdote.

The construction of essays of this sort is extremely important. They must appear easy and spontaneous, but, if they are not to be rambling and incoherent, they must be carefully planned before ever they are

\* From "I Tremble to Think".



written. The writer's craft must then be used to conceal the plan and to link its parts into a smooth succession, so that in the finished essay the reader is led casually on from point to point without apparent method or purpose. This "art concealing art" is to a great extent instinctive in the practised essayist; without a natural bent for this kind of writing the beginner will find it extremely difficult to master. It defies perseverance and must come unforced. In the same way, the humour which is an essential element in the light essay must be free and unforced if it is not to degenerate into mere facetiousness. Unless, therefore, you discover from the first a natural aptitude for this form of writing, you would do better to devote your talents to something less elusive.

### EXERCISES

(a) Write an article of approximately 200 words in length describing some practical process or recommending some hobby or handicraft with which you are familiar.

(b) Write a serious article of approximately 1200 words in length on any subject which has recently become topical.

(c) Write a light, humorous essay of approximately 1000 words in length on "Sweets" or on "The Old School Tie", and then turn to "I Tremble to Think" by Robert Lynd and see how he has treated the same subjects.

(d) Write (i) a review of approximately 500 words on some modern work of non-fiction which you have recently read, and (ii) a review of approximately 500 words on three modern novels you have recently read. (Avoid choosing those of which you have already read reviews.)

### SUGGESTED READING

"Writing for the Press." Leonard Russell.

"Writing for Women." Emilie Peacocke.

"Humorous Writing." A. A. Thomson.

Collections of light essays such as the following :—

"I Tremble to Think." Robert Lynd.

"Along the Road." Aldous Huxley.

"First and Last." Hilaire Belloc.

"Tremendous Trifles." G. K. Chesterton.

## CHAPTER IV

# FICTION (GENERAL)

THERE are few writers who at some time or other do not try their hand at fiction; few readers, however austere, who do not now and then give way to its charm. For both it provides a channel of escape from tram-melling realities; it is as necessary to the adult as the world of make-believe is to the child, fretted by the boredom of bed or the frustrations of a wet holiday. Not that it necessarily provides an escape into a better or braver world, for how then should we account for the popularity of war novels or of realistic studies of life in factory and slum? We are disturbed by such books, we experience vicarious miseries and hardships that in our own lives we should at all costs hope to avoid. We do not enjoy them, but they attract us because they free us from the limitations of personal experience and provide an entry to a world other than our own. Or, even if we have shared the experiences they recount, we feel the same sense of escape because we see them through the eyes of another, and see them often with a clearer vision and a deeper understanding. The war veteran, looking back, may remember only confusedly the mud and blood, the plum jam and bully beef, the lice and wet and boredom and fatigue, but reading Erich Maria Remarque or Siegfried Sassoon he is aware of thoughts and sensations, then but half realized, later half-forgotten, and through their writing he views his own experience with a new and profounder comprehension.

Herein lies the spell of the finest fiction : it illuminates



reality and shows us the significance of things, so that after reading "War and Peace" or "Jude the Obscure" we are, according to our capacity, changed and deepened, and can never think or feel in quite the same way as we did before. Everyday life is too crowded with experiences, many of them trivial, for us to have time to see them objectively or as a whole; we are too occupied with eating and sleeping, talking and working, to be able to see behind all this activity the pattern of living or to guess at its meaning. It is the writer who must do this for us, focussing our vision on what is important, relegating what is trivial to its proper place, bringing to light those half-thoughts, half-feelings which we dimly apprehend, making us understand ourselves through our understanding of his imaginary characters. It is, of course, only writers of genius who have this surpassing power to illuminate and interpret, but every honest and sensitive writer possesses it in some small degree. It is a power, moreover, which grows the more it is used, so that the writing of fiction might be recommended for no other reason than as a means of deepening and enlarging the writer's own vision of life.

But we do not always want to escape from the trivialities of life to its profundities; we may merely want, as the saying goes, "to be taken out of ourselves". Fiction can help us to lay aside our solemnities and escape into a gallant world of comedy, adventure, fantasy, make-believe. The roads of escape are many; we might, in fact, classify types of fiction according to the ways of escape they offer. Commonest of all is that which satisfies the universal longing to be what we are not—hence for the overworked housemaid the charm of the novelette of "high life", for the sedate clerical worker the allurements of the "western", for the shy and

tongue-tied schoolgirl the appeal of the fashionable "romance". The secret of commercial success in writing depends largely on the writer's ability to satisfy this psychological need. It is not, however, for this reason to be under-rated, for the quality of a story lies not in its theme or purpose, but in its treatment. Stevenson, by no means alone among great writers, satisfies our wishful day-dreaming. We should all like to be as brave and sagacious as David Balfour in "Kidnapped", as enterprising as Jim Hawkins in "Treasure Island," and we may be fairly sure that Stevenson, an invalid most of his life, satisfied his private longings for adventure by choosing such tough and active fellows for his heroes.

Fiction in another guise appeals to that nostalgia for the past which grows with the years and which is soothed by plays such as "Cavalcade", or stories of childhood such as Kenneth Grahame's "The Golden Age" and "Dream Days". It is satisfied also in a somewhat different way by that kind of historical fiction which is based on the fallacy that past periods were more gallant, more romantic, more exciting than our own. This gives us the chance moreover of mentally masquerading in fancy dress, and who would not rather swagger in doublet and hose than in black striped trousers, or wear a farthingale in preference to a plain tweed skirt? Serious historical fiction attempts, indeed, to show life in the past as it really was, not as we would romantically wish it to be, but this is another matter, and will be discussed elsewhere.\*

Fantasy provides the completest escape of all from everyday reality, and perhaps because of this is, of all modes of escape, the least generally popular. The

\* See pp. 99-111.



scientific fantasies of H. G. Wells or the wildly picturesque fantasies of G. K. Chesterton are recognized for what they are; romances more firmly rooted in everyday life, though they may be equally unrealistic, yet satisfy simpler readers by an air of half-truth. The nursery-maid *might* marry a duke, but in their cooler moments they would regard it as unlikely that the earth should be invaded by warriors from Mars.

Modern taste, on the whole, inclines more to realism than to fantasy, and there is a growing public that desires, not mere entertainment, but a more comprehensive view of reality. This does not mean that fiction must be a precise reflection of reality, or that art, as it has been said, should hold up a mirror to life. To reflect life in every detail, even if it were possible, would be merely to ape the art of the photographer. The task of the writer is to make us see a segment of life through his own eyes, to select what is significant, and to impress on that his own interpretation. The world of fact and the world of fiction must always be separate, though always closely linked. This is clear to anyone who has tried to "lift" a character from life and insert it in a story, and has discovered how odd and unsatisfactory is the effect. The real and the imagined characters are incompatible, and it is those drawn directly from life that appear unconvincing. (This is not to say that fictional characters cannot be based on real people; the important point is that they must be transmuted in the author's imagination so that they harmonize with their imaginary setting.) In the same way actual spoken dialogue, as soon as it appears in print, almost inevitably loses its living quality, and is ineffective as well as banal. It is only when character, scene and dialogue have lain in the author's mind, have

been sieved, as it were, by an unconscious selective process, and recreated in his imagination, that they become the living stuff of fiction.

In its primary essential the art of fiction has changed little since time began. We still demand a story, are impatient for its unfolding, eager to know the end, even though in our more sophisticated moments we are also profoundly interested in its characters, construction and style. The early story-teller, the lame man or blind minstrel left at home while his fellows hunted and fought, knew the needs of his hearers. Their life was hard and dangerous, and they wanted stories that would make them forget their own weariness in hearing of the hardships and dangers of others. So the story-teller crowded his tale with incident and adventure. Odysseus is shipwrecked; his companions broiled and eaten by a giant; he narrowly escapes the snares of an enchantress, and, after innumerable adventures, he returns home at last to harry and slay the suitors. Beowulf must slay a monster and go beneath the waters to slay the monster's dam; he must find hidden treasure and fight with a dragon. The emphasis in the story is on action; it does not matter if the incidents are not welded into a neat plot, if the characters are less individuals than heroic types. With such good tales to tell who would care?

It is only as the audience becomes more sophisticated that story begins to give way to plot and characterization becomes important. What is the distinction between *story* and *plot*? For the best answer we may turn to E. M. Forster's brilliant study, "Aspects of the Novel", in which he defines a *story* as a narrative of events connected only by time sequence, a *plot* as a narrative of events connected by a chain of causality. The first



demands little of the reader save passive acceptance; he has no need to exert either intelligence or power of memory. The second demands the exercise of both, since all parts of the plot are interlinked, and no single episode can be detached from the rest. The plot is clearly the more sophisticated form; its attraction lies partly in its element of mystery, partly in the aesthetic satisfaction we feel in its gradual unfolding. It is not, however, to be regarded therefore as superior, and many of our greatest novelists have preferred the story form. Scott, for instance, excels in telling a story, but his handling of plot is often far from happy (compare the exciting *story* of Jeannie Deans' journey to London in "The Heart of Midlothian" with the melodramatic final episode of the *plot* in which Effie's son unwittingly kills his own father). Dickens likewise attempts plot, but his novels almost invariably fall into the story form. There are elements of plot in "David Copperfield", but they are its most artificial and least successful elements. Of modern writers Eric Linklater in "Juan in America" (surely his best novel) appears at his happiest in handling a very loose episodic story form, while in such a novel as "Ripeness is All" he turns to highly farcical plot. It seems, indeed, that the more exuberant writers find the story form their natural medium, while more careful and self-conscious craftsmen find delight in a delicately elaborated plot. Jane Austen handles plot and character alike with supreme ease, and in her novels they are never in conflict, as so frequently happens in the work of lesser artists. "Emma" is a beautiful example of a novel in which character and plot expand freely without ever cramping each other; it contains, moreover, a pleasant element of mystery that culminates in an ingenious and surprising ending.

Conflict between character and plot occurs almost inevitably (in all writers who are not Jane Austens) when the characters begin to take on a vitality of their own, and to act according to the dictates of their own nature instead of as their creator intended. It is easy to design a tolerably good plot; far harder to create living characters to play the rôles in it; the hardest task in the world to persuade them to stick to the rôles assigned to them. Which, then, must give way—character or plot? Some forms and some themes demand that the plot be given first place, even at the cost of cramping character. In detective fiction the plot is everything, and the author is to be earnestly congratulated if live human characters can be found among the inevitable concourse of corpses, coroners, dunderheaded policemen and brilliant amateur detectives. This is true in a lesser degree of the fiction of adventure, where the characters are often limited by the necessities of the plot, and are anyway so much occupied in fighting, stealing secret documents, breaking into houses or being kidnapped by their enemies, to have much time to display any human idiosyncrasies. (Genius, of course, belies this generalization: Stevenson's heroes and villains, however much occupied with deeds of violence, are always full of individual vitality.) In other forms of fiction it is far wisest to let the characters develop spontaneously (if they will), even though in doing so they may make havoc of a tidy plot. Once the author tries to set them back on their pre-ordained path, they mutiny and will behave stiffly and inhumanly until he lets them go free again.

The story form (as opposed to the plot) gives greater freedom, since it can develop from episode to episode, and is not so closely bound to what has gone before



and what is to come. In this it is like life, which rarely follows the Aristotelian pattern of complication, climax and *dénouement*; but, on the other hand, it fails to supply that aesthetic satisfaction in form and pattern which, consciously or unconsciously, we demand in a work of art. The writer who seeks the right compromise will start with a not too precise concept of his story or plot and a very clear concept of his characters, and he will allow them to influence the minor episodes as they will, while not altering the main outline of the action. (But this is a subject which must be dealt with more fully in discussion of the novel.)

Hardly less important than character in fiction are background and atmosphere. Psychologists have written a great deal about the influence of environment, and it is commonly accepted that our characters are moulded and our lives coloured by the background against which we live. To the good novelist the characters are inseparable from their setting, an integral part of the world in which they move. Again one thinks instinctively of Jane Austen: we must be fully aware of the sedate prosperity of Mansfield Park to understand the characters of Fanny and the Bertrams; the pompous splendour of Lady Catherine de Bourgh is merged with the pompous splendour of Rosings. In some fiction the background of house or countryside play almost as large a part in influencing the action as the characters themselves. In "The Edwardians," by V. Sackville-West, the great family mansion is a living force against which Sebastian and Viola in turn rebel.

Characters draw life and actuality from their background, and if it is a mere painted backcloth then they will appear painted and lifeless too. The writer must himself know familiarly the scene in which he sets them,

must in imagination have haunted the same lanes and climbed the same stairs to bed, know the colour of the sitting-room wallpaper and the housemaid's Christian name; he must, in short, be as intimately acquainted with all the material details that are never mentioned in his work as he is with those that are. Only thus will he be sure that the world he creates is built on solid foundations.

### SUGGESTED READING

- "The Craft of Fiction." Percy Lubbock.  
"The Writing of Fiction." Edith Wharton.

The following short stories should be read in preparation for the next chapter :—

- "The Garden Party." Katherine Mansfield. (From "The Garden Party and Other Stories." Cape.)  
"The Man who Stole the Pelican." I. A. Williams. (From "The First Mercury Story Book." Part 2. Longmans.)  
"The Undefeated." Ernest Hemingway. (From "Men without Women." Cape.)  
"Once Aboard the Lugger." Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. (From "Selected Stories by Q." Dent.)



## CHAPTER V

# THE SHORT STORY

“SHORT story” is a wide term that may cover anything from a brief sketch to something perhaps a third the length of an average novel. It may adopt an almost infinite variety of forms and may cover an altogether unlimited range of subjects. The problem for the writer is to find the right form for his subject, or, if he is writing for a magazine or periodical a story of prescribed length, to find a subject that can be fairly treated at the length prescribed. (Such a seemingly Procrustean process may appear unworthy of the dignity of his art, but it does, in fact, help the amateur to discriminate in his choice of theme and to learn economy in its treatment.)

Common sense or commercial necessity will in most cases condition the choice of subject. Certain themes clearly demand full-length treatment in a novel, and cannot be adequately dealt with in a short story, even a long “short story”. The novel form is necessary when the theme is centred in the *inner* life of a character, so that it cannot be revealed in a flash, but must be disclosed little by little; when, for the purposes of the story, characters must change and develop; when a plot is highly complex, or crowded with characters or when it must cover a long period of time. Simple themes and comparatively simple characters are most easily handled in the short story, since a complex plot is too apt to sound like the synopsis of a novel, and a too subtle character may seem eccentric or unconvincing because it has not sufficient room to develop.

The need for a writer to be on familiar terms with his subject is obvious enough, but cannot be too much stressed. We tend to regard what is most familiar as being too commonplace for fiction, while the unknown appears romantic by its unfamiliarity. Eleven-year-old Daisy Ashford in "The Young Visitors" aspires to write of court circles, and shows the Prince of Wales eating ices at a levée "in a small but costly crown"; that is excellent fun, but the grown-up writer who, in venturing out of his familiar world, makes milder and less brilliant blunders merely makes a fool of himself. The real stuff of fiction lies not in our wishful daydreams but in the familiar world about us; it is the writer's task to recognize its potentialities and his own limitations.

The way in which a story is to be told depends to a great extent upon what it is about, but the author has considerable freedom of choice. He may write as one gifted with divine omniscience, knowing all about his characters and able to describe their inmost thoughts with complete assurance; or he may write as an impartial spectator, seeing all, but displaying no inside knowledge of his characters, allowing them instead to reveal themselves through their words and actions. He may choose to write from the standpoint of one of them, and, though using the third person, make us see the action through the eyes of this one particular character; or he may carry this third method a stage farther by putting the narrative into the mouth of one of the characters and using the first person throughout.

The first method is the easiest to handle and allows the greatest freedom, but it has one disadvantage which the third and fourth methods have not; it is apt in certain circumstances to sound unconvincing and to make the reader impatient of taking so much on trust. The



second method demands more dramatic skill than the first, since the writer must not explain the characters to us, but must make them speak and act in such a way as to explain themselves. The third and fourth methods restrict him, since he must view his narrative largely through the eyes of a single character, who can be in only one place at a time, and can possess a range of vision that is merely human. They do, however, give an air of solidity to the narrative, for the reader, by identifying himself with one character, is made to feel his experiences at first hand. Such methods are particularly suited to fantastic or somewhat incredible themes. Ghost stories, for instance, are much more frightening when told in the first person, while, if told by either of the first two methods described, they may appear merely melodramatic. The reason seems to be that the reader will accept the word of the fictional character, whom he has the illusion of knowing, rather than that of the author about whom he knows nothing. Henry James in "The Turn of the Screw" subtly elaborates this method. He opens with a Christmas company discussing ghosts round the fire; the host hints at a story more terrible than any they have heard; the story, which is finally read from a manuscript, is told in the first person by a woman he had known, who had herself experienced its horror. "Q" does somewhat the same in "The Roll Call of the Reef";\* he begins in the first person but puts the actual story into the mouth of "my host the quarryman", who tells what he has been told by his father. Both James and "Q" in this achieve a double effect of remoteness and actuality—a remoteness that makes us ready to credit whatever may

\* From "Wandering Heath" (Cassell) or "Selected Stories" by "Q" (J. M. Dent).

happen, an actuality that makes us share the strangeness of the experience recounted.

But the question of form must be further dealt with in considering the novel. (See Chapter VI.) The important point is for the writer to choose whatever method suits his story and his own temperament and style, and then faithfully abide within the limitations of that method.

How and where to begin a story is always something of a problem. The opening of a novel can be leisurely, the characters loitering in one by one, but in a short story we must plunge directly in with as little introduction as possible, at whatever point of time falls nearest to the kernel of the narrative. That is the main issue; to find an arresting opening is important, but of secondary importance only. A too arresting opening, moreover, is inevitably followed by anticlimax. It is no use beginning, " ' Hell ! ' cried the Archbishop ", unless you can not only continue at that pitch but can pass in a grand crescendo to a nerve-shattering conclusion—and that, of course, is difficult. It is far better to begin more soberly and allow your story to rise by degrees to its climax.

Dialogue is often recommended as an effective form of opening, and in some cases it is, while in others it is merely cumbrous. Thus you may begin: " ' Wait a moment and I'll let you in. ' The speaker, a dark pretty girl of about eighteen, leant from the window and thus addressed the young man below who had evidently just knocked at the door. " There the dialogue opening has only led to cumbrous explanation, and there is no reason on earth why the story should not begin—" The young man knocked on the door "—which has at least the merit of simplicity. Clearly, if dialogue is to be used as



an opening, it must be of a self-explanatory kind, and directness and economy must not be sacrificed to the desire to buttonhole the reader's attention. The opening must be attractive, and is all the better for being original, but the reader's interest can be stimulated as easily by gentle methods as by blowing a trumpet in his ear.

Ending a story is less difficult, but still requires skill. The kind of ending, as well as the kind of beginning, must depend on the nature of the story itself. If it is a story where plot-interest is dominant, then the best ending is one which is both neat and unexpected—that has, in fact, the same effectiveness as a good 'curtain line' in a play.\* If, on the other hand, the story is of an impressionistic kind, where the emphasis is on character and atmosphere, it is important that the ending should not be too neat or dramatic, since this would give an effect of artificiality. It should be quieter, should even, in some cases, lack finality; the dividing line between fiction and reality will thus become almost imperceptible, and the characters will seem to continue their lives outside the pages of the story. This is the kind of ending in which Katherine Mansfield excels, and her methods should be carefully studied.

There is little scope in the narrow confines of the short story for character and plot to develop sufficiently to come into conflict. Instead, two divergent tendencies in short-story writing seem to emerge—towards character on the one hand, and towards plot and situation on the other. Yet even in the short story (often little more than an impression), in which character plays a pre-

\* For a good example of this type of ending, see "The Shameless Behaviour of a Lord" in "These Charming People", by Michael Arlen.

eminent part, there is little room for subtle characterization or for character development. The first can be convincingly revealed only through a multiplicity of incidents, the second only over a period of time; and the short story, if it is to be effective, must confine itself to a brief period and isolated episode. But if the short-story writer cannot portray the whole character, he can portray a single side of it which will help us to guess at the rest; if he cannot show character growing and developing, he can so illuminate a brief hour of time that we can look both before and behind, and guess what was and is to come. This implies that he must know much more about his characters than space allows him to tell us, that he must know them, if not as fully as the novelist knows his creations, at least as familiarly. Only when he sees the whole character clearly in his mind can he decide what facet, what mood he shall reveal, what incident through which to reveal it. Tchegov and Katherine Mansfield both have this power of conceiving character "in depth", and then revealing one quality of mood so unforgettably that through it we instinctively understand the whole.

Where the emphasis of the story is on situation, character must play a minor but essential part. No intelligent reader can be entirely absorbed by plot, however good, or content that the characters should be puppets merely, but, on the other hand, there is not room for character and plot to develop in equal proportions. The most effective solution is to exaggerate certain qualities in the main characters, throwing them into high relief in order to focus the reader's attention. Consider, for example, the carefully exaggerated ordinariness of Chesterton's Father Brown, the mannered languors of Michael Arlen's men-about-town, the



deliberate "Wimseyness" of Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter. We do not believe in these people, but they intrigue us, and, because we are chiefly concerned with following their adventures, we do not gravely trouble ourselves at their unreality.

Something must be said of the place of dialogue in the short story. It is a common fallacy that a book or a story which is full of dialogue will be light and easy to read, and therefore attractive to a large and lazy-minded public. In practice, however, large tracts of dialogue (especially of the "breezier" kind) can be exasperatingly dull. Dialogue has certain definite uses in fiction, but, especially in the short story, it must be used with economy. Certain forms, it is true, demand it. It is the very fabric of the dramatic sketch (as typified in T. Thompson's Lancashire studies); in other forms it should be kept strictly within its functions, which are to illustrate character, to create an air of naturalism, and to relieve eye and ear from the monotony of plain prose. Unnecessary dialogue slows up the action, and it must therefore be used with economy in stories where plot interest is dominant, and, though more liberally, yet with discretion in stories where character is of first importance. It must be easy and natural always, but it must not, except in special circumstances and for a deliberate purpose,\* echo the commonplaces and trivialities of everyday conversation. The writer's task is to convey the *quality* of talk without its banality, selecting only what is relevant to the story and retaining only such mannerisms as lend a flavour to speech and emphasize individuality of character.†

\* As in the conversation of Miss Bates in Jane Austen's "Emma".

† For a brilliant example of selection in the use of dialogue, see the first chapter of "Pride and Prejudice".

When dialect is used it should not be so broad or so full of local words and idioms that a glossary is needed to make it intelligible to the uninitiated. Broad dialect is permissible if the writer has a particular circle of readers in mind,\* but in general it should be suggested rather than exactly reproduced (somewhat as the Scots comedian on a London stage suggests profound "Scotchness" while speaking very little genuine Scots). Indication of accent by an elaborate system of phonetic spelling should be avoided; it usually looks like gibberish to the uninitiated, and almost always discourages the lazy.

Dialogue provides the most searching test of the writer's power of selection, but in the short story he must exercise this power continuously. Vividness and clarity are essential, and he must therefore choose those details which will stand out in sharp relief, and must avoid a multiplicity of detail which the reader has no time to absorb without bewilderment. Nursery tales can teach a lesson here: we are told no more of Goldilocks than the colour of her hair, no more of Red Riding Hood than the scarlet of her hood, but that is enough to give us a clear picture of them both. In a novel we should want to know much more; in a short story we need to know only enough to enable us to visualize the characters and their setting. There is no room for static description; what is given should be given as part of the narrative and is in this way more effective. Thus, it is less interesting to be told that the hero had untidy tow-coloured hair than to be told that "he ran his fingers through his untidy tow-coloured hair": the first gives us a portrait, the second a motion

\* As T. Thompson in his Lancashire sketches written for the *Manchester Guardian*.



picture. Again, though it is important that we should realize the background, it need not be elaborately painted in. A few suggestive brush-strokes are more effective than pre-Raphaelite accuracy of detail. Too elaborate a background tends to dwarf the characters, just as too elaborate description of their appearance prevents us from seeing them as living figures.

The selection of detail, the treatment of character and plot, the handling of dialogue are alike dependent on the subject, on the way in which it is treated, and on the effect the writer wishes to make. Much can be learnt from the study of accomplished craftsmen (though the amateur is again warned against the perils of imitation), and in the rest of this chapter it seems worthwhile to consider how four good writers, each in a different genre, have dealt with their material.

In "The Garden Party", by Katherine Mansfield, the emphasis is laid on character and atmosphere, the subject itself being slight, and seeming to less discerning eyes almost inadequate. It is an account of a young girl's day, from her first eager preparations for her mother's garden-party to her frightened evening visit to a neighbouring cottage where a carter, killed that morning in a road accident, is lying dead. The point of the story lies in the contrast between the summer gaiety of the party and the tragedy in the carter's cottage, and the effect of this contrast on the warm-hearted, sensitive Laura.

The opening is abrupt—"And after all the weather was ideal"—but it brings us to the threshold of the story and at the same time makes us share all the anxieties and speculations that have gone before. Happiness is to be the keynote of Laura's day, so for her every detail

is significant : we feel her delight in the friendliness of the men who come to put up the marquee, her shocked rapture at the arrival of an extravagant load of cannalilies for the party, her childish pleasure in eating cream puffs in the kitchen—then, cutting across all this bustle and gaiety, comes the news of the carter's death. Laura's first horrified cry is that they must stop the party, but her sister José is annoyed, her mother amused and irritated at what she regards as extravagance of sentiment—besides, Laura must try on her new hat. “ ‘ It's made for you. I have never seen you look such a picture. Look at yourself ! ’ And she held up her hand-mirror.” But Laura will not look and goes off indignantly to her own room, where, “ quite by chance, the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat trimmed with gold daisies and a long black velvet ribbon ”. Was her mother right? Was she behaving absurdly? She begins to hope so, and pleasure in the new hat and in the party make the thought of the dead carter and his stricken family fade from her mind. This is the turning point of the story. The guests arrive, the party is a success, Laura in her black-and-gold hat is enchanting and enchanted; then, when the last guest has departed, talk returns once more to the tragedy of the morning. Mrs. Sheridan, blandly confident of what “ people of that class ” would like, decides to send Laura with a basketful of the good things left over from the party. Laura, reluctant, frightened, is taken into the cottage, into the room where the dead man lies.

“ There lay a young man fast asleep—sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far away from them both . . . His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids.



He was given up to his dream. What did garden-parties and lace frocks matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this wonder had come to the lane. . . . Laura gave a loud childish sob. 'Forgive my hat,' she said."

Her brother meets her at the end of the lane.

" 'Was it awful? '

" 'No,' sobbed Laura. 'It was simply marvellous. But, Laurie——' She stopped, she looked at her brother. 'Isn't life,' she stammered, 'isn't life——' But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.

" 'Isn't it, darling? ' said Laurie."

The ending, in its indefiniteness, perfectly sums up Laura's bewildered sense of the wonder of life, and her unfinished sentence is far more eloquent than any epigram. We leave her walking up the road with Laurie, walking back into that real and continuous life from which Katherine Mansfield has for a brief space summoned them. Both ending and beginning fade imperceptibly, it seems, into a background of reality.

How has she achieved this effect? It comes mainly from the vitality of her characterization. The story is told for the most part from Laura's angle, and we see it as it is reflected in her young, wondering mind; but Katherine Mansfield has not used this method alone in telling her story; she blends it with the "dramatic" method, presenting her characters and letting them reveal themselves. That they do this so well is a consequence of her own close familiarity with them. She has lived with the Sheridan family, not merely on the day of the garden-party, but for far longer, and so she knows that it is perfectly in character for Mrs.

Sheridan to lose the sandwich list, or for the cook to urge the girls to eat cream puffs after breakfast with " ' Have one each, my dears. Yer ma won't know.' "

The style also adds much to the freshness and naturalness of the story. Dialogue is easy and lively, and the style of the rest of the prose is in subtle harmony with it, and, without being colloquial, echoes the rhythm and idiom of speech. " As for the roses . . . hundreds, yes, literally hundreds, had come out in a single night," (then, rising easily to lyricism) " the green branches bowed down as if they had been visited by archangels."

For economy in descriptive detail " The Garden Party " is worth close study. Except for the opening picture of the early morning garden, and, later on, the account of the workmen's cottages down the lane (essential for stressing the contrast on which the story is built), there is almost no direct description. We learn about the karaka trees and the lily lawn only by the way, as part of the problem of where to set up the marquee. Other writers (women, at any rate) would have been tempted to describe the party dresses, but Katherine Mansfield only tells us about Laura's hat, which, as has been seen, plays a direct part in the story. For the rest, we know that José came down to breakfast in a kimono and Meg with her new-washed hair in a green turban. To know more would distract us. Imagination has enough to work upon, and with its help and the writer's supreme yet self-concealing skill, we know the Sheridan family far more intimately than we could have done from pages of exact description.

Plot is the dominant element in I. A. Williams' story, " The Man who Stole the Pelican ". Its opening is direct and without preamble. Sir Charles Trumington,



chief of the Diplomatic Office, is in a quandary. He has received a communication from his agent in Zenobia earlier than he expected; he is to see the Zenobian ambassador that morning and wishes to be able to assert complete ignorance of Zenobia's internal affairs; his solution to the problem is to send a junior official out for a walk with the report, unopened, in his pocket. Mr. Tape's interests being zoological, he visits the pelicans in St. James' Park, and, while sporting with them in a somewhat undiplomatic manner, the precious envelope slips from his pocket and is gobbled by one of the more inquisitive birds. Seeing no alternative open to him, he seizes the pelican and, with considerable difficulty, elopes with it in a cab, and drives to the house of a Harley Street surgeon, whom he implores to operate on the creature and recover the envelope. The surgeon, with greater acumen, administers an emetic, and the envelope, by then somewhat fishy and noisome, is restored. But what is to happen to the pelican? Mr. Tape has always longed to present a specimen to the Zoo, and, in his exultation of spirit, this seems to him the perfect opportunity. Accordingly, he drives at once to the Secretary's Office, and offers the now limp and dejected bird as a gift to the Zoological Society. The clerk, not unnaturally suspicious, invites him in and telephones the police. Mr. Tape thus ends his luckless day in a police cell, whence he is rescued only by the diplomatic efforts of Sir Charles Trumpington. But the real sting of the story lies in the tail, for the envelope which was believed to contain the important report is found to contain only postage stamps for Sir Charles' little grand-daughter.

The story, one imagines, grew out of the whimsical fancy of stealing a pelican from St. James'. Next the

reasons which might prompt a man to steal a pelican would be invented, and the awkward consequences of the theft would then be finally elaborated. The plot in itself is farcical, but is worked out so carefully as to seem plausible. It falls, moreover, into a satisfying pattern which might perhaps be symbolized by two concentric circles with the pelican as centre: the outer one would represent the complications arising from the supposed Zenobian report and their unexpected conclusion; the inner and more important one, the difficulties that ensue from the theft of a Crown pelican.

The characters are slight but amusingly and clearly drawn, and emphasis is laid on those qualities which directly affect the plot—Sir Charles' equivocating conscience that guides him to send out Mr. Tape with the report rather than tell a direct lie about it; Mr. Tape's zoological enthusiasm, which first leads him into fatal dalliance with the pelican, and then inspires his insane notion of presenting it to the Zoo. The latter's natural sobriety and sense of dignity are also clearly indicated in order to stress the ironic fortune which leads an inoffensive civil servant into such embarrassments.

The attraction of the story comes in part from the neatness of its fantastic plot, but still more from the irony with which the subject is treated, and from the author's power of extracting the utmost absurdity from the situation. Here, for instance, is Mr. Tape trying the effect of persuasion on the pelican—" 'Pretty Pelly,' he coaxed, working upon an obvious analogy, 'there's a good Pelly. There's a nice bird.' And he held out his hand, hoping, supposedly, that the pelican would hand the document back to him.

" But no miracle of the kind happened; persuasion



was as useless as shouting; and the pelican, deciding to taste this strange titbit, incontinently bolted the envelope."

Or again, when Mr. Tape is trying to persuade his surgeon friend to assist him—

"Fortunately Redman was disengaged, and Tape was soon in his consulting-room, pouring out his woes to him.

" 'But,' said the surgeon, 'where do I come in?'

" 'Well, you see,' replied Tape, 'I thought you might cut the bird open for me, and recover Travers's report.'

" 'The devil you did!' exclaimed Redman. 'My dear chap, I can't operate on a pelican.'

" 'Why not? You're a surgeon, aren't you?'

" 'Of course I am.'

" 'Well, then,' said Tape, 'there you are! If you can cut open human beings, surely you can manage a mere bird. Why, I don't make such an awful mess myself of carving a chicken!'

" 'Anyhow,' answered Redman decisively, 'I'm not going to.'"

The dialogue, as these examples show, is natural and lively, and gains greater effect from being sparingly used. The style, as a whole, is quiet, sedate and restrained, so that the humour bubbles beneath its surface and does not burst out in gusts of excessive hilarity. This is an important point for the would-be humorist to note, for nothing is more irritating than humour that is over-stressed and that makes us feel that the author is guffawing at his own jokes.

"Once aboard the Lugger" by "Q" (Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch) concerns the eternally romantic theme of the love of a young man and a young woman and

their courtship, but, because "Q" is a witty as well as a romantic writer, the conventional treatment of the theme is reversed. Instead of presenting the man's pursuit of the woman, he shows her resolute capture of him, and shows it in a way that makes it both moving and gallant.

The Rev. Samuel Bax comes in 1839 as minister to the Cornish seaport of Troy. His youth, good looks and social position make him of romantic interest to all the young women of his congregation, not least to Nance Trewartha, a fisherman's daughter from Ruan on the other side of the bay. One evening she rows over to summon him to the bedside of a dying woman in Ruan. He goes with her in her boat, but is puzzled, and finally alarmed, by the course she takes, which is not towards Ruan, but to the open sea. He challenges her, and she confesses that her story has been a lie.

" ' You told me a lie—then why in the name of common-sense am I here? ' "

" ' Because, young man—because, sir, I'm sick for love of you, an' I want 'ee to marry me.' "

The minister is rightly angry, Nance obdurate; she will not turn back, nor he grant the preposterous promise she demands. Night comes on brilliant with stars.

" ' In three minutes yet we'll open Plymouth Sound,' she said quietly, and then with a sharp gesture flung both arms out towards him. ' Oh, lad, think better o't an' turn back wi' me! Say you'll marry me, for I'm perishin' o' love! ' "

" The moonshine fell on her throat and extended arms. Her lips were parted, her head was thrown back a little, and for the first time the young minister saw that she was a beautiful woman.



“ ‘ Ay, look, look at me ! ’ she pleaded. ‘ That’s what I’ve wanted ’ee to do all along. Take my hands : thy’ m shapely to look at and strong to work for ’ee.’ ”

“ Hardly knowing what he did, the young man took them ; then in a moment he let them go—but too late ; they were about his neck.

“ With that he sealed his fate for good or ill. He bent forward a little and their lips met.”

Nance has won by a ruse but, returning, her heart misgives her.

“ ‘ I’ll—I’ll let you off, if you want to be let off,’ ”

“ ‘ I’m not sure that I do,’ he said, and stealing softly up the ladder, stood at the top and watched her boat as she steered it back to Ruan.”

The story in other hands might have been boisterously comic ; “ Q ”, by his delicate treatment of Nance and by his exquisite evocation of atmosphere and background, has made it moving and romantic. But it is romance without sentiment. Nance, when she has received her kiss and gained her purpose, is once more the practical fisher-girl—“ . . . she dropped her arms, walked off and shifted the helm.

“ ‘ Unfasten the sheet there,’ she commanded, ‘ and duck your head clear.’ ”

It is romance, too, that is rooted in common life. We can guess at all the parochial jealousies and discords of Troy from the gossip we hear between the girls on their way back from chapel ; we share the minister’s relief that on his fateful expedition the sea is smooth and he need not fear the ignominy of being sea-sick.

“ Q’s ” method of telling the story is interesting. He begins at the end with the death of the minister and his wife, and the funeral sermon preached over them. Thus we know from the beginning that Nance’s scheme

will succeed, and interest is therefore concentrated on the means rather than on the consequence.

Since it is Nance who must gain our hearts, she is given by far the most prominence. She is a heroine of real flesh and blood, and, even within the limits of the short story, we are made to feel her vitality, her simplicity and robust good sense, her beauty and her own pride in it. More than this, we are made to see these qualities expressed in action. The dialect she uses is in significant contrast to the cultivated speech of the minister, emphasizing the social gap between them. As for himself, he is a comely enough young man, with the good sense to accept his fate happily, and that is all that matters. His rôle is a passive one, and, had his character been allowed to develop as fully as that of Nance, the story would have been overweighted and its outcome have seemed unconvincing.

Atmosphere is all-important. The description of the young moon rising over the harbour attunes us to the romantic mood; the background of night and sea and stars stresses the romantic side of Nance's decidedly brazen venture. "Once Aboard the Lugger", for all its unconventionality, is romantic in the popular sense, though it has, as one would expect from such a writer, a rare freshness and originality. Its freshness comes from its sincerity. Authors of conventional love stories too often write with tongue in cheek, despising their public, yet knowing, or thinking they know, how to satisfy that public's taste. "Q", on the other hand, clearly cares for Nance and understands her feelings; because he believes in her, he makes us accept her fantastic escapade and be moved by it, instead of laughing or disapproving. 'Romance' in the popular magazines has been commercialized and shop-soiled,



but, as this story shows, it can be restored to morning freshness by a writer who has both imagination and sincerity.

“The Undefeated” by Ernest Hemingway is a story of violent physical action. The central figure is a matador, Manuel, who, though too old for bull-fighting, cannot bring himself to leave it. His day is over, and it is with difficulty that he persuades a bull-ring manager to put him on as substitute in an evening show. He knows he can do well only if he has a good picador to support him; Zurito, older than Manuel, but still in his prime, agrees, but on one condition only—that Manuel, if he is unsuccessful, shall cut off his coleta (the pigtail that is the mark of the bull-fighter) and never enter the bull-ring again. Evening comes. Zurito does his work well. Manuel, tense, apprehensive, handles the bull with skill until the last phase of the fight when he must finish him off with the sword. He tries once, falls, and is almost trampled on; tries again, and again barely escapes the bull’s horns, fails a third time, and exhausts the patience of the crowd. Cushions hurtle at him out of the dark; he trips, and the bull is upon him, the horn enters his side. Coughing, broken and worn out, he rushes on the bull for the last time and plunges the sword deep into its neck. The fight is finished.

But Manuel is finished too. He is carried to the infirmary and laid on the operating table. Zurito is there: he leans over him, holding the scissors with which to cut off his coleta. Manuel sits up.

“‘You couldn’t do a thing like that, Manos,’ he said.

“He heard suddenly, clearly, Zurito’s voice.

“ ‘That’s all right,’ Zurito said. ‘I won’t do it. I was joking.’ ”

“ ‘I was going good,’ Manuel said. ‘I didn’t have any luck. That was all.’ ”

The anæsthetic cone is put over his face, but he is undefeated still.

“ ‘Wasn’t I going good, Manos?’ he asked for confirmation.

“ ‘Sure,’ said Zurito. ‘You were going great.’ ”

The force of Hemingway’s story is largely dependent on his style. He is writing of a man whose thoughts are very simple, whose observation is vivid yet limited. (“He thought in bull-fight terms. Sometimes he had a thought and the particular piece of slang would not come into his mind and he could not realize the thought. His instincts and his knowledge worked automatically, and his brain worked slowly and in words.”) Hemingway makes us see the action as it is reflected in Manuel’s mind; his problem has been to find a medium that will suggest Manuel’s simplicity, without obscuring the dramatic qualities of the story. The curt sentences, simple language and staccato rhythms that characterize Hemingway’s style create the illusion that the thought and observation are Manuel’s own.

In this way, for the greater part of the story the author’s mind seems merged with Manuel’s. At times, however, the angle of observation shifts, and we are shown the action through Zurito’s eyes, as he waits ready for his part in the fight or watches Manuel from the barrera. Now and then we have a significant glimpse of the scene through the eyes of the bored newspaper correspondent, to whom the fight is a tedious evening’s job, and to whom Manuel appears merely as a clumsy matador, past his prime. Occasionally, more



significantly still, we see the scene through the eyes of that other main protagonist—the enraged and tormented bull.

The structure of "The Undefeated" is worth some study. The bull-fight, of course, holds pride of place, with Manuel's final duel with the bull as climax; the early scenes, which show him first in the manager's office, then in the café with the waiters and Zurito, form a prelude to this; the last scene, when we see him on the operating table, broken but undefeated, provides a significant epilogue. Until the bull-fight the story moves with comparative slowness, and is broken up with dialogue; with the description of the fight the movement quickens, and we are aware of a constantly increasing tension, which, when the last phase is reached, becomes almost unbearable. How is this effect of tension obtained? Partly, it would seem, through a deliberate limitation of vision. With one brief exception, we see in the last phase only what comes within the range of Manuel's consciousness—and the bull's. For the matador two things matter only—the bull's feet, which he must be ever watching, and its horns, one splintered, the other "sharp as a porcupine's quill," which constitute for him an ominous threat of what is to come. The glimpses we are shown through the eyes of the bull confirm this sense of foreboding; we feel that the great beast is waiting, holding his time—"His eyes watched Manuel. He felt he was going to get this little one with the white face." The tension comes also from the extraordinary precision with which every moment of physical action is recorded, so that we see it all as clearly as in a slow-motion film, yet experience at the same time that mood of strong excitement in which every detail seems pricked on the mind.

There is little of what may be called "character-drawing". Hemingway tells us nothing directly about Manuel or Zurito; character is implicit in the action, and we understand intuitively Manuel's tough and anguished resolution, Zurito's gruff sympathy and kindness. The dialogue does much to emphasize the strength and reticence of both. It should be noted also that Hemingway makes them talk like tough Americans, and does not, as inexperienced writers would do, pepper their speech with Spanish words and phrases in order to remind us that they really are Spaniards. (Where he makes use of Spanish words in describing the fight, he does so only because there are no equivalent English or American ones that could be used with equal accuracy.)

For the apprentice writer "The Undefeated" provides a rare model of combined economy and force. Its technique deserves long study, though its style is Hemingway's own, and should not, indeed cannot, be imitated. Physical action is always curiously difficult to describe, and in this field of writing this story must rank as a masterpiece.

### EXERCISES

- (1) Write an impression of a child's first day at a new school, or of an evacuee mother and baby arriving in the country.
- (2) Outline the plot of an adventure story dealing with an Englishwoman's escape from German-occupied Europe.
- (3) Invent a modern version of the story of Cinderella which would serve as the basis for a romantic story.

### SUGGESTED READING

- "The Modern Short Story." H. E. Bates.  
 "The Magazine Story, with ten examples analysed." Michael Joseph.

The following novels should be read in preparation for the next chapter :—

- "Wild Strawberries." Angela Thirkell. (Penguin.)  
 "Mr. Polly." H. G. Wells. (Benn.)  
 "Huntingtower." John Buchan. (Hodder and Stoughton.)



## CHAPTER VI

# THE NOVEL

FOR every novel written there must be at least ten begun and left unfinished. This is hardly surprising, since to write a novel demands not only imagination and knowledge of life, but more fortitude and perseverance than most of us possess. The would-be novelist should therefore have a very clear conception of the size of his task before he begins, if he is not to waste ink, paper and industry on an uncompleted manuscript. He should, moreover, be prepared to spend a considerable time brooding over his subject before ever he starts to write. Only by knowing his fictional characters as well as he knows those of his own family (and maybe even better) can he be sure of making his readers know them too.

As for his subject, that will depend on his temperament and on the range of his experience. Novel themes may be divided roughly into two categories—those that are concerned with outward action, and those that are concerned with action that takes place in the mind and the heart. It is rare indeed for any writer to be able to treat both kinds of theme with equal ease, and his character and way of life will naturally incline him strongly to one or the other. Again, it cannot be too much emphasized that it is useless for anyone to choose a subject and setting of which he has not intimate knowledge. This, of course, is even more important for the novelist than for the short-story writer, since the novel offers broader scope for blunders, and it is most important of all in the novel of manners. In

writing adventure fiction it may be conceded that the novelist must draw on his imagination to a large degree, but he should at least make a careful preliminary study of his subject and setting (even if this can be made only from reference books), and he must verify every detail of which he is uncertain, or he will have a host of clamorous readers ready to point out his mistakes for him. The writer of adventure fiction, moreover, who chooses to set his story against a background which he knows, is always at a great advantage. John Buchan is surely in his happiest vein in such Scots novels as "Huntingtower" or "John Macnab"; Stevenson, in "Kidnapped", "Catriona", "Weir of Hermiston", or "The Master of Ballantrae", when he writes of his own country.

In choice of characters, too, the novelist must for the most part content himself with types with which he is familiar. This, of course, cannot be taken as a general rule, or it would mean the end of all imagination in fiction, but it is wise at least to know one's own limitations. The sober civil servant will hardly be able to interpret the emotions of a temperamental prima donna; the robust writer will not deal adequately with the self-inflicted sufferings of an introvert. Fashions in literature (and they change almost as quickly as fashions in hats) should not be allowed to influence the writer's choice. He must write about what he knows and what interests him, or he will not be able to write at all.

To say that half the work of the novelist should be done before he starts his novel is hardly an exaggeration. If it is not to be jerry-built, he must be architect as well as bricklayer, and no one would rate that architect's part as least important. True, many great writers



seem to have written without very definite plan. Dickens and Trollope, writing much of their work in serial form, readily altered the framework of their stories, inserted episodes, killed off their characters or joined them in matrimony, to suit the wishes of their readers or to prolong their novels to the required number of instalments. Only genius, however, can surmount such haphazard methods; the less talented must take the greater pains. The main outline and much of the detail must be clearly conceived before the novel is begun, though some incidents and episodes may need to be altered as the characters develop. Whether the "plot" or the "story" form is adopted depends on the subject and on the author's gift. Detective fiction and farce both require a very well-constructed plot; where character is dominant, the "story" form often prove more flexible. Probability should never (except in farce or fantasy) be sacrificed for the sake of a neatly dovetailed plot, and the long arm of coincidence should never be too long.

A good plot and, in most cases, a good "story" should contain some element of conflict. One thread of interest is not enough; it should be crossed by another, and out of the crossing should arise complication and suspense. This crossing of threads is clearly seen in D. H. Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers", in which a young man's passionate devotion to his mother is brought into conflict with his natural sexual love for a girl of his own age, so that we are left in anxiety as to which shall prove stronger. The novel of adventure (and, of course, the detective novel) demand more than two inter-crossing narrative threads; but in most other kinds of fiction the beginner will be wiser to adopt as simple a

construction as possible; an elaborate one is easily bungled, and is apt, besides, to leave no room for the development of character.

The material out of which the novel is formed need not in itself be original; the greatest novels are full of conventional episodes; the originality lies in their treatment. Some novelists deliberately choose to re-tell an old story in a new way. Thornton Wilder recreates the plot of an old Roman play in "The Woman of Andros" \*; Robert Graves, in his novel of the Roman Empire, "I, Claudius," presents historical material from Tacitus and Suetonius in a new form. Stevenson is very frank about his magpie method in "Treasure Island", yet no one will deny the book's vigour and originality. "As I pored upon my map of 'Treasure Island' the future characters of the book began to appear among imaginary woods. No doubt the parrot once belonged to Robinson Crusoe. No doubt the skeleton is conveyed from Poe. I think little of these, they are trifles and details; and no man can hope to have a monopoly of skeletons or make a corner in talking birds. The stockade, I am told, is from "Masterman Ready". It may be; I care not a jot. . . ." The freshness and idiosyncrasy of the characters make up for any lack of originality in the tale itself. It is in novels where character is least important that originality of material is needed most.

In deciding the form of the novel the angle from which it is to be told must be well considered. The different ways in which a story might be told were analysed in Chapter V, and might be briefly summarized as the "omniscient", the "dramatic", the "author-character"

\* Based on Terence's *Andria*.



method and the "first-person" method. In the first, the author assumes complete knowledge of his characters' thoughts and actions and reveals them as he pleases; in the second, he is impartial, presenting his characters and letting them reveal themselves like persons in a play; in the third, he makes us see the action entirely, or almost entirely, through the eyes of *one* of the characters; in the fourth, he identifies himself with one character and makes this character actually tell the story. The short-story writer usually confines himself to one method for the sake of unity; the novelist can use two methods or even three, though one should predominate over the rest. Thus, in "A Farewell to Arms", Hemingway's method is largely dramatic and he concerns himself chiefly with the words and actions of his two main characters; but at times he seems to feel that this method is inadequate, and he is forced to reveal his own inside knowledge of their thoughts and feelings. The novelist can, in fact, shift from one method to another at his discretion as it suits the requirements of the novel, but he must keep to one method in the main in order to preserve a unity of vision.

Of the first and second methods, the first, with its convention of omniscience, gives the novelist a freedom that is far more necessary to him than to the short-story writer. In the short story, character is generally static; in the novel it must develop, and it is extraordinarily difficult to show development of character through words and actions only. (Hemingway's enforced intermingling of methods in "A Farewell to Arms" makes this clear). The dramatic method has obvious virtues, is more direct, altogether more vivid and convincing, but it can rarely be used alone and with con-

sistency unless the novel is concerned only with outward physical action, and not at all with thought and feeling.

The third and fourth methods are in many ways cramping, and have definite disadvantages, since it is obviously impossible for one person to be everywhere and see everything. This does not matter nearly so much where the third method is followed, since it can be temporarily abandoned without the reader's observing it, but that ubiquitous creature, the First Person, can never be abandoned. He must gatecrash on every scene, or it cannot be narrated at all; or, if he is ever to be left out, he must hear news of what has happened by word of mouth or by letter, devices which often appear artificial and which inevitably make the action remote from the reader, who sees it, not directly, but with two other people as intermediaries. Moreover, in the hands of the unwary, this First Person is apt to appear sententious, pompous, something of a prig; he exasperates by his air of conscious rectitude or wearies by his introspective brooding.

That the method can be brilliantly successful is obvious to anyone who has read "Robinson Crusoe" or "David Copperfield" or "Kidnapped", but it offers a crop of difficulties to the amateur, and even the great masters sometimes falter. The method succeeds best in novels which deal particularly with the experiences of one person only—in "Robinson Crusoe", to take an obvious example, or "Kidnapped". In the latter, interest is entirely centred on David Balfour's adventures, and the fact that he is both actor and narrator makes them more vivid; in the sequel, "Catriona", interest is divided, and we should like to know not merely what is happening to David, but what is happening at the same time to



Alan Breck and Catriona and James Stewart of the Glen. The 'first-person' method here seems not quite adequate, and we wish at times for the 'dramatic' or the 'omniscient' method which would tell us more.

The great virtue of this method is that we do indeed share directly in the narrator's experience, and, by seeing events through his eyes, we see them more vividly. Again, the novel as a whole can gain piquancy from the character of the narrator, as in "Kidnapped", where we see the romantic highlanders through the eyes of that staid lowlander, David Balfour.

The character of the narrator and his position in the novel are important. He must be someone with a direct interest in the action, or there will be no excuse for his constant presence. He may be one of the chief protagonists, so that the narrative is chiefly concerned with his own adventures; or he may be a shrewd observer, detached yet profoundly interested; or he may be a mixture of both. It is essential that he should not be too much the hero of his own story, describing, even with an air of modesty, his own gallantry and courage and good sense, for then we are sure to think him an insufferably conceited fellow. Nor must he be of too introspective or reflective a turn of mind, for then his reflections and observations may come between us and the action. Nor must he be devoid of character, for then, since he is to be our constant companion throughout the book, his nullity will weary us. In short, the perfect First Person is very difficult to find, though, when found and rightly used, he can add very much to the effect of the novel. Thackeray, Dickens, Stevenson, Henry James, all show the potentialities of this method for dealing with certain themes; the amateur should not

avoid it for its difficulties, where its use is appropriate, but he should adopt it with a full sense of the snares it may hold in store.

It has been said that the essential difference between people in fiction and people in real life is that, while it is possible for author and reader to know everything about the former, the latter can never be completely known, even by their intimates. Real people never reveal themselves entirely, but the novelist can make his imaginary characters reveal themselves by word and action, and, if that is not enough, can himself tell us all their inmost thoughts. But *knowing* all about them will not necessarily make them alive; the real test of living characters in fiction is that, without being told all about them, we should know them intuitively and be able to guess how they would behave if we met them outside the covers of a novel. This intuitive understanding is only possible when the author has meditated on them long and deeply, has lived in them and suffered with them, and, out of this accumulated store of experience, has selected certain illuminating moments that cast light on their past and on their future. Beatrix Esmond, coming in conscious beauty down the staircase, with a wax candle in her hand and a scarlet ribbon in her hair, burns in the imagination, so that we understand at once the vain, brilliant child that she has been and the lovely, passionate, egoistic creature that she is yet to be.

Characters like Beatrix are organically alive in the complexity of their qualities, in their human inconsistencies. Others, endowed with a different kind of life, may be types or even caricatures, displaying one



marked characteristic, which overshadows the rest. Uriah Heep, as the embodiment of oily hypocrisy, is a caricature; we see but one facet of his character, and it is well-nigh impossible to picture him *not* rubbing his hands and dropping obsequious *h*'s. Copperfield, on the other hand, though less striking, has depth, and we can imagine him walking and talking outside the pages of the book. There is room for both kinds of character in a novel; both kinds, indeed, are necessary. Jane Austen shows that plainly enough in "Pride and Prejudice" when she mingles figures of caricature like Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh with such very real and vital creations as Elizabeth and Lydia Bennet. There is not room even in the novel of manners for the development of a large number of Elizabeths and Lydias, and caricature provides both relief and contrast. In the same way, a satisfactory novel cannot be peopled entirely by caricatures and types, unless it is deliberately artificial, or is satiric in purpose, or is concerned only with situation and plot. Unrelieved by living characters, their artificiality overwhelms us, and because they are without organic life, they must remain static, cannot develop. Scrooge, in "A Christmas Carol", is an extreme example of caricature, and his transition from a miser to a genial old gentleman is not a development of character, but a complete metamorphosis.

The interest of the psychological novel and the novel of manners lies largely in this growth of character—in the effect of the action upon the character or the gradual revelation of character through the action. Such development can only take place over a period of time and under stress of emotion and circumstance. It must be gradual, and the scenes in which phases of develop-

ment are made clear must be carefully prepared beforehand, so that each phase seems a natural and inevitable part in a continuous process. Only a novel of excessive length (and doubtless of excessive tediousness) could show the whole process of development in all its phases. There must be gaps and interludes (small ones between chapter and chapter, larger ones where the novel is divided into parts or sections), but they must be such that the reader can fill them in from his own imagination. This is only possible when the author knows all that happens in these unchronicled interludes, so that his knowledge is implicit in the rest of the book. In other words, the unwritten novel that exists only in his brain must be of far greater magnitude than the one he presents to the world; the written work must be a selection from that vast unwritten, and the facts and episodes selected must be so significant that they allow the reader to guess instinctively at the rest.

In deciding on the number of characters, the amateur should eschew ambition. It is the mark of the great novelist that he can handle a vast number of characters with consummate ease; Tolstoy in "War and Peace" presents a moving pageant of people whose numbers seem almost limitless and whose character and vitality are irrepressible. Those who are starting on a first novel, however, will be wiser to confine themselves to a small number of characters and must avoid introducing any that are irrelevant to the action without knowing how to dispose of them. (Any who have to be hurriedly married off at the end, or ruthlessly slaughtered, fall into this category.) Dickens, by reason of his haphazard methods of composition, was very apt to introduce such characters; Miss Mowcher, in "David Copperfield", is one of these, and the long arm of coincidence has to be



stretched even further than usual in order to include her in the finale.\*

In creating background and atmosphere the novelist has an easier task than the short-story writer, since it is always easier to build up material than to cut away the excess. Nevertheless, selection is very important, and still more so today, when the reader is impatient of prolix description and prolific detail. Here again the novelist must know much more than he chooses to reveal to his reader. This is essential, for he cannot plan the action unless he sees in accurate detail the scene in which the action is to take place. It is even worth while to imitate Jane Austen, who made a map of the district in which her novel was set, marked in the houses of the leading gentry, and could tell just how long it would take Emma Woodhouse to drive over to visit her friend Mrs. Weston, and calculate to a nicety the chances of her meeting Mr. Knightley on the way. In writing adventure fiction a private map is almost always essential, and, if it is the kind of map that will serve to decorate the end-papers of the book, so much the better.

Care must be taken over all the small details that distinguish different periods and different social classes, and here the novelist who writes from direct experience has an obvious advantage. The one who writes of a period long past is less likely to make serious blunders

\* Cf. the last chapter of "Northanger Abbey", in which Jane Austen pokes fun at the novelist's passion for coincidence—"Concerning the one in question [the young man who married Eleanor Tilney] I have only to add (aware that the rules of composition forbid the introduction of a character not connected with my fable) that this was the very gentleman whose negligent servant left behind him that collection of washing bills, resulting from a long visit at Northanger, by which my heroine was involved in one of her most alarming adventures."

than the one whose story is set, for instance, in the now remote nineteen-twenties. To make a young lady of 1924 wear a floor-length evening-dress, or in 1939, coil her hair into "earphones", is far worse than to become confused over the niceties of Jacobean costume. The writer of historical novels is, besides, more conscious of his dangers and more careful to verify dubious points. It is the chronicler of recent periods who has most need to go warily.

The time element, also, must be kept well in mind. This is especially important in novels where action predominates, though it is essential, too, in the psychological novel, that the characters should not seem to move in a timeless void. The recommendation to work with a calendar at one's elbow may seem prosaic, but is undoubtedly wise. Such conscientiousness in minor matters may not appear to go hand in hand with inspiration, but it does help towards the sound construction of a novel.

The opening of a novel would be important if it were only for the fact that it must catch the interest of that bored and cynical creature, the publisher's reader; but it is, of course, far more important as the first revelation of theme and character. Beginnings are always difficult, and there is much to be said for the old-fashioned way of starting, as in "Robinson Crusoe", with the date of the hero's birth (or even, as in "Tristram Shandy", nine months earlier). But this is only possible where the book is to cover the whole period of a man's life, and, in any case, seems, for no good reason, to be out of favour. A novel of adventure or of "situation" should open at a point as near to the main action as possible; explanations will, of course, be necessary,



but they should be brief. The reader may even be plunged into the heart of the action at the start, but then explanations must follow, and these may come as an anticlimax. Stevenson opens "Treasure Island" with the coming of the old pirate to the "Admiral Benbow", and thus combines action and exposition; his arrival is the prelude to extraordinary adventures, and it serves to whet the reader's appetite without creating a mood of excitement that cannot be maintained.

To find the right opening for a novel where interest centres on character is more difficult. Our first impressions of living people are generally decisive—we like or dislike them, or set them aside as of no interest at all—and this is equally true of our reactions to characters in fiction. The novelist's first concern must be to interest us in his characters, and to impress on us enough of their personality to make them vivid. He has, besides, to present them as people living and acting outside the pages of his book; he must, as it were, draw aside a curtain and show them going unconcernedly about their business. Hence he will find it easier to open in the "dramatic" method, allowing his characters to display themselves, and later adding whatever else is necessary in his own account of them. They must be seen, if possible, in characteristic mood and attitude, but we must not be allowed to know too much about them, since part of the interest of the novel will lie in the gradual unfolding of their qualities. To introduce them gradually in ones and twos is the safest method for the beginner, though it might be tempting to open brilliantly with a party, as in "War and Peace", or "The Edwardians" by V. Sackville West. In this way all the characters are assembled in an atmosphere of excitement and chatter, and the characters

gradually emerge from the crowd and assume their due importance. Such openings are extremely effective in introducing not only the main characters, but the social world in which they move, but they are too difficult to be attempted by the inexperienced.

The ending of the novel presents less difficulty, because it grows, or should grow, out of the plot. Many people, it is true, appear never to know when to stop, and write as if they were paid by the page and worked under the shadow of bankruptcy. (It is well, by the way, to remember that mere length and bulk will never commend a novel, especially a first novel, to the publisher, for he knows that length too often goes hand in hand with dullness, and in any case, sends up the cost of printing.) The length must be exactly fitted to the subject. In "Invitation to the Waltz", an account of two young girls going to their first dance, Rosamond Lehmann shows exquisite judgment in treating a wisp of a subject at precisely the right length. A lesser artist would have been tempted to prolong it to a full-length novel, and have turned what was delicate and delightful into something heavy and dull.

A novel should generally end on a note of finality, and finality to the conventional writer is symbolized by marriage or by death. It may be conceded that a marriage, or at least an engagement, provides a good enough ending for a romantic novel, and that the public would be discontented if the hero and heroine were not married off and left to "live happy ever after". But, in novels that are not classified as "romantic" in the publisher's lists, marriage provides too often a patched-up and unconvincing ending, since, everyone, when not in romantic mood, knows that marriage is not an ending at all, but a beginning. Death, in spite of many



honourable precedents, should not be used for an ending unless the plot demands it; for the lazy novelist it is just an easy way of despatching a character whose fictional possibilities are exhausted. The ending, like the beginning, should be carefully planned before the novel is begun; it must be an intrinsic part of the plot and must leave the reader with a sense of completion; yet it must not clap the door too abruptly on the world of fiction, for this would destroy that illusion of continuous reality which is essential to our enjoyment of a novel.

So much for how a novel *ought* to be written; let us next consider how it is actually done. The four novels chosen for analysis in the rest of the chapter represent examples of four current types.

The first of them, "Wild Strawberries" by Angela Thirkell, might be considered the perfect novel for the escapist. This does not mean that it provides a romantic escape from reality, but rather that it presents life with such gaiety and good humour that we gladly forget its darker side. This, for most sensible people, is escape in its most acceptable form. They recognize the cloud-cuckoo-land of the sentimental romance as obviously false, but they are glad to escape for relaxation into a world where care is fleeting and laughter and absurdity are triumphant. Miss Thirkell's novel is romantic yet humorous, crowded with comic character and slight but amusing incident. Sentiment is there, certainly, but it is treated throughout with gentle irony and it does not cloy.

The setting is a large country house, not too magnificent or too august, but rich and comfortable enough to satisfy the wishful imaginings of most of us. It is dominated by

the charming but eccentric Lady Emily, whose passion for meddling and genius for muddling provide the comic background of the book. The sentimental plot centres on Mary, who is young, immature, pretty and absurd, and believes herself in love with Lady Emily's son, David, a cheerful and light-hearted amorist. She becomes extremely jealous of Joan, an intellectual young woman with whom he is also on dangerously friendly terms, but she finally realizes that her real love is for David's elder brother, John, who, while believing himself bound to the memory of his dead wife, has fallen very much in love with Mary. Joan marries a bright young man from the B.B.C., and David, relieved to be rid of two entanglements at once, goes off to South America. Romantic sentiment is thus satisfied by the happy union of Mary and John, while romantic convention is neatly reversed by making Mary indulge an unrequited passion for David, instead of making him suffer on her account.

The plot, though ingenious and amusing, is too slight to form the whole material of the novel, and Mary is too much of a little goose (though a very charming one) to occupy a pre-eminent place in it. The author has therefore introduced comic characters and comic incidents to fill in the interstices of the main plot. Chief among the former are Lady Emily and her daughter, Agnes, both of whom are studies in mild caricature: the eccentricity of the one and the amiable inanity of the other are exaggerated for humorous purposes, but not so much that we cannot believe in them, at least while we read the book. The French family of the de Bouilles, introduced purely for comic effect and having almost no part in the plot, provides opportunity for shameless but delightful caricature, while the other main characters—Mary, Joan, David, John, Martin,



and Mr. Leslie—are drawn from real life with vivid and ironic observation. It should be observed that, though all Miss Thirkell's characters are very much alive, they are all, except perhaps John, quite superficial. This is deliberate and well-judged, for, if we were to become painfully conscious of their deeper feelings, then the novel, designed as it is for entertainment and relaxation, would have defeated its purpose.

The same deliberate skill is shown in the handling of the plot. Miss Thirkell has created the pleasant, lazy atmosphere of the English countryside in summer. Incidents, such as they are, show only like ripples on placid water, yet, if we look more closely, we can see with what skill the major events are prepared for and recorded. Five outstanding incidents make up the main plot. First comes Mary's meeting with David, skilfully anticipated in the preliminary fuss about her arrival; then comes her unhappy lunch with him in town, followed by her childish outburst of tears in John's office; then her second visit to town, and her *tête-à-tête* with John; then the night of the dance, when David kisses her, and John inadvertently witnesses the kiss; and, finally, the sequel next morning, when all misunderstandings are cleared away and John proposes. Into this framework are woven a number of minor incidents—the visits of the exasperating Mr. Holt, the village concert, Pierre's dramatic rescue of Agnes's small daughter from the lily-pond, the Royalist plot concocted by the Boules, which comes to so tame an ending. . . . It is all very slight, very trivial, but it is in the handling of this wealth of minor incident that the novelist's skill is best shown; the main plot and the major characters might have been tackled by a far less able hand. The opening of the novel is of particular interest,

though it is of a kind very difficult for the amateur to imitate. We are shown Lady Emily and her family arriving, late as ever, at morning church, and we thus receive our first impression of them as a *family*—a point of importance, since among them family feeling is strong. Then, having shuffled them into their respective seats, Miss Thirkell is free to introduce them one by one to our notice, so that by the time the service is over and they are assembled again at lunch, we know them as individuals as well as being able to see them as a family group. (Note that Mary, the pivotal character in the plot, does not appear till later, though her arrival is carefully anticipated in the conversation at lunch, and her importance is thus stressed.) The ending, neat though conventional, has the merit of introducing a note of hilarity rather than of sentiment—a welcome change from the tears, embraces, rose-coloured dawns and far horizons with which the romantic novelist loves to adorn the last page of his book.

“The History of Mr. Polly” by H. G. Wells provides a complete contrast to “Wild Strawberries”. Miss Thirkell’s achievement is to combine humour and sentiment; her main preoccupation is never to be serious—and rightly so, since her sole object is to entertain. In Wells’ novel there is humour in plenty, but it is combined with a realistic treatment of life and character. Comedy comes close at times to tragedy, and Mr. Polly is both a comic and a pathetic figure. Wells, indeed, is like Dickens in seeing life as a tragic-comedy, and he resembles him, too, in seeing the sociological import of what he describes. Not that he thrusts his sociology upon us, for that would be inappropriate in a novel, but we are made by indirect means to see Mr. Polly as a



symbol of his kind; his frustration and despair are true not only of himself but of all the social misfits that abound in the small shop-keeper class to which he belongs. It is this that gives depth to the comedy: when Mr. Polly has his celebrated row with his neighbour, the ironmonger, the surface effect is hilarious, but we know also the depth of bitterness and misery that lies beneath it.

The novel traces Mr. Polly's development from an imaginative small boy into an unsuccessful draper's assistant; shows him gaining temporary freedom through a small legacy, falling hopelessly in love with a pretty schoolgirl as socially remote as a princess, marrying more by accident than choice, and settling down, as "gents' outfitter", to a drab marriage and a dyspeptic middle age. Indigestion and the close prospect of bankruptcy drive him to desperate measures. He resolves to set his house on fire and cut his throat (a stratagem by which he can secure insurance money for his widow). Characteristically, having set fire to the house (and to his trousers) he forgets the second part of his plan altogether, and, after trying wildly to put out the fire, becomes the town hero by rescuing a deaf old lady from the burning house next door. The fire is the turning-point of his life, for it brings him face to face with the discovery that "if life does not please you, you can change it"; and change it he does, by walking off one morning into the sunshine, leaving wife and home and shop behind him for ever.

A month's tramping brings him to the Potwell Inn, a delectable riverside "pub", run by a fat and amiable widow. She is then in need of an odd-job-man, and is very happy to engage Mr. Polly. All would be delightful if it were not for the fat woman's nephew, Jim, who returns recurrently to bully and sponge on her, and will

not tolerate a man about the place who might resist him. He is an ex-gaolbird, and a very tough customer indeed, and his horrible threat to cut out Mr. Polly's liver ("spread it all about, I will") almost decides that somewhat unheroic hero to leave at once. He sets off on his way home, but an unreasonable instinct draws him back to the Potwell Inn to protect the fat woman against whatever may come. Surprisingly, for he is, as he confesses, "not one of your Herculeous sort", he worsts Jim in battle and ducks him in the river. Two subsequent encounters leave him again the victor, and Jim, having made off in curious circumstances with a suit of his enemy's clothes, disappears for good.

Five years after, Mr. Polly is struck by a fancy to see what has happened to his wife, and, returning, finds she has set up a combined teashop and confectioner's. Horror overwhelms her at the sight of him, for he has been assumed dead (Jim having been found drowned in Mr. Polly's clothes) and she has bought the teashop out of his life insurance money. "'It's *you*,' she said. . . . 'I always feared you'd come back'". But Mr. Polly has not come back. "'I haven't come back and I'm not coming back. I'm—I'm a visitant from another world . . .'" And, satisfied that Miriam is happier far with a drowned husband than a living one, he returns to the peace of the Potwell Inn.

The form of the narrative is interesting and deserves attention. It is entitled a "history", and it might therefore have been told in chronicle form, the events being narrated in order just as they happened. Instead, we are plunged into the middle of Mr. Polly's career and find him sitting on a stile, suffering from acute indigestion, hating life in all its aspects, and facing imminent bankruptcy. From this point Wells takes us back to Mr.



Polly's childhood and youth, chronicles his hapless marriage and shows the gradual fading of his happiness and exuberance (together with the growth of his indigestion) until he has become as we find him on the first page of the book—a frustrated little tradesman who has lost belief in life altogether. This brings us to the crisis of the story (for it is on this same afternoon that he conceives his elaborate plan to combined arson and suicide), and from this point it moves on in straightforward chronicle form.

As a story (it is essentially "story" not "plot") it satisfies by coming full circle. We are made to see how the germ of romance, crushed by the misery of a hostile atmosphere, a dull job and a loveless marriage, flowering for a brief while in his love for a schoolgirl and choked again by disillusionment, achieves full growth at last. By beginning where he does, and showing Mr. Polly in the very depths of his unhappiness, Wells presents a contrast between the romantic small boy that he once has been, and the happy, satisfied creature that he is to be by the end of the book. Our first view of him in his forlorn middle age is important because it stresses the change that takes place in him, and shows from what depths he has to climb to reach his final happiness. That such a beginning has also the merit of originality is important also, but of secondary importance only. The ending also deserves note. The "story" might appropriately end with Mr. Polly's final departure from Miriam; and his parting words, "That *was* a tasty egg'" (for Miriam's eggs were always somewhat musty), would have made an effective "curtain line". Instead, Wells ends by showing us Mr. Polly and the fat woman sitting outside the inn in the facing yellow sunset; this is not an anticlimax, nor

yet a sentimental epilogue: it is the perfect ending, because it leaves us with a sense of continuity. Mr. Polly has won peace and beauty at last, and we leave him there to enjoy it in his comic philosophic way till the end of time.

Mr. Polly, of course, holds the centre of the stage throughout, and the story is told mainly from his angle. Not, however, entirely. In spite of his gift for phrase-making, he is too helpless and inarticulate a person to be able to explain himself or to make us see through his eyes the significance of his experience. Wells therefore falls back on the "omniscient" method to reveal Mr. Polly's inarticulate feelings, and he uses the "dramatic" method also because it gives scope for his particular gifts. "The History of Mr. Polly" does in fact consist, to a great extent, of a series of comic and dramatically effective scenes, connected by passages of explanatory narrative. There are, for instance, the funeral party (with ham and sherry) and the wedding (pie and champagne); the row with Mr. Rusper; Mrs. Rumbold's rescue from the fire; and, not least effective though in a different way, the three great fights with the blackguardly Jim. Wells thus combines three narrative methods in the way that best suits the needs of the story and his own gift for telling it.

Mr. Polly, as has been said, cannot be seen as a complete character without the omniscient author to explain to us all that he cannot explain himself—his romantic day-dreaming, his half-unconscious longing for beauty and delight, his sense of futility and frustration, and the real goodness and courage that underlie his outward insignificance. It is a brilliant and discerning study, but most brilliant of all is the way in which Mr. Polly's feelings are made to bubble out in obscure but expressive



phrases and jaunty malapropisms. "Zealacious commerciality" is the perfect summing up of his contempt for his neighbours in trade; "exultant urgent loogoo-buosity" of his reactions to the preacher at a P.S.A.; "not one of your Herculeaceous sort . . . nothing very wonderful bicipetally" of his modest estimate of himself. It is this idiosyncrasy of expression that stamps his character on our minds, and makes him the endearing creature that he is. The same gift for vivid characterization is shown in the lesser portraits of his wife Miriam and the rest of the Larkins family, of his exuberant friend Parsons, of his earnest cousin Johnson (who so loved "figuring things out"). In each case character is perfectly translated into dialogue; we know just the people they are by their way of talking. Even those that appear only once or twice in the story (old Uncle Pentstemon, or Mrs. Punt with her interest in post-mortems) have a vitality of speech that makes them unforgettable.

Part of the secret of Wells' sure handling of character is that he has chosen a subject and setting intimately familiar to him. In his account of Mr. Polly as a shop-assistant he is drawing on actual experience of his own. In the Larkins or the Johnson household he shows himself perfectly at home, and we instinctively realize the accuracy of such details as the violet-purple table-cover in the sitting-room (bought especially for the funeral) or the kitchen wall-paper "tattered and blotched" and "covered with brightly-coloured grocers' almanacs". It is this solid accuracy of background that reinforces the solidity of the characters and makes us see the lower middle-class world of pre-1914 days in all its reality. Without it the characters would lose part of their meaning; Mrs. Larkins could never be

quite the same without her rakish rose-trimmed wedding-bonnet; Miriam is inseparable from her broom and bucket and inefficient "turning out"; Uncle Pentstemon without his carefully guarded top hat is unthinkable.

"The History of Mr. Polly" is, indeed, more than the history of one little shop-keeper: it presents a picture of a class and a period that it would be hard to surpass. For the writer who essays realism it has, I think, three lessons, quite apart from what he can learn from it about construction, narrative method and dialogue. The first is that any subject, however commonplace at first sight, is the right subject for a novel, if he knows it at first hand; the second, that observation, both of manners and material details, is the greatest gift he can cultivate; the third, that to write a realistic novel, even a comic one, he must have sympathy, sincerity and affectionate understanding.

The romantic and the realistic novel are chiefly concerned with emotion and character. Outward action is less important for its own sake than for its effect on the mind and heart. In the novel of adventure outward action is all-important; events must move fast and be vividly presented, and the reader must until the last chapter be held in agreeable suspense. In fulfilling these conditions it is difficult for the author to allow much scope for the development of character or for the presentment of any but conventional emotion. His heroes and heroines are almost inevitably romanticised, and if our attention were not so much engaged with their adventures we should certainly find them too brave or too beautiful to be true. As for subtlety of feeling, it can be said (as an American wit remarked of a certain actress) that they run "the whole gamut of



emotion from A to B." Such weaknesses can be forgiven if the novelist offers us a good story, swift action and a stirring climax, for these are first essentials. But if, in addition to these, he can give us lively character-drawing, originality of feeling, and a real and solid background, then his novel is likely to be, if not the success of the year, at least the book of the moment.

Among all John Buchan's novels of adventure, "Huntingtower" best displays these qualities. Adventure is there, and excitement and suspense, shooting and kidnapping and black-avised villainy; there is conventional romance in the shape of a Russian princess with a prince and a poet for her lovers, but in contrast to this melodrama we have realism in the form of a Glasgow grocer and a gang of little boys from a Glasgow slum. Without Dickson McCunn, the grocer, and the Gorbals Die-hards we should have an exciting but conventional tale of adventure, but it is this impudent mingling of romance and realism that gives "Huntingtower" its unusual quality. It is quite possible that John Buchan was acquainted with *emigré* Russian princesses such as Saskia; it is quite certain that he knew his Glasgow shop-keeper and his little Glasgow urchins at first-hand. He has, moreover, taken as his setting the Ayrshire countryside which he knew so well, so that he can really make us feel the clean wind of the moors and smell its mingled scent of salt sea and heather. The importance of this choice of a background familiarly known to him is brought out by a comparison with his later novel, "The House of the Four Winds". Here, though three of the characters are the same as in "Huntingtower", the setting is a fantastic Balkan state, and we never cease to be irritatingly aware of its unreality.

The charm of "Huntingtower" lies in its union of fantasy and prosaic fact. The adventures told in the later novel in their "Ruritanian" setting are incredible; those of "Huntingtower" are equally so, but, because of its homely characters and familiar background, the reader willingly suspends disbelief and is even persuaded that he, like the grocer in the story, might set out with a knapsack on his back and stumble on strange adventure.

The story itself is constructed on conventional lines. An exiled Russian princess has been imprisoned in a lonely house on the Scottish coast by wicked Bolsheviks (the stock villains in most of John Buchan's romances). Her presence is discovered by a gang of little Glasgow boys camped nearby, and the secret is passed on to Mr. McCunn, the grocer, and Heritage, the poet, who are casual visitors on a tramping holiday. Their attempt to rescue the lady is almost foiled by the arrival of reinforcements of her enemies by sea; the house, with her and her new allies inside it, is besieged, and there follows an exciting struggle in which the enemy are finally routed by the Gorbals Die-hards, who, under cover of night, by judicious whistling and shouting, make pretend to be the police. The princess's Russian lover turns up in time for the fight; the Bolsheviks, escaping by boat, are caught in a storm and drowned; and Mr. McCunn returns to Glasgow, knowing that he has at last crossed the borderland of Romance.

There is little mystery in the story, and what there is is speedily unravelled. Its excitement depends on the minor adventures which are built into its conventional framework, and, more particularly, on the author's power of conveying physical excitement. Thus, though we guess at the happy outcome of the episode, we share Mr. McCunn's trepidation when he carries Saskia's



jewels off to Glasgow with two of her captors in pursuit; we know the nervous tension of the watchers as they wait in the dark house for the attack. The excitement of such episodes comes from the stress laid on the time factor. Will Mr. McCunn catch his train in time and leave his pursuers behind him? Will the police arrive before the princess and her friends are overpowered and captured? The action covers only a few days, but throughout we are made to feel the desperate sense of hurry. The struggle is not against actual adversaries only, but against the unseen adversary, Time.

The vividness of the story is to a great part dependent on the care and accuracy with which the scene of action is described. This should be noted, for the reader's enjoyment of an adventure story is often lost in his confusion as to where and how the action is taking place. The knowledge is not pressed upon us in any obvious way, but is presented unobtrusively as the narrative proceeds, and is then summarized (see Chapter IV) by Heritage talking aloud as he studies the map. In this form it stays easily in the mind and is invaluable in making vivid the events that follow.

These are points which the writer of adventure stories must observe with care. But, as has been said, the especial attraction of "Huntingtower" lies in its combination of a good story with excellent characterization. Its romantic hero and heroine are of secondary importance; its real hero is the unromantic figure of the retired grocer, Dickson McCunn. In making this outwardly stolid and prosaic little man his central character, Buchan shows intuition: his steadiness and common-sense provide an antidote to melodrama and pin the story to earth. Where the other characters of the

novel (apart from the Gorbals Die-hards) are, as it were, one-dimensional, his character has depth; where the others are static, his develops. His gradual and reluctant transformation from a cautious business man to a quite incautious adventurer provides real character-interest and gives the superficial romantic melodrama a core of realism. Yet to say this is not to disparage the story or the rest of the characters. On the contrary, a novel of adventure can hardly contain more than one Dickson McCunn, since there is no scope for both character and action to develop with equal freedom. "Flat" characters are on the whole more suited to this type of fiction, but they need relief. It is to this contrast and to this ingenious blending of realism and romance that "Huntingtower" owes its distinction.

The lessons to be drawn from this novel are clear, and there may also be found in it a warning. Buchan's one fault as a story-teller (and he is a prince among contemporary story-tellers) is his indulgence in political prejudice at the expense of his story. A writer of adventure fiction cannot afford to be serious. The intrusion of a political disquisition, however lofty, strikes a jarring note and effectively dates both novel and novelist.

### EXERCISES

(1) Outline the plot of a light romantic novel dealing with the misadventures of a young English girl as governess in a French family. Make notes on the main characters and write a first chapter.

(2) Outline the plot of a serious realistic novel about a woman factory worker with a husband in the army abroad and a young baby. Make full notes on the two main characters. Write a first chapter.

(3) Write a detailed synopsis of a thriller about a British secret agent in the Balkans.



## SUGGESTED READING

“The Art of the Novel.” Henry James.

“Tendencies of the Modern Novel.” Hugh Walpole.

The following historical novel should be read in preparation for the next chapter :—

“The Conquered.” Naomi Mitchison.

## CHAPTER VII

# HISTORICAL FICTION

THE memorable dictum from "1066 and all That"—"Royalists, wrong but romantic; Roundheads, right but revolting"—would serve quite well to distinguish the two prevailing schools of historical fiction—the romantic and the realist.

The romantic writer claims for his own certain well-defined tracts of history, and his attitude to historical events is pre-determined. For him the aristocratic victims of the Revolution go proudly to the guillotine, flicking imaginary dust from their ruffles in a last disdainful gesture; Mary Stuart, innocent and helpless, passes to her doom at Fotheringay, and Jacobite gentlemen drink and die for the king over the water. This is all very well in its way, and many good romantic novels have been made out of such material, but there is a danger that the writer will, in his ardour, indulge in excess of sentiment, or paint his characters in such romantic colours that they look like figures from a fancy dress ball. It is, in fact, easily possible to hold a middle course between picturesqueness and historical truth. Maurice Hewlett's portrait of Mary Stuart in "The Queen's Quair" is coloured by partisan feeling, but he shows her infatuation and folly as well as her beauty and charm, and moves us far more by the revelation of her weakness. The novels of Baroness Orczy, on the other hand, great as their popular success has been, cloy by excess of sentiment.

The "romantic" periods, too, have become hackneyed in the course of years, and writers whose turn is



for romance would be wise to explore the less-frequented paths of history—they must remember also that gallantry and chivalry are not confined to one side only or to one social class, and that the past was not entirely peopled by gentlefolk, as many historical romances would seem to suggest. Too often where common folk appear it is only in the capacity of servants—the groom to hold his master's stirrup, the maid to comb milady's hair. Such social exclusiveness easily results in monotony; without contrasts in atmosphere and manners, nothing stands out clearly, all is monochrome.

There is the further difficulty that gentlefolk in conforming to a standard of conventional good manners tend to lose their vitality; the kitchen-maid or valet is uninhibited by any social code and is free to develop character and personality. This is seen very clearly in Scott's novels, where the genteel hero and heroine are generally insipid, while the common folk are exuberantly full of life. (It is worth noting that when Scott, in "The Heart of Midlothian", takes Jeannie Deans, a farmer's daughter, for his heroine, she steals our hearts, while the conventional Floras and Ediths leave us cold.) Immoderately beautiful heroines are best avoided; raven hair, starry eyes and skin like alabaster invite scepticism, and when, moreover, the lady's beauty is adorned in the silks and velvets of a bygone age we are apt to be reminded of Madame Tussaud's. There are times when the jaded reader longs for a good plain face, and the writer should remember that a judicious sprinkling of freckles or an ill-shaped nose can, paradoxically, add much to a heroine's charm.

Contemporary taste has turned against the "Orczy" school of fiction, and the trend is now towards realism.

This, however, has its own dangers. After an overdose of elegant vicomtes and gay cavaliers it is indeed refreshing to be reminded that the world contains kitchen-boys and cooks as well, and that people in the past, though they wore different clothes, displayed at times the same qualities of meanness, cowardice and bad temper as we ourselves. The pendulum, however, has swung too far. The realist, determined to lay aside the rose-coloured spectacles through which the romantic writer views the past, too often presents a picture of unrelieved gloom. If the romantic's picture is false, the so-called realist's is equally so. Life can never be wholly evil; happiness and tranquillity are as much a part of reality as brutality and pain. Consider moreover the unhappy reader. If he tires of chivalry, elegance and fine manners, will his appetite not be equally cloyed by childbirth and murder, abduction and rape?

The fault of both realist and romantic is in forgetting that the past and the present are part of a continuous stream, and that men and women, however different their way of life, remain in every age essentially the same. Hack phrases like "the good old days", "Merry England", "the Age of Reason" and so on, perpetuate this illusion that time past was in some way essentially different from time present. The generalizations behind them are misleading. The mass of people in the eighteenth century were no more reasonable than people of today; the "Merry England" of the Tudors had its witch-burnings and heretic-hunting as well as its merry-making and dances. In short, "the good old days" or "the bad old days" (whichever we prefer to call them) were as much a mixture of good and bad as our own, and the people who lived in them laughed



and cried, and lost their tempers and their heads just as we do now. The more completely the novelist forgets that he is writing about the past the more vital will his creations be. This is not to say that he should translate them completely into modern terms, as the author of a recent novel \* about Henry VIII has done, introducing motor-cars and telephones among his properties. But it is better that a book should contain anachronisms (deliberate or accidental) and be convincingly alive than be historically exact but void of life.

The novelist's attitude towards his characters is betrayed in the dialogue he assigns to them. If he conceives them as contemporary people, then he will instinctively make them speak in natural modern idioms; if, on the other hand, he thinks of them as figures from dead history, their speech will inevitably be stilted and formal. The "odsbodikins" style of dialogue has quite gone out, and it need hardly now be said that no attempt should be made at imitating the language of a past period—the result is reminiscent only of "ye olde worlde teashoppe". Clear, simple, modern English should be used, but slang and excessive colloquialism avoided. They may sometimes be effective where an author wishes to stress the essential modernity of a past age, but in general they jar.

Imaginative truth, we have said, is more important than historical accuracy; but the maxim must not be taken too far. No one should attempt a historical novel without devoting a good deal of time and study to the period he has chosen as his background. And study and erudition are not enough. The mind and imagination must be steeped in the colours of the past;

\* "Ramping Cat" by Christian Mawson.

the writer must himself become a part of it, like G. K. Chesterton's archaeologist,\* who had brooded so long on the civilization of the ancient Hittites that he could even hear their music.

Wide reading is important. He should know the great writers of the period because they reflect the thought and the taste of the age, while for its social life he should go to the letter-writers and essayists and writers of comedy, for these reflect its colour and catch the very tone of its conversation. Anyone planning a novel about the latter half of the eighteenth century, for instance, should dip for inspiration in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* and Johnson's own writings, in the letters and novels of Fanny Burney, the correspondence of Gray and Cowper and Horace Walpole, in Goldsmith's essays, Sheridan's plays, the novels of Smollett and Sterne. . . . He should besides make himself familiar with the material background of the century—its houses and gardens, tables and chairs, food and clothing. Here the museums and the art galleries will help him—the Victoria and Albert Museum at South Kensington with its superb collection of furniture, the London Museum with its galleries of costumes, the National Gallery with its Reynolds and Gainsboroughs and Romneys.

The construction of a historical novel presents certain difficulties, since it must be conditioned by historical events; and the more closely real events and real personages are woven into the story the greater becomes the problem. For the reader there is a fascination in seeing a great event imaginatively presented; Maurice Hewlett's † description of Mary Stuart's tragic return

\* In "The Return of Don Quixote".

† In "The Queen's Quair".



to Edinburgh, a captive queen, broken-spirited and unlovely in her draggled skirts, moves us as the history books never could. But for the writer consistent fidelity to history is constricting; it is only the experienced and scholarly who can dare, as Hewlett and Robert Graves \* have done, to make a historical character the centre of a novel. For the inexperienced the compromise between history and imaginative creation is too difficult; there is, on the one hand, the danger of perverting historical facts, on the other, of writing a lifeless chronicle of historical events. It is easier and safer to choose a fictitious character as hero and show history as it is seen through his eyes and as it affects his life, allowing real personages to play only minor parts. This leaves the imagination unfettered and the characters free to develop. Prince Charles Edward must follow his predestined path: plain John Smith may grow into whatever kind of fellow he pleases.

Naomi Mitchison adopts this method in "The Conquered". Her theme is the struggle of the Gauls against Julius Cæsar, her source-book Cæsar's "Gallic War". To anyone who has toiled over Cæsar at school, and remembers only that "Gaul is divided into three parts" or that "Cæsar ordered a bridge to be built over the Rhine", this will not seem promising material. That Mrs. Mitchison could find in that arid classic the material for living fiction shows imagination of a high order. Study and industry have played their part: she is no classical scholar, but the list of books she has consulted shows her capacity for taking pains. Her secret, however, lies in the fact that she sees the Gallic revolt as if it were contemporary history, and feels, and makes

\* "I, Claudius"; "Claudius the God".



us feel, the tragedy of free men, unorganized and dis-united, struggling vainly against the relentless war machine of a conquering State. It does not matter that the protagonists are these long-dead Gauls and Romans: the struggle and the tragedy are unending, recurring in different forms in different ages, but essentially the same.

In her use of historical material she has shown discretion. Cæsar and Vercingetorix are the dominant figures on either side, and it would have been possible to construct a novel round these two. But to do so, though tempting, would cramp creative effort. Too much is known of Cæsar to make him an easy subject for a work of fiction, and not all the novelist's art could win much sympathy for that harsh and very Roman genius. Instead she has created fictitious characters who serve to symbolize the two conflicting forces. Meromic embodies the romantic courage of the Gaul and also his weakness; in Titus Barrus we see the generosity and rectitude that marked the Romans at their best.

Real and imaginary characters are mingled, but the latter hold chief place. The Gallic leader, Vercingetorix, except for a brief episode, is never shown at close quarters; Cæsar is revealed most often through the eyes of his officers or his victims. Story and history are interwoven in the same way. Meromic's personal adventures are the novelist's chief concern, but they are conceived as part of the larger struggle. His is the chief part, for his is the tragedy. He represents the Gaul whose loyalties are divided, whose heart is with his own people, yet who is bound by ties of gratitude and service to Rome. We see him first fighting with his own clan against the Romans; then follows a black interval when he is a slave in Rome; he is rescued



from torture by Titus Barrus, and he follows the young Roman officer on Cæsar's campaigns in Gaul and Britain; but, when Vercingetorix is defeated and with him the hope of Gaul, he goes in a mood of bitter self-reproach to join those of his people who are still holding out. He is with them in their last stand against Cæsar, and, once more a prisoner, pays the penalty exacted by Cæsar from the defeated, of losing his right hand.

We see him at last, worn out, prematurely old, enjoying the peace of Titus Barrus' country estate in Italy. But his story is bound still to that of his hero, Vercingetorix, who, for six years a prisoner in Rome, had been brought out at last for Cæsar's triumph. Chained, decked out in his old armour, he is led through the shouting mob to a cruel execution. Meromic, hearing of it, knows again the hatred of the conquered for the conqueror. In far-away Gaul his tribe had had the wolf as their symbol; now he hears the crying of wolves in the woods and goes out from the comfortable Roman house to follow his kindred. "Meromic's room stood empty; his knife lay on the window-sill, rust beginning to gather in the dew-spots; in the paths and under the bushes there were tracks of wolves, and one wolf that went lame of the right fore-foot; the tracks went north. . . ."

His story, profoundly moving in itself, gains in tragic intensity from the great events with which it is bound up. Fable and history run a parallel course, and the historical climax—the surrender of Vercingetorix—coincides with the climax of Meromic's story: his decision to leave his Roman loyalties and join the broken remnant of his people. In this interweaving of personal and historical motifs the novelist's constructive skill is most apparent. History has a new vitality



seen thus through the eyes of the individual; individual suffering a greater significance when it is a part of a larger tragedy.

It is worth noting that women play a very small part in "The Conquered", and there is no so-called "love-interest" whatever. Its omission is clearly deliberate, though it runs counter to convention. An author writing with an eye to popular taste would have made Meromic fall in love with some beautiful Roman girl, racially and socially beyond his reach, arguing that this would accentuate this tragedy of divided loyalties. It would, on the contrary, weaken it, as Mrs. Mitchison clearly saw, by introducing a romantic element inconsistent with the realism of the story. Instead, therefore, of the usual romantic theme, we have the far more subtle relationship of Meromic and Fiommar, sister and brother. Fiommar, indeed, belongs only to the first part of the book; after the defeat of her people she chooses to die rather than surrender. But the memory of Fiommar runs through the story, serving always to stress the contrast between Meromic's free and happy youth and his hard years of servitude. For the would-be novelist the point is important as a reminder that there are other relationships between men and women than that of loved and lover, and that they may in certain circumstances be more moving and more appropriate to the novel.

Mrs. Mitchison's skill in construction is equalled by her skill in characterization. Meromic and Titus Barrus are real figures, very different from those stiff Gauls and Romans pictured in the school texts of Cæsar. We are told what they looked like and the clothes they wore, for that is essential if we are to form a mental picture, but the difference between them and ourselves ends



there. They are neither better nor more heroic than people are today: Titus Barrus is a good young man, but somewhat staid and strait-laced; Meromic is brave and spirited, but weak and vacillating too, capable of nobility, but also of cruelty. It is not heroic qualities that win our sympathy, but the bond of common feeling and common weakness.

This sense of closeness is increased by the form of dialogue chosen. Here, for instance, is the passage in which Meromic and his sister question whether it is better to die than to surrender to the Romans—

“ ‘ The Romans are going to sell everyone who surrenders—sell them as slaves.’ ”

“ ‘ That looks like my dying too. Fiommar, what is it, death? Shall we go to the Far Isle? Or shall we stay here, ghosts along the beaches? Or is it all a lie and there’s nothing afterwards? ’ ”

“ Fiommar shook her head. ‘ I don’t know. Only I’m quite sure it’ll be better for me than living as a slave, even if it’s black sleep. But you’re a man; life may hold something for you still; and, besides, you’re the last one of us left, the only hope for the name of the Wolf to go on. Meromic, I think you should surrender.’ ”

There is nothing here of the pseudo-antique; it has the ring of contemporary speech, yet there is no deliberate modernity.

It would be unjust to overstress what may be called the “ contemporary quality ” of this novel. It is of no use for the novelist by his style and his grasp of character to turn the past into a vivid present, unless he can at the same time convey the colour and atmosphere of the past. Merely to transpose characters from a bygone age to our own would be to destroy the

whole point of historical fiction, since we go to it in order to gain a more vivid picture of the past than the historians can give us. Atmosphere, however, is not to be suggested by a wealth of historical detail; a museum catalogue would be as illuminating. Nor is it to be conveyed by lengthy descriptive passages for which the modern reader has no patience. It must be implicit rather than stated, evoked by slight but significant details which illumine the picture that the reader creates for himself. The reader, of course, needs preliminary help in creating this mental picture. In the opening chapters of "The Conquered" Mrs. Mitchison presents in some detail the life led by Meromic's people before their defeat by the Romans. We see them feasting and fighting, know what their houses were like, and their clothes and their weapons and their ships, and from this material we can construct our own picture of Gaelic civilization. In the same way we are given a comprehensive account of the Roman house in which Meromic served as a slave on which to base our conception of Rome and the Romans. All this is essential and in itself of deep interest, but we should not want Mrs. Mitchison to go beyond these essentials and to weary us with excessive detail. Scott, writing more voluminously, describes the colour of a baldric, the pattern on a scabbard; the modern novelist, confined within more moderate limits, has no scope for all this.

One very effective way in which she has evoked the atmosphere of the past deserves especial mention. Any account of Gallic life which failed to suggest its superstition and religious fear would be incomplete. How was it to be suggested? She might have had a full-dress Druid sacrifice, with white-robed priests and shrieking victims at the altar, if there were not a certain



triteness in such a picture. Instead she has boldly introduced a supernatural element. She adopts the device of a strange, half-ghostly figure who appears always at critical moments in Meromic's life and seems to symbolize the fears and hesitant beliefs that haunt the half-barbaric mind. He is the story-teller at the Venetan feast; the robed stranger at the secret sacrifice; the vagabond who passes by when Meromic is about to kill himself; the traveller who at the last beckons him from the Roman house to follow the baying of wolves through the dark woods. His presence in the story, though it is never explained and conveys nothing clear to the understanding, profoundly stirs the imagination. More than anything else could do, it stresses the contrast between the romantic Gallic spirit and the clear, hard mind of the Roman.

Among so much romantic fiction that is shoddy or sensational, falsely romantic or falsely "realistic", "The Conquered" stands out for its sincerity and imaginative truth, its simplicity and its grasp of human character. It explores a period neglected by the novelist and shows the potential interest of the less familiar tracts of history. For the writer who wishes to escape from a conventional mode it is a valuable model, and its style, dialogue and use of historical material deserve careful study.

### EXERCISES

(1) Outline the plot and write the first chapter of an historical novel of the romantic type dealing with the Thirty Years' War and introducing Elizabeth of Bohemia. Make notes on the main characters and write a first chapter. Suggest the sources to be consulted for the background of the period.

(2) Outline the plot and write the first chapter of a realistic historical novel about Scotland in the sixteenth century, to be written from the angle of the puritan reforming party. Write

notes on the main characters and suggest sources to be consulted.

### SUGGESTED READING

Novels by Marjorie Bowen, Margaret Irwin, Maurice Hewlett, Naomi Mitchison, and others. In preparation for next chapter :—

- “The Red House Mystery.” A. A. Milne. (Penguin.)  
“The Piscatorial Farce of the Stolen Stomach.” D. Sayers.  
(From “Lord Peter Views the Body.” Gollancz.)



## CHAPTER VIII

# DETECTIVE FICTION

IF you are good at chess and cryptograms and crossword puzzles, if you are given to asking "Why?" and to finding out how things work, if you have a logical mind, quick observation and an inventive fancy, then it is likely that you will be able to write detective stories. Without this "chess mind", as we may call it, however well you write, however clever your characterization, you cannot succeed. Detective fiction, in its essentials, has more to do with logic or mathematics than literature. Good writing cannot cover up deficiencies of plot and construction. Yet it must at the same time be stressed that only the writer who combines the "chess mind" with the creative imagination can produce a really good detective novel. Dorothy Sayers is rare in offering not only ingenious plots but character and humour, atmosphere and style as well. Such a combination of gifts is unusual. It would probably be easier to find two writers with complementary talents to collaborate, the one to provide the plot, the other the rest of the ingredients.

The plot is, of course, the most important element. It is hardly necessary here to draw a distinction between the detective story and the "thriller". The one makes a sophisticated appeal to the intellect, the other to the feelings; the aim of the one is to titillate the mind, of the other to harrow the heart and chill the blood as thoroughly as may be. Obviously, the construction of the detective story makes greater demands on the author. He has first to provide a crime and invent

ingenious methods and sound motives for the criminal, and then to evolve the means of concealing him and the manner in which he is ultimately discovered.

Dorothy Sayers, in her amusing essay, "Aristotle and Detective Fiction", sums up the matter. "There you are then; there is your recipe for detective fiction: the Art of Framing Lies. From beginning to end of your book it is your whole aim and object to lead the reader up the garden: to believe the real murderer to be innocent; to believe some harmless person to be guilty; to believe the detective to be right when he is wrong and mistaken when he is right; to believe the false alibi sound, the present absent, the dead alive and the living dead; to believe, in short, anything and everything but the truth."

The choice of a crime provides a starting-point for this formidable task. It *need* not be murder, and indeed it is refreshing at times to read about something less sensational—as the theft of a picture in "The Man in the Red Hat" by Richard Keverne, or a scandal in an Oxford college in Dorothy Sayers' "Gaudy Night". If it is to be murder, let it be a nice, clean murder. Horrors should be admitted only in as far as they forward the action, never solely in order to harrow the feelings. A corpse is invariably unpleasant, but it need not, and should not, be sordid. The crime is only important for the mystery it creates and the doubts and suspicions it raises. It may provoke not only the question "Who killed Cock Robin?" but also "Why?" and "How?", and even the question whether the body was Cock Robin's at all, and the more questions raised the more fun for everybody.

Having settled the crime, the next question is to find a motive. Money and sex are the commonest, but



there is opportunity for the psychologist to supply a subtler explanation. Discovery of the motive may play a large part in the solution of the mystery. Thus, in "Thou Shell of Death" by Nicholas Blake, the detective is more concerned with psychology than with the usual scientific investigation, and the result is an unusual and interesting novel. But it is of no use to find a motive that is both ingenious and psychologically sound unless it can be backed up by sound characterization. The subtle psychological motive is to be avoided, therefore, by all but the accomplished novelist.

More difficult is the problem of concealing the crime. Here technical ingenuity is essential and the necessity for a "chess mind" becomes apparent. The author must play a double game: he must put himself in the place of the criminal and pit his wits against the detective, anticipating, as in chess, each move of his opponent, laying traps for others and neatly escaping from the traps laid for him. Then, having trailed red herrings, established false alibis, scattered misleading clues, he must change sides and, in the rôle of detective, must patiently, stage by stage, unravel the mystery. Finally, when he has worked out every detail of his plot, he must find a way of presenting it that will keep even his cleverest readers guessing until the final chapter. The need for elaborate planning and for the utmost care for detail is clear. A time-table of events, a house-plan or a map of the locality,\* a catalogue of suspects, a list of alibis—all these are but the primary essentials that ensure good workmanship.

All the material need not, and indeed cannot, be original. The false alibi, the murder that looks like

\* It is a sensible plan to provide house-plans and maps for the use of the reader.



suicide and the suicide that looks like murder, these are the common stuff of detective fiction. Even the most original writer cannot help using some of the stock ingredients. It is in the way he blends and mixes them that his skill is shown.

In unfolding the solution two ways lie open. You may pile mystery upon mystery and then allow the detective to produce the right conclusion in the last chapter, like a conjuror producing a rabbit out of a hat; or you may let the reader share the detective's confidence as he unravels the mystery step by step. The second method is generally preferable in a full-length novel, since it holds the reader's interest and allows him to exercise his own wits in seeking a solution. The first method, though on the whole less satisfactory, is better suited to the short story, where interest has not to be so long sustained. Dorothy Sayers, in her novels, always uses the first method, but always holds back enough information to be able to spring a surprise in the last chapter. In her short stories she uses both methods, but generally prefers the first. Conan Doyle and his school inclined, on the other hand, to the second method.

In handling the plot the chess-playing type of author is dealing with problems of a familiar kind; in handling character he is apt to display more uncertainty. Yet detective fiction in which plot is all-important and the characters mere puppets makes dull reading. Good characterization, besides, can play an essential part in the plot, for the way in which a character is presented may serve to divert suspicion to the wrong quarter. From this point of view the character of the criminal deserves especial notice. He must be an unlikely person, but not so unlikely that we cannot find his crime



plausible. He must be interesting in himself, but not so attractive that we tend to grow fond of him, for that would spoil our pleasure in the *dénouement*. Many novelists avoid this difficulty by choosing as villain someone whose respectability we take for granted—a lawyer, headmaster, family doctor, vicar—or, less satisfactorily, to fasten the crime upon some character whom we tend to overlook, such as a butler or gardener or chauffeur. A third course is to make the obvious suspect turn out to be the real criminal, thus double-crossing the reader who has refused to suspect anyone so obvious. The best kind of villain, however, is one who, by his outward behaviour or by his position in the novel, lulls our suspicions from the outset. In “The Murder of Roger Ackroyd”, Agatha Christie’s choice of villain is brilliant and inimitable, for she puts the whole story into the mouth of the family doctor, who is himself the murderer, and, because he is the narrator, we never dream of suspecting him. It may be noted that there is a general preference among readers for the amateur criminal. The professional has less character interest.

Choice of a victim is an easier matter, as long as it does not fall on someone whom the reader has grown to like. In such cases there is a danger that interest in the detection may be diverted to sympathy with the corpse. It is even preferable that the victim should be someone whom we actually dislike, as in “The Red House Mystery” by A. A. Milne, for then it is possible to take a sympathetic interest in the character and motives of the murderer.

The question of the detective is more controversial, and opinion is divided between the merits of the man from Scotland Yard and the amateur. There is no



doubt that the amateur is vastly more popular both with authors and public. His character offers far more scope; he can be more light-hearted, more irresponsible than is seemly for a policeman, and one is bound to admire ingenuity and courage that go unpaid. On the other hand, in most criminal cases the police must be called in from the start, so that it may be more convenient and more convincing to use an official as detective-in-chief. That an officer of the Yard can be both intelligent and charming is proved by Miss Ngaio Marsh, whose Inspector Alleyn is as gallant a figure as one could wish. The more common solution is to use both professional and amateur together, allowing the police the routine tasks of examining witnesses, listing alibis and taking finger-prints, while the amateur, with his superior intelligence and subtler intuition, spots all the important clues and triumphantly unmasks the villain. Sometimes they co-operate (as Lord Peter Wimsey and Inspector Parker in Dorothy Sayers' novels); at others they are rivals, which is always the worse for the police! The important point is that, whether amateur or professional, the detective should be an amusing and an attractive figure, since the reader is bound to spend so much of the novel in his company. A good detective with a sense of humour, some amiable idiosyncrasies, and a modicum of charm, can be the making of a book. It is obvious that Dorothy Sayers owes very much of her success to the cheerful eccentricity of her Lord Peter, and Agatha Christie to the Gallic oddities of Hercule Poirot. How far a detective can develop character when he is himself so busy an exponent of plot is questionable. Certainly he can never exhibit character in the round; at best he is a "flat" character, displaying as much liveliness and



wit as his creator can inject into him, and impressing himself upon our attention by some quirk of manner or of speech. (Excessive mannerisms, however, are merely tiresome. The detective who misquotes "Macbeth" as he examines the blood-stains on the carpet should be ostracized.) For the new writer there is scope for the creation of a new kind of detective as a change from the already well-worn types, and when he has found one he will have gone a long way towards the success of his novel.

Detectives fall roughly into two groups—those who use scientific methods and those who rely chiefly on their intuition and their understanding of character. Some, needless to say, do both: even, Lord Peter Wimsey, that connoisseur of character, collects dust in envelopes and takes sinister packages to the public analyst for investigation. The author who lays stress on scientific methods must write with accuracy and real knowledge. Technical erudition of an out-of-the-way kind is always useful, as when Dr. Thorndyke is able to clear an innocent person of the charge of murder through his surprising knowledge of the habits of the body parasite, *Filaria nocturna*! The drawback, however, to this erudite scientific detection is that it must be explained at length to the ignorant reader, who may be rather bored by the explanation. It is, besides, far harder to rouse interest in a detective who is always fiddling with magnifying-glasses, dissecting-scissors, test-tubes, and the like, and who talks like a lecturer in chemistry. Lord Peter Wimsey is right in leaving most of these details to his valet, Bunter. Both methods are necessary, but it will generally be found that to the more original and imaginative writer scientific detection is of subordinate importance.



After the detective and the criminal, the other characters are of only secondary importance. They exist only for the purposes of the plot, to provide clues, trail red herrings, or divert suspicion from the guilty to the innocent. To make them perform their function, and at the same time behave like interesting human beings, is difficult, but no writer can afford to make them merely functional. Only when he has created as entertaining a company as Ngaio Marsh has done in "A Surfeit of Lampreys" can he sit back complacently, and he will find it hard to reach her standard.

One character perhaps deserves especial mention—Dr. Watson, the admiring friend, the perfect confidant, who, under one name or another, is indispensable in every detective novel. The original Watson, the guileless and devoted friend of the great Sherlock, has in the course of time become a figure of fun, yet his successors are very useful indeed to the novelist. It is essential that the detective should have someone to whom he can expound his theories, for how else is the reader to know what he is thinking about? He may, of course, confide in his fellow-sleuth, the patient and industrious policeman; he may confide in a trusted manservant; he may even confide in his wife—but confidant he *must* have. That the confidant should be someone more lively, less sheep-like, than the original Watson is obviously imperative.

In discussing fiction in general it was emphasized that character and atmosphere are to a great extent complementary. This is no less true of detective stories, though in most of them the action seems to take place in a void. We are told the exact position of the butler's pantry, but have no sense of the atmosphere of the house. We are given a map of the locality, but there



is nothing to help us visualize the countryside which it represents. Detective fiction, it is true, has no room for redundant detail, but only a few suggestive details are needed to make the background real and familiar. Dorothy Sayers is admirable in this, for she not only evokes the atmosphere of a place, but she also makes it serve the action. In "Murder must Advertise" her presentment of an advertising agency from the inside is highly entertaining for its own sake, but is also very important for the sake of the plot. In "The Nine Tailors" she gives a magnificent account of a great Fenland church with its roof adorned with gilded seraphim, and then finds a lost necklace beneath a seraph's carven wings.

"On the great Love Question opinions may be divided, but for myself I will have none of it." Not everyone will endorse A. A. Milne's judgment in this matter, but it is certain that the real devotees of detective fiction will be on his side. To quote A. A. Milne again—"A reader, all agog to know whether the white substance on the muffins was arsenic or face-powder, cannot be held up while Roland clasps Angela's hand 'a moment longer than the customary usages of society dictate'. Much might have happened in that moment properly spent; footprints made or discovered; cigarette-ends picked up or put in envelopes. By all means let Roland have a book to himself in which to clasp anything he likes, but in a detective story he must attend strictly to business." A love affair that contributes to the plot or provides a motive for the crime is another matter, but even then it should not bulk too large. Readers who want romance can find it elsewhere. The juxtaposition of kisses and corpses in detective fiction is sometimes unseemly and always inappropriate.



So far this chapter has dealt for the most part with the detective novel. The short story requires a rather different technique. The novel must provide a problem of such complexity that its slow unravelling can hold the reader's attention through several hundred pages. The problem in the short story must be simpler, though equally ingenious. Its solution must be dependent, not on the linking of a number of clues, but on the discovery of a master-clue. Intuition will generally play a more important part than logic, and there will not be much time for the examination of footprints and fingerprints. In many cases the reader will not be allowed to share in the process of unravelling, but will be confronted with a surprise in the last paragraph. This is certainly the most satisfactory formula for the short story, but it is one which it is difficult to use effectively, since the mystification must be compressed into a few pages, and the surprise ending must depend on real originality. Minor puzzles—the finding of a will, the recovery of a stolen necklace—are in some ways more suitable subjects than more grandiose mysteries, for they require less elaboration and a lighter treatment.

Detective fiction, it is clear, demands a high standard of technique in its practitioners. Moreover, the seasoned reader of detective novels is a creature of considerable cunning. He is a connoisseur in crime. He knows all the thousand and one ways in which a murder may be committed, and he can see through all the subterfuges of the author at a glance. To outwit him requires no small degree of skill, and the writer must use every trick at his command, remembering only the essential rule of fair play—that he must never *in his own person* make any statement that turns out later to be untrue. He may suppress the truth or present it so tendenciously



that it sounds like falsehood; he may make his characters lie without shame or restraint; but he must always stick to the truth himself.

Much can be learnt about technique from studying the work of accomplished writers like E. C. Bentley, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, John Dickson Carr, Nicholas Blake and others. More will be gained from a careful analysis of two or three good detective stories than from a superficial reading of several dozen. They must be read several times over and then analysed in detail—the plot outlined, the clues tabulated, the stages by which a solution is reached marked off in order, the characters studied. We end the chapter, therefore, by analysing, by way of example, a novel and a short story, each by a distinguished author—"The Red House Mystery" by A. A. Milne and "The Piscatorial Farce of the Stolen Stomach" by Dorothy Sayers.\*

## "THE RED HOUSE MYSTERY"

(By A. A. Milne)

### *Chief Characters.*

*Mark Ablett* (the victim), owner of the Red House. A vain, touchy, small-minded egotist. (A suitable choice for victim, since the reader cannot regret his demise and is free to take a purely intellectual interest in it.)

*Matthew Cayley*, Mark's cousin and confidential secretary. A pleasant, quiet, somewhat enigmatic person. His character enlists sympathy, invites speculation.

*Anthony Gillingham* (the amateur detective). Handsome, charming, humorous, daring, self-possessed, but very likeable in spite of all this. Turns up by chance just after the murder and stays to investigate.

\* From "Lord Peter Views the Body." (Gollancz.)

*Bill Beverley* (his "Watson"). One of the guests at the Red House at the time of the murder. Young, cheerful, not very clever, a good foil to Anthony and a perfect confidant.

*Angela Norbury*, with whom both Mark and Cayley are in love. Not an important character, but serves to provide one motive for the murder. (Note that there is no real love-interest in this novel.)

*Crime.* The shooting of Mark Ablett.

*Murderer.* Matthew Cayley.

*Motives.* (1) Mark had refused to advance money to save Cayley's brother from imprisonment.

(2) Mark was going to marry the girl whom Cayley loved.

*Method of Committing the Crime.* Mark is taken by surprise and shot in his study by Cayley.

*Method of Concealing Crime.* Cayley had suggested that Mark should play a trick on his guests by disguising himself as a ne'er-do-weel brother Robert and calling at the house. He is shown into the study; Cayley goes in after and shoots him, then makes pretence of discovering the murder. It is naturally assumed that the body is that of Robert, and that Mark, since he is nowhere to be found, has shot him, probably in self-defence.

*The Process of Detection.*

*False Clues.*

(1) "Robert's" arrival established by parlour-maid who showed him into the study.

(2) Mark's presence in the study established by the housemaid overhearing him saying, "It's my turn now. You wait." *Inference:* Mark was threatening his brother.



(3) Mark believed to have been seen on a train leaving for London.

*True Clues.*

(1) Cayley's odd behaviour when Anthony arrives by chance and finds him hammering on the locked door of the study. *Inference*: He has something to conceal.

(2) Following Anthony's comment that it was odd that the key of the study door should have been locked on the *inside* (since most ground-floor rooms are locked from the *outside*), it is found that the keys on the ground floor have altered, some placed inside, some outside. *Inference*: Cayley has done this in order to allay suspicion on this point.

(3) Discovery of secret passage from house to bowling green, and the further discovery that Cayley is using it to eavesdrop on Anthony's conversation with Bill. *Inference*: That Cayley is implicated in the mystery and is suspicious of them, and that the passage perhaps provided Mark with a way of escape.

(4) Anthony's recollections of the scene in which he and Cayley discovered the body. His realization, through a reconstruction of the incidents, that when Cayley left him ostensibly to fetch water, he had furtively opened the window in the next room. *Inference*: He wished it to be assumed that Mark had escaped that way.

(5) Cayley's insistence on the police dragging the pond for Mark's body. *Inference*: He wished to conceal something in the pond *after* it had been dragged.

(6) Recovery of the suitcase which Cayley drops in the pond the night after it had been dragged, and which is found to contain a complete set of Mark's clothes, *except for the collar*. *Inference*: ?

(7) Discovery that Mark had taken great pains to

tell Angela Norbury's mother all about his scapegrace brother in Australia *the day before* he was supposed to have received a letter from him announcing his intended visit. *Inference*: Mark was playing some mysterious game of his own.

(8) Discovery of an old poster of an amateur theatrical show in which Mark had played the lead. *Inference*: He was good at acting, and therefore might have been *impersonating* Robert when he was shot, obviously by Cayley.

(9) Identification of the body as Mark's after his dentist had examined the teeth.

*Dénouement*: Anthony writes to Cayley warning him of his discovery of the crime. Cayley writes a long letter in return, explaining his motives in murdering his cousin, and exactly how he did it, and declaring his intention of committing suicide.

#### *General Notes.*

(1) Plot is based on one simple but highly original idea. It is worked out with fine economy of detail. No superfluous incidents and no loose ends.

(2) The deductions are plain for the lay mind to grasp, not based on any special scientific or technical knowledge that only the author would know about.

(3) The process of detection is explained step by step until almost the end, but there is a large element of surprise left for the last chapter.

(4) No love interest. Angel Norbury merely supplies a motive.

(5) Victim and murderer well-chosen: we dislike the one and sympathize with the other.

(6) Murderer allowed to escape the humiliation of being arrested by taking his life. (This is a general and



commendable practice in detective fiction, arising from public squeamishness about hanging, and also from the fact that most murderers have a reasonable motive for crime.)

## THE PISCATORIAL FARCE OF THE STOLEN STOMACH

(By Dorothy Sayers)

### *Chief Characters.*

*Lord Peter Wimsey.* Amateur detective. Wealthy dilettante in crime. Charming, witty and somewhat absurd. (Plays part of detective in almost all Dorothy Sayers' novels and stories.)

*Great-Uncle Joseph* (deceased before the story opens). Retired Glasgow shipbuilder of considerable wealth and eccentric habits.

*Robert Ferguson.* Hard-up, shady solicitor's clerk. Elder nephew of Great-Uncle Joseph and his residuary legatee.

*Thomas Macpherson.* Medical student. Younger nephew of Great-Uncle Joseph. Honest, amiable. Spends fishing holidays in cottage at Gatehouse-of-Fleet, Kircudbrightshire, where much of the action takes place.

### *The Mystery.*

Wealthy Great-Uncle Joseph commits suicide, leaving to his nephew Thomas, the medical student, his stomach preserved in a bottle, while his other nephew, Robert, the residuary legatee, inherits only £500. *What has happened to his money?*

### *Clues.*

(1) The curious legacy bequeathed by Great-Uncle Joseph to Thomas, his favourite.

(2) The wording of his will—"And I bequeath him these my alimentary organs with their contents for his study and edification, they having served me for ninety-five years without failure and defect, because I wish him to understand that no riches in the world are comparable to the riches of a good digestion."

(Note the phrase "with their contents" and the repetition of "riches".) *Inference*: That Thomas's legacy is more valuable than it appears.

(3) The fact that Great-Uncle had withdrawn the bulk of his money from his bank some twenty years before his death. *Inference*: That he wished to find some safer means of keeping it.

(4) The fact that he had ended his life by jumping out of a window after learning that he could never recover completely from a stroke. A note left behind him explained that "he had never been ill in his life and wasn't going to begin now." *Inference*: That he was a sensible man, in full possession of his wits, sane and deliberate in his actions, but with marked originality of character.

(5) The discovery that he had been buying rubies under a false name over a period of twenty years before his death. *Inference*: That he had converted his money into precious stones for greater safety and convenience.

*Puzzle*. What is the connection between Great-Uncle's rubies and Great-Uncle's stomach?

*Answer*. Just before committing suicide *he had swallowed them*.

### *General Notes.*

The interest of the story depends on two factors—

(1) *The detection*. The elucidation of the mystery by Lord Peter.



(2) *The action.* Robert's attempted theft of Great-Uncle's stomach.

This is seen by summarizing the plot which falls into two halves—the first concerned with the detection, the second with the action.

### *Summary of Plot.*

Part I opens in the cottage where Thomas and Lord Peter are spending a fishing holiday. Here Lord Peter is first introduced to Great-Uncle's stomach, which rouses his curiosity and prompts him to investigate the matter.

Part II overlaps slightly with Part I, when Robert, also on the scent of the mystery, meets Lord Peter in Somerset House and finds he has been investigating Great-Uncle's will. The rest of the action can be briefly summarized. Lord Peter wires to Thomas "Advise opening up Great-Uncle immediately". Robert meanwhile has burgled the cottage and made off with the bottle containing the stomach. He drops it in flight, and the contents are washed down the stream and cannot be found. Lord Peter arrives, insists on further search, and the stomach is found washed up on a sandspit. It is brought home and opened up in the presence of Robert, who is in bed at the cottage, recovering from his burglarious misadventures. Inside it are found the rubies. The final explanation of the puzzle is saved for the end of the story.

"But how did they get there?" demanded Robert foolishly.

"Simple as shelling peas. Great-Uncle Joseph makes his will, swallows his diamonds——"

"He must ha' been a grand man for a pill," said Maggie with respect.

“—and jumps out of the window. It was as clear as crystal to anyone who read the will. He told you, Mac, that the stomach was given you to study.”

### *General Notes.*

(1) Detection is simple, central idea very original.

(2) Its success as a story depends on its blending of character, humour, excitement and farce as well as detection. It is not only a very good detective story, but a very good piece of humorous writing.

### EXERCISES

(1) The dead body of a man is found gagged and bound on the roof of a London newspaper office. Make up a plot for a novel elucidating this mystery.

(2) A headless Greek statue is stolen from the British Museum. Make up a plot for a short story (preferably humorous) explaining the theft and the means by which the statue was recovered.

### SUGGESTED READING

“Aristotle and Detective Fiction.” D. Sayers. (Publications of the English Association. Vol. I. 1936-7.)

Preface to “The Red House Mystery.” A. A. Milne.

In preparation for the next chapter :—

“Twenty Years A-Growing.” Maurice O’Sullivan. (Penguin.)

“Madame Curie.” Eve Curie. (Heinemann.)



## CHAPTER IX

# AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND BIOGRAPHY

“ To reduce my ego to a little *i* with whom I could live and never notice it ”—this is the avowed purpose of Eric Linklater’s autobiography, “ The Man on my Back ”. Such self-discipline is uncommon, and for most autobiographers the ego is more aptly symbolized by a full-size capital letter. Nor is this surprising, for to spend a lavish amount of time, paper and ink on recounting one’s own life-history is a plain confession of egotism—a fact which James Agate gaily recognized when he labelled his two volumes of memoirs, “ Ego I ” and “ Ego II ”. Since we are most of us egotists at heart, the temptation to indulge in autobiography is strong. What, indeed, could be more delightful than to occupy two hundred odd pages in discoursing of oneself, and be handsomely paid for it besides? Yet before plunging in it is advisable perhaps to consider what makes a good autobiography, and what qualities are essential in writing one.

First, of course, you must have something worth writing about. This does not mean that you must have led a life of adventure, distinction or exemplary virtue. Success, or even notoriety, is no qualification, though many believe it to be: actresses and admirals, politicians and millionaires are prone to publish their reminiscences, but these are in themselves often unworthy of publication. It is not what a man is, nor what he does, that makes a good autobiography; it is his attitude towards life and his power of absorbing and communicating experience. By

these standards a dustman may write a better life-history than a duke, and the reminiscences of a small-town grocer interest us more profoundly than those of a distinguished general. To have led an interesting life is a definite advantage, but to be interested in life is the real essential. Many people pass through great adventures and remain untouched and unchanged by them; others find in trivial occurrences continual amusement and delight. Humour, perception and the capacity to assimilate experience are the best gifts an autobiographer can possess; without them adventure and achievement are as nothing.

Realization of this might well tempt many modest and unknown people to write their memoirs, but one reservation must be made. It is no use writing your life-story unless you have (at least for the most part) enjoyed living it, and can look back upon it with tolerable contentment and good-humour. The public will pay seven-and-sixpence to be entertained, but it will not willingly go to that expense to be dispirited. If you are a celebrity or a genius, or if you have something really original or stirring to say, it will tolerate the tale of your misfortunes; in other circumstances, a happy temperament and a sense of humour are almost essential qualities.

To write with complete honesty about oneself is difficult: memory becomes wishful thinking, and we are apt to touch up less creditable episodes in order to appear, if not more virtuous, at least more interesting. Some incidents, we feel, are best omitted; others are involuntarily distorted from what *was* into what *should have been*, and the result is a self-portrait that, however soothing to personal vanity, lacks life. W. H. Davies in his "Autobiography of a Super-Tramp" confesses how he lied and stole as a boy, and this confession puts



the stamp of truth upon the whole of his remarkable book. His candour is to be imitated. Personal considerations can have no weight in autobiography; the writer must view his life and character objectively, and cheerfully accept both vices and virtues, humiliations and triumphs. "Objectively" is here the operative word; the writer who is determined to be candid may end by displaying an inverted pride in his worst points, and parading them with proprietary affection.

Objectivity is important also in his treatment of other people. There are, of course, certain difficulties in writing about friends or acquaintances who are still living, but it is no use avoiding the difficulty by alluding to them in polite and colourless phrases. Nothing is more irritating than the autobiography which abounds in such entries as "General — and his charming wife most kindly invited us to dinner". Neither the general's kindness nor his wife's charm has any interest for the reader, and the writer has clearly mentioned them only from a sense of obligation. (Worse still is the common practice of referring to people in this way from purely snobbish motives. The writer has met some distinguished person and cannot resist recording the fact, even though the incident was of no general interest and the conversation quite banal; worst of all, he is at pains to call the great man by his Christian name in order to stress their intimacy. Such transparent snobbery does not impress, but infuriate the general reader.) Politeness is inhibiting. The law of libel effectively prevents the writer from expressing himself freely about the people he dislikes, but he may feel equal constraint in describing those he does not. In this case he may escape from it by writing about them under fictitious names (as did Christopher Isherwood in "Lions and



Shadows"), or he may himself adopt a pen-name. These devices, though they rarely deceive the persons concerned, confer something of the sense of freedom which the novelist enjoys.

There remains one qualification for autobiography that is almost too obvious for mention—a good memory. By this we commonly mean the capacity for remembering names and dates and concrete details of this sort, but memory in an autobiographer must be both factual and imaginative. It is useful to be able to remember names and dates, though these can generally be verified without great effort, but it is more important to possess a memory which can recreate past experiences and even the atmosphere of the past. This is particularly important and particularly difficult in recalling childhood. There is the constant temptation, as Siegfried Sassoon puts it, "to imbue one's past life with saturations of subsequent experience". This is to some extent inevitable, yet only by shedding the accumulations of adult experience can one hope to convey the feeling of childhood. Imaginative effort is necessary, and no amount of concrete fact can replace it, though sometimes some remembered detail may stimulate imagination. "The Soul's Awakening" over the mantelpiece, the pink plate with its picture of Brighton pier—such jumbled images, insignificant in themselves, may release a flood of memories.

Autobiography may take many forms. Truth and fiction may be mingled as in Siegfried Sassoon's "Memoirs of an Infantry Officer" and "Sherston's Progress"; here, by abandoning strict fidelity to truth and making a fictitious character, George Sherston, the centre of the autobiography, Sassoon is able to see himself and his experiences more objectively. It can take the form



of haphazard reminiscence, as in "The Honeysuckle and the Bee" by J. C. Squire, where the main narrative thread is an account of a tramp from London to Devonshire, and memories are evoked at each turn of the road. Or it can devote itself to one aspect of life only, as in "The Story of My Heart" by Richard Jeffries, which is a chronicle of a phase of spiritual experience with no material facts in it whatsoever. None of these examples can strictly be called autobiography, but they show the variations that can be made on the conventional form, and suggest the scope there is for originality.

Whatever the form chosen, the autobiographer's first business is to assemble his material. For this it is possible to rely on memory alone, but most people will find their memories alone insufficient. Letters, diaries, school magazines, even old dance programmes, not only bring back to mind events of the past, but can also evoke its atmosphere. However inadequate they may be, they are clues that lead us back to half-forgotten sensations and experiences. Memory can also be stimulated in other ways—by talking over the past with contemporaries, or by revisiting scenes that were once familiar. Siegfried Sassoon gives an account of such a visit in "The Old Century" when he describes how he returned to a Norfolk village in order to bring back recollections of a summer holiday spent there in childhood, and it is true that for most of us certain places will revive memories that had long been latent and would never otherwise have been awakened.

Few will find it difficult to have enough to say; to sift the accumulation of material is another matter. It is only too easy to become garrulous about oneself; memories that are of profound personal interest may fail to interest the rest of the world. An autobiography



should not be a *magnum opus*; if it begins to assume too bulky proportions, then the writer must suspect himself of growing tedious. His aim in writing should be something more than mere self-indulgence; it is his duty to interest and entertain, and whatever cannot be made interesting or entertaining must be set aside as unsuitable, or at least treated as briefly as possible. The chronological form offers temptation to prolixity; it is unnecessary to record everything in order as it happened, as the inexperienced writer is prone to do; only those incidents that are of real interest should be stressed, the rest briefly summarized. Thus a boy's first term at school will be interesting because it records first impressions of a new and unfamiliar world, but a detailed account of his progress from prep. school to University will be wearisome. It must not be forgotten, however, that small incidents may be more significant than great events: the child's first pony-ride of more vivid interest than the grown man's elevation to the peerage. Finally, it must be remembered that, though an autobiography is primarily about oneself, it must also be in great measure about other people—brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts—and the reader is far more interested in hearing about them than in the author's introspective musings. Introspection and self-analysis are always fascinating to oneself, almost always tiresome to other people. Eric Linklater, in the passage quoted at the opening of the chapter, struck at the heart of the matter. An autobiography is by its nature an exercise in egotism, but, unless the author can reduce his ego "to a little *i*", the reader will not find him tolerable.

Style is always revealing, and perhaps especially so in this kind of writing. Pomposity and self-satisfaction are inevitably reflected in a pompous and inflated style;



the "purple passage" almost certainly suggests that the author takes himself too seriously. Autobiography, like letter-writing, demands an easy, familiar style; you are taking the reader into your confidence, and your style must be friendly and intimate, echoing the very tone of conversation. An over-weighted vocabulary, formally balanced sentences, ponderous *clichés*—all these make intimacy impossible. A grand style, moreover, offers a subtle temptation to falsity. It may serve well enough to describe a sunset or a symphony, but it will not do for more prosaic matters. Hence, the author tends to stress the loftier moments of his career and omit its trivialities, since triviality and a swelling style do not go together. Sometimes this fault of style springs from modesty—he may feel that unvarnished facts are not exciting enough, and that only by "writing them up" can they be made interesting. In reality, the reverse is the case; the picturesque over-statement does not carry conviction, and the reader loses interest because he feels he is being cheated of the truth. Style is a touchstone which infallibly reveals all falsity of feeling. It is useless to try to present a false picture of yourself; artificial graciousness or charm or whimsicality is reflected in artificiality of style. Simple, easy prose is the only medium for an honest autobiography since it suits with the small prosaic happenings which make up the fabric of our lives, yet is capable, when necessary, of rising to transcendent heights.

Biography and autobiography, though kindred arts, present very different problems. It is easier for the biographer to adopt an objective attitude towards his subject, but he has not, like the writer of autobiography, the advantage of inside knowledge. Every man must



remain something of an enigma to his fellows, and it is well for the biographer to realize that, however wide his knowledge, however sensitive his intuition, he cannot hope to lay bare all the secrets of another's mind and heart. Each man's mystery dies with him. Imaginative understanding, though essential in biography, has limitations which must be recognized. The biographer who allows his imagination to stray too far beyond established facts *may* stumble upon truth, but is more apt to produce a portrait that is wholly misleading. By confounding facts and fiction he makes the worst of both, and the reader speedily learns to mistrust him.

For this reason the necessity of turning for material to original sources cannot be overstressed, and is as important for the writer of popular biography as for the serious historian. Many popular lives appear to be based almost entirely on the weightier volumes that have preceded them, so that the truth is by successive phases twisted beyond all recognition. By using original sources, even though no new facts can be discovered, the writer is able to draw closer to his subject and view it with impartiality.

These "original sources" vary very much in extent and value according to the subject and the period. In writing the biography of a contemporary, or of someone who lived in recent times, it is possible to have access to letters, journals and private papers, and perhaps to have the advantage of personal, even intimate, knowledge. But as we go farther back in time the material becomes scantier. The facts of a man's public life may be well known, while the details of his personal life are altogether obscure. Even when the industrious biographer has ransacked family papers, legal records, parish registers, and every other possible source of



information, he may in the end have gathered only a few clues from which to reconstruct his subject's personal life and character. It is then that he finds himself on dangerous ground. With so little to go upon it is tempting to fill in the gaps with picturesque and imaginative detail, to report rumour as fact and to read into the facts themselves far more than they justify.

Confidence in the truth of what he reads is essential to the reader's enjoyment. Once he suspects the author of romancing, the spell is broken. Everything in a biography must bear the stamp of authenticity. This does not mean that every statement must be supported by corroborative detail, for this would make dull reading, or that the eye should be teased by a multiplicity of footnotes. But it is important that, at the beginning or end of the book, there should be some account of the sources used and the authorities consulted, so that the reader may follow up any point which interests him and may feel sure of the writer's reliability. Philip Guedalla's method of giving detailed annotations to each chapter at the end of the book is admirable, for it substantiates the narrative, but allows the reader to enjoy it without distraction.

But the power to inspire confidence depends on more than substantiating facts. However impeccably he may set down his sources, his writing will not carry conviction if it is felt to be overbiased or to be using the biography as a means of airing certain prejudices of his own. Complete objectivity is almost impossible; the writer's liking or dislike for his subject can never be concealed entirely nor is it desirable that it should. It is important, however, to suppress strong personal feeling. Marked enthusiasm or marked hostility prevents the writer from viewing his material with an open



mind. Having already formed his judgment, he unconsciously selects only those facts which conform with it. Adulation is perhaps the most tiresome fault in a biographer, but the modern tendency to deride and debunk can be nearly as bad. (The delicate irony which distinguishes Lytton Strachey's biographies has become in the hands of his imitators the crudest of mockery.) The biographer, like the artist, must "keep his eye on the object." By giving too much freedom to his own feelings and opinions they come to overshadow the main theme. They have their place, of course, but their interest is secondary.

The biographer's first task, then, is to get hold of the facts; his second to present them clearly and without bias. But since no one can be isolated from his surroundings, he must also draw in the background, and, when he is writing of a past period, this may be an exacting task. Superficial knowledge is not enough. Like the writer of historical novels, he must make himself completely at home in the period he has chosen, and he must go about it in a similar way. He will, however, need more specialized knowledge than the novelist. If he is writing about a statesman, he must have a sound understanding of the politics of the period and of the years preceding it, so that he can present events in their perspective. If he is writing the life of a poet or a painter, he must have a critical understanding of his art and of the influences which have shaped it.

At times background and atmosphere may play as important a part in the biography as the life-history of the individual. A few men—the poet Blake, for instance—seem detached from their age, almost uninfluenced by its way of living and modes of thought, so that to present the social background of their period



would add little to our understanding of them. Others again are so much a product of their age that we cannot understand them without knowing a good deal about the world they lived in as well. Still others may seem less interesting for their own sake than as reflections of the world about them, and the biographer then must lay as much stress on their background as on their personal history. From this point of view it is interesting to compare Lord David Cecil's biographies of the poet Cowper and of the politician Melbourne.\* Cowper's life was a backwater, unstirred by the main current of his times, and the emphasis is therefore laid on his individual experience; Melbourne, on the other hand, seems to epitomize his age, and it is fitting that his biographer should be as much concerned with the exotic social world to which he belonged as with the man himself.

In form the biography does not offer much scope for originality. Clearness is all-important, and it is obviously clearer to begin with a man's birth and finish with his death than to adopt any other procedure. It is a good plan, all the same, to modify the chronological pattern to some extent. Interest may be stimulated by opening at some dramatic point, and then, the reader's attention secured, retracing the story from the start. It would, indeed, be possible to construct a biography on the pattern of Wells' novel, "Mr. Polly" (see pp. 87-93), starting at some crisis in a man's life, then tracing his career up to that point, and finally completing it. The danger, however, of originality of form is that the writer may be tempted to force facts into a chosen pattern, or, by over-dramatizing certain situations, play false to reality.

As in autobiography, certain periods may be briefly

\* "The Stricken Deer"; "The Young Melbourne".



recorded, others elaborately treated, and the biographer must be able to decide where the emphasis must be placed. In some lives childhood and adolescence may play an important part in the development of the adult; in others this early period has little significance. In writing a biography of Wordsworth, for example, considerable space must be devoted to an account of his childhood and youth, but no one knows or cares very much about the infant Samuel Johnson. The biographer must discriminate carefully between the significant and the inessential, and must plan the proportions of his work accordingly. Ponderous biographies are out of fashion: we have no taste today for "those weighty volumes of panegyric under which the Victorians buried their illustrious dead". This being so, the writer must cultivate an elegant brevity, dismissing what is unimportant in a few pages in order to devote sufficient space to the rest. In this way significant episodes will stand clear, unobstructed by a forest of irrelevant detail.

The question of proportion is important in another aspect. Biography concerns itself not only with a man's personal life but with his work or his public career as well, and a due balance must be kept between the two. The sober biography may make dull reading by concentrating overmuch on a man's public achievements, so that we seem to see him always in formal dress, never at ease in his dressing-gown. It is a temptation, on the other hand, to over-stress the personal element at the expense of the rest. André Maurois' brilliant life of Shelley \* is guilty of this kind of distortion. By focussing attention on his eccentricities as a man it makes us forget his greatness as a

\* "Ariel".



poet. The biographer must not of course usurp the place of critic, but he must in justice to his subject show both aspects.

To weave these separate threads of public and private life into a single narrative is often difficult, and to attempt to treat them in chronological sequence always makes for confusion. To skip from an account of an elopement to the genesis of picture or a poem is bewildering. It is better to take each thread separately as far as possible, dividing the life into its main phases and recording first the private history of each phase and then the work achieved in it.

All this would imply that biographies should only treat of the great or the successful, but this is very far from the truth. If the biographer is denied originality of form, he has scope for originality in his choice of subject. So much has already been written about the established great that it would be refreshing to read, or to write, the lives of the obscure. Unimportant people, moreover, often live richer, more exciting lives than do the famous. Success tends to narrow a man's personality by making him too conscious of position and reputation; obscurer folk feel no such self-consciousness. Virginia Woolf in a few charming pages dallies with some "lives of the obscure",\* and Edith Sitwell in "The English Eccentrics" explores the oddities of some long-forgotten characters. Both suggest new possibilities for the enterprising biographer, and the popularity of such books as "Kilvert's Diary" (the journal of an obscure nineteenth-century clergyman) is proof of public interest in the undistinguished. This kind of biography demands good writing and considerable imagination, since the reader's interest must

\* "The Common Reader." First Series. (Hogarth Press.)



be won by its intrinsic merits, not by the lure of a great name. Much of its charm will depend on the way it reflects the contemporary scene, and it is here that the skill in reconstructing the past will be called into account. Material for such biography may be found readily enough in the letters and diaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and family papers may prove a treasure trove; before that period material is likely to be too scanty to be of use.

There is no reason, on the other hand, why the biographer should turn to the past. The present in some ways offers greater possibilities, since the material is easily accessible and knowledge is often more intimate. James Barrie in "Mary Ogilvie" presents a portrait of his mother that is more fascinating than the biography of any lady of world-wide reputation. Mary Ogilvie was quite unknown outside her own small circle until Barrie wrote her life, but the charm of his book depends quite as much on its subject as on the grace of his writing.

Eve Curie's life of her mother, Madame Curie, provides an interesting study in problems faced and surmounted. The difficulty of writing about anyone so intimately known is very real. From such close range it is hard to see the whole personality clearly; certain qualities seem to overshadow the rest, and only after the lapse of years is it possible to see the character in perspective. The difficulty is more acute in writing of such a dual character as Madame Curie. She must be shown as the wife and mother in the intimacy of her home, and as the great scientist in the impersonal atmosphere of the laboratory. To maintain this balance it was necessary for the biographer not only to devote considerable space to her scientific research, but to make



it interesting and intelligible to the layman—which, considering its abstruse nature, could have been by no means easy. That Marie and Pierre Curie discovered radium everyone knows, but to follow the complex process by which it was tracked down and isolated is another matter. It must have been tempting to pass lightly over it as something too difficult for the unscientific mind to contemplate, but without some understanding of the process, the passionate absorption and patient industry of the Curies could not be adequately felt.

Even in the matter of collecting material Eve Curie's work has not been easy. For the latter part of her mother's life her material would be ample, perhaps overwhelming. But for the earlier part, which is in every way more significant—for her youth in Poland, her student days in Paris, her married life and the years of research that culminated in the discovery of radium—for all this her biographer has had to depend on second-hand information. There is the additional difficulty that the Polish background of the early years would be largely unfamiliar to a daughter French by birth and upbringing. For this reason one would expect that there would be a marked discrepancy between the earlier and later parts of the biography—that the later would be more vivid, the earlier vaguer and less convincing. But there is no such distinction: the figure of the young Marie Curie which her daughter has reconstructed merges imperceptibly into that of the older woman whom she knew so well.

The material has been drawn from a variety of sources. Chief among these would be the writer's personal observation and recollection, but these would serve for little more than the last twenty years of Marie Curie's life.



For the earlier period she has had to depend on the recollections of her mother's friends and relatives and fellow-workers, pieced out by letters, personal papers and official documents. Wherever possible she has let her mother speak for herself. She quotes letters very freely and with as little preamble as possible. Frequently she sums up a phase or a period by a series of passages quoted from letters, prefixing it with a brief explanation, and merely putting headings before each letter quoted, giving the date and the name of the person to whom it was written. Her use of passages from her mother's journal, written at the time of Pierre Curie's sudden death, is particularly effective. To describe her intensity of grief would have been to vulgarize it: instead we have these moving fragments which reveal her heart. Even scientific writings have been quoted where they illumine the character of the Curies, as, for instance, the account of the painful action of radium on the skin, an account so detached and impersonal that it brings home most vividly their self-forgetful devotion as well as the grave risks they ran in their research. By this habit of frequent quotation the reader's contact with the Curies is direct and immediate, unhampered by a sense of the biographer's presence, while the quotations themselves are more vivid and moving than even the best descriptive writing could be. They add besides to that air of convincing truthfulness that marks the book. The biographer's besetting temptation is to embroider and overstate. Eve Curie has resisted it. "I have not related a single anecdote of which I am not sure. I have not deformed a single essential phrase or so much as invented the colour of a dress. The facts are as stated: the quoted words were actually pronounced."



She has tried not only to present the real Madame Curie, but to present her objectively and with almost complete detachment. It is this that has made her avoid as far as possible the use of the first person. She writes of herself as "Eve", conscious that the repeated "I" would tend to distract us from the subject of the biography to the writer of it. In this way she has been able to a great extent to escape from herself and to view her mother and her home and family with impartiality. When she does write in her own person it is in order to express her later and maturer judgments. "I", in fact, stands for the grown woman who is writing the book, "Eve" for the child and the young girl that she has been. In neither rôle does she allow herself to play too large a part in the story. The biographer who writes about someone intimately known is apt to write as much about himself as about his subject. Eve Curie is discreetly retiring, and by this self-negation (never, however, exaggerated) we are able to see the Curie family in perspective.

In every form of writing the problem is not to amass material but to sift and select what is essential. With a character so many-sided as Marie Curie's this is difficult. Most people tend in their minds to simplify the characters of others and to classify them as types—such a one is an intellectual, another a practical business man, and so on—and they unconsciously stress those qualities in them that fit with the description. It would be easy to classify Marie Curie as the student and scientist, and in writing about her early life to stress whatever foreshadowed her later greatness. But she was more than a student: she was the childish patriot who carefully spat upon a certain Tsarist monument whenever she passed by, the girl who danced the



soles off her shoes in one wild night of gaiety, the romantic governess who lost her heart to her pupil's handsome brother. All these other Marie Curies had to be crowded into the book if the portrait was to be a true one, and, to make it live, each facet of this complex character had to be illustrated by an episode, a scene, a story. This, Eve Curie has accomplished with remarkable success. We do not learn merely the facts of a great scientist's life; we see her growing up, and know her changing phases and changing moods. And when she has reached intellectual maturity we are not allowed to forget the contrasts of her character. "While a young wife kept house, washed her baby daughter and put pans on the fire, in a wretched laboratory at the School of Physics a woman physicist was making the most important discovery of modern science."

The proportions of the book deserve attention. Of the sixty-seven years of Madame Curie's life, the fifteen years that begin with her arrival in Paris as a student and end with the death of Pierre Curie were the most significant both for herself and for the world. During this period she worked intensively and in great poverty for a doctorate, married, bore two children, and, after years of patient research and heavy manual labour, discovered radium. Thus all that was most important in her scientific career and in her personal life belong to this period, so that the years before and after seem to form but a prologue and an epilogue. It is fitting therefore that, of the book's four hundred odd pages, one hundred and seventy should be devoted to these fifteen years, while the first twenty-four and the last twenty-eight occupy respectively eighty and one hundred and fifty pages.

The plan of the book has been roughly chronological,



never strictly so. To record the events of Madame Curie's personal life and of her life as a scientist precisely in the order in which they occurred would be confusing. Descriptions of a baby's upbringing and of a scientific achievement do not mingle well in one chapter. Eve Curie has met this difficulty by devoting separate chapters to the different aspects of her mother's life over a given period. Thus, one chapter describes her early married life and her first attempts at cooking, the next the experiments that she was at the same time conducting in the laboratory. Similarly, in the latter part of the book we are shown Madame Curie on holiday in one chapter, at work at the Radium Institute in another, and in another at home with her daughters.

The points that have been noted are only a few out of many that deserve attention. Eve Curie has written a remarkable biography, and one that, from a technical point of view, is especially interesting, since we may see in it most of the problems that could beset a biographer successfully tackled and solved.

"Twenty Years A-Growing", by Maurice O'Sullivan, may seem an oddly chosen example of autobiography, since it was written in Irish and much of its quality must be lost in translation. Yet, in spite of this disadvantage, it is a good choice, for it rests on its own merits entirely, and borrows no lustre from a great name or a great subject. Its author is a young Irishman in the Civic Guard; \* judged by common standards he has had no great adventures, has met no great people, and is himself a nobody. Why, then, you may ask, should he write his autobiography? The answer

\* The police force of Eire.



is simple and sufficient. He has enjoyed his twenty years of life and has enjoyed writing about them. There can be no better reason. To be in love with life and to live as gaily and fully as he has done is far more important than to be a distinguished personage, or to know distinguished people.

It is true that the book has for us an interest apart from its author. It deals mainly with his boyhood on a little island off the Kerry coast, and the picture it gives of a way of life so strangely remote from our own cannot fail to be fascinating. As a museum piece it would command interest, whether it were written well or ill. But it is far more than a museum piece; it stands out among autobiographies by its freshness, its unforced originality. E. M. Forster's praise of it can hardly be bettered: "Here is the egg of a sea-bird, lovely, perfect and laid this very morning."

What are Maurice O'Sullivan's qualifications for autobiography? Certainly not literary skill, for he learnt his lessons at the village school and spent much of his school-time, it would seem, playing truant on the shore. He writes just as he thinks and speaks, and tells his story, not soberly and in order, but with a hop, skip and a jump, as the memories crowd into his head. Thus, in the first chapter, he tells of going to school on the mainland, of the scolding schoolmistress and the kind priest with his tin of sweets; and then, quite irrelevantly, he recounts a very odd dream he had one afternoon on the hill. This, of course, is very improper, for the proportions of the chapter are thereby ruined, and all this nonsense about a dream would be better omitted, as any experienced writer would know. But here, and all through the book, the author's lack of literary skill stands him in good stead, for it enables



him to tell the truth—which is always singularly difficult. It springs from complete unselfconsciousness. He writes of what really happened to himself, and it never occurs to him to conceal the story of his getting drunk at a tender age, or cadging tobacco, or being frightened by a quite imaginary ghost.

Naturalness, candour, delight in living, these are the qualities that will ensure his autobiography being read when those of many eminent people are forgotten. His approach is always direct. He projects himself completely into the past, re-lives it moment by moment, and never blurs the effect by adding his maturer reflections. Except for the opening sentence there is hardly a generalization in the book. Being so young, he can remember his boyhood without the nostalgia or regret which must always colour and distort past experience. Having lived so vividly, he can in imagination relive each adventure and identify himself with each of his past selves. Take, for instance, his account of his first train journey—

“The train began to move and soon she was passing rapidly across the country to the east. I got up and put out my head through the open window. There was not an inch of the sea to be seen now, but fine broad fields and green leafy woods and birds flying over the trees in terror of the train. Before long I noticed the train making the worm’s twist round a turn in the railway. Oh Lord, said I to myself, as I saw the length of it, what is drawing it at all? Is it possible to understand its weight to say nothing of the people in it? I gave another look ahead and what did I see but it passing under a bridge. When I came to the bridge myself I had no thought but that my head had been torn off with the start which was taken out of



me. Quickly I crouched back inside the carriage. I looked round at the people but, if so, I was not at all pleased with the way some of them were smiling. I looked out again to see what had become of the others who were looking out at the same time. They must have had their heads torn off, said I, if they were not as quick as myself in crouching back. But, *musha*, when I looked they were still there. Before long I saw another bridge, but this time I drew in quietly without letting on anything. . . .”

This *naïveté*, this engaging candour, is only possible because he writes, not for a wide public, but for the small and intimate company of his own islanders. Had he visualized his words in print, to be read by an unknown and critical public, he could never have written with such ease or such gaiety. Instead he would have been tempted to put on airs and hide his *naïveté* under a guise of sophistication.

Of the structure of “Twenty Years A-Growing” little can be said, for it seems to have grown of itself. It is roughly chronological, but there is no stress on the passing of time or on the different phases of growing up. We are conscious chiefly of the flowing pattern of life on the island in which certain things stand out—a wake, a shipwreck, a day’s hunting, a truant day on the mainland—and then, quite suddenly, we are aware that the little boy who was caned by the schoolmistress has grown up into a young man on his way to Dublin to seek his fortune. He has written without method, merely delved into the rag-bag of his memory and brought out gaily-coloured handfuls for our delight. Compared with this the deliberately haphazard method of Sir John Squire or Norman Douglas seems artificial.



To draw lessons from so delightful a book seems unfitting, but if, like the Duchess in "Alice", we believe that there is a moral in everything, here are some for the autobiographer. First and most important, write, as O'Sullivan has done, for a small and intimate circle. Forget publishers and public and imagine yourself confiding to some familiar friends, and write for them and for them alone. In this way you will not be tempted into pomposity or posing; they know you too well to put up with such affectations. Nor will you be able to touch up your self-portrait; they would surely raise their eyebrows and mock at such vanity. Consideration for your audience will prevent you from prolixity and tediousness, and you will find yourself writing easily, intimately and honestly, which is the only way in which an autobiography should be written.

For the rest live fully, write as well and as simply as you can, and tell the truth even if it makes you look a fool. Use whatever form and formula you like, as long as it allows you to be easy and natural. Finally, don't wait till you are old and distinguished before you write your autobiography—begin now.

### EXERCISES

(1) Write a chapter of your autobiography covering the period of your life which you have most enjoyed.

(2) Write the opening chapter of a biography either of some distinguished, but not too well-known, person of the past, or of some interesting but undistinguished person of the present.

### SUGGESTED READING

#### *Biographies :*

"Queen Victoria." By Lytton Strachey.

"The Duke." Philip Guedalla.

"Montrose." John Buchan.

#### *Autobiographies :*

"The Honeysuckle and the Bee." Sir John Squire.

“Memory Hold the Door.” John Buchan.

“Twenty-Five.” Beverley Nichols.

In preparation for next chapter :—

“Dick and the Beanstalk.” Walter de la Mare. (From “My Lord Fish.” Faber.)

“Swallows and Amazons.” Arthur Ransome. (Cape.)

“The Farmer and the Seasons.” F. Fraser Darling. (Country Life.)



## CHAPTER X

# WRITING FOR CHILDREN

IT is sometimes supposed that writing for children is easy, and that to like and be liked by them provides a passport to success. If this were so, every fond parent and devoted aunt, with any talent for writing whatever, would be earning a golden income by the pen, which is not the fact at all. Writing for children is by no means easy. It demands as much skill, care and effort as writing for adults, and demands besides quite uncommon qualities of mind and imagination. There is all the difference in the world between writing *for* children and writing *about* them. The grown-up looks back on childhood with heightened perception and sensibility; he is aware of its absurdity and its charm, and sometimes of its tragedy; and his view is coloured by a romantic nostalgia for the past. "The Golden Age" and "Dream Days", those exquisite volumes of Kenneth Grahame's, betray this adult standpoint by their very titles, which epitomize this longing for the lost world of youth. The stories contained in them, enchanting as they are to grown-ups, have far less appeal to children for this reason: it is "The Wind in the Willows", with its exciting account of the adventures of Mole and Rat and Toad and Badger, that brings them lasting pleasure. Here Grahame is no longer looking back on childhood, as in the other two volumes; he has himself become a child again, peering out with wondering eyes upon the strange world of river and wood.

It is perhaps this wondering delight that distin-

guishes the child's outlook from that of the average adult. "O brave new world," cries Miranda in "The Tempest", and that is what most normal happy children unconsciously feel every morning when they wake. Whoever aspires to write for children must share this delight in some degree, and must retain this gift of daily seeing the world in all its wonder as if for the first time.

That he must also know a great deal about children at first hand hardly needs saying, and it is equally clear that his knowledge of them must be based on close daily acquaintance with children of today. Children's tastes and outlook have changed more swiftly in the last fifteen years than ever before. Instead of a simple interest in ponies and pigs, the modern child shows a sophisticated knowledge of cars and aeroplanes, and can confound his elders with a wealth of technical information. Simple stories pleased us, but the modern child is used to the speed and excitement of the gangster film. Tales of magic stirred our wonder, but the modern child is used to the far more astounding wonders of this mechanical age. All this does not mean that children have changed essentially, or that their delight in aeroplanes differs radically from our own innocent farmyard pleasures. Moreover, the change affects older children (from nine or ten upwards) more than younger, boys more than girls. It is important, nevertheless, to take this change seriously into account, remembering that topicality is just as important in writing for children as in writing for adults, and that a demand for swifter action in children's fiction is only another symptom of the quickening tempo of the age.

Children seem to pass through at least four distinct phases, which are reflected in their tastes in reading.



First comes the very early stage when they are discovering the material world for themselves, and when everything from cabbages to cotton-reels is of absorbing interest because it is remarkable and new. For them, "The cat sat on the mat" is not a wearisome lesson in spelling, but an enthralling fact, especially if there is a picture to illustrate it; and the reading-books designed for children at this stage should be chiefly concerned with material things—with cats and dogs and trains and motor-cars—and (this is important) they must show the child himself prominently in their midst.

Next comes the phase when they believe that anything may happen, however wonderful or strange; when they prefer make-believe to fact, and can convince themselves that the table really is a house, even though mother is laying the cloth for tea upon its roof. It is now that they delight in fairy tales of all kinds, from the crudest tales of magic in their penny weeklies to the fantasies of Hans Andersen or Walter de la Mare.

The end of this highly imaginative stage frequently comes when they go to school. In this new crowded life interest in real people, particularly in their contemporaries, develops. The imaginary world grows dim; they want stories about children like themselves, stories in which they can identify themselves with the heroes or heroines and set out on real adventures, and it is books like Arthur Ransome's "Swallows and Amazons" that satisfy this longing.

Finally comes the romantic stage, when hero-worship is natural and inevitable, and interest in character, conduct and ideals begins. This stage differs greatly in boys and girls; it is more pronounced perhaps in girls' development, but occurs in that of both. It is reflected in the books they read—in school stories



centred round the beautiful girl prefect or the captain of the cricket eleven; in adventure stories in which the hero, battered and broken, holds the fort against desperate odds; in historical fiction in which handsome royalists outwit despicable roundheads. It must be noted, however, that the rising generation does not, on the whole, care for sentiment or idealism laid on too thick, as may be seen by comparing such a book as "Little Women" (with its roseate portraits of Marmee and Little Beth) with its modern countertype.

These phases vary greatly in different children, and occur at different ages according to the rate of their development and the environment in which they grow up. The writer must decide for which phase he is writing and must suit his style and story to the particular phase he has in mind. He must always remember, moreover, that children are naturally egocentric—each in his own private world a king and hero—and that they like stories in which they themselves can in imagination play the chief parts. Hence, in children's books the grown-ups must be the supernumeraries, while the burden of responsibility rests upon the children. In "Treasure Island" all the characters save one are adult, but it is the child among them, the little cabin-boy, Jim Hawkins, who is at the heart of the whole enterprise, and who really pulls the strings.

It must be remembered, too, that children are essentially moral in their outlook, seeing good and evil in uncompromising black and white; there are no subtle greys, no half-tones of virtue and vice for them. Little boys, who engage in all sorts of wickedness at school and at home, are always ready to hiss the villain at the cinema. Their heroes must be heroic all through; they have a Puritan intolerance of amiable vice. The



writer for children must not attempt subtlety of character in which good and evil are blended; his characters must be vivid and alive, but never both good and bad at the same time.

Children of all ages enjoy humour when it is not above their heads or at their expense. Most of us, except the most solemn or the most sophisticated, retain much of the child's sense of humour. We laugh as happily when someone tips a pail of whitewash over Charlie Chaplin's head as we did when father's best hat blew into the river, or an elderly uncle "sat through" a thin place in a canvas chair. Children laugh most easily at the discomfiture of others, and their pleasure is heightened when the victim is pompous or greedy or bullying, or in some other way deserves his fate. An analysis of the jokes in children's "comics" amply supports this fact, and it is illustrated over and over again in the traditional children's tales. Æsop's frog is punished for her stupid ambition to be as big as the bull by swelling and swelling until she bursts. In Andersen's diverting story "The Emperor's New Clothes", the Emperor falls a victim to his own credulous vanity. Stories of practical jokes always please, and can appear in an endless variety of forms without ever palling. (Indeed, to judge again from an analysis of children's "comics", they can be repeated with very little variation at all, and will yet delight the young as much as ever.) Their popularity even with older children can be guessed from their constant appearance in school stories, written for both boys and girls.

Verbal humour might be thought too difficult for children to understand, but it is an odd fact that, while puns are distinctly out of fashion in grown-up society,

they still afford children great amusement. The explanation seems to be that puns, like riddles and nonsense rhymes, appeal to their new-found delight in words for their own sake, and charm because they emphasize the essential oddity of language. The same cause accounts in part for their pleasure in nonsense, especially the kind of verbal nonsense that reaches transcendent heights in Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky"—

" 'Twas brillig and the slithy toves  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe,  
All mimsy were the borogroves,  
And the mome rathes outgrabe."

Here it is the sound that delights by its absurdity, and stirs the mind by its sheer expressiveness. Edward Lear comes close with his rhymes about "Aunt Jobiska's *runcible* cat with crimson whiskers", but in Lear's poems the nonsense is partly verbal, partly dependent on the joyous absurdity of what he has to say. "Jabberwocky" is a *tour de force*, but it is doubtful whether such pure nonsense could be longer sustained, or, if it were, could continue to give the same pleasure. In general, "Alice in Wonderland" and "Alice through the Looking Glass", like Lear's nonsense rhymes, depend less on nonsensical language than on nonsensical situations. They present a world turned topsy-turvy in which it is quite natural that a dormouse should fall asleep inside a teapot, or a duchess beat her baby when it sneezes; and—because children's notions of sense and propriety are less conventional than their elders'—they are enthralled by Alice's adventures as well as enchanted by their absurdity. Carroll's secret—and Lear's—is that, having created a crazy world, they proceed to treat it with becoming gravity. We never



hear them laughing at their own wit; instead, we feel that they regard such tragi-comic figures as the Gryphon and the Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo with real solemnity and sympathy. The nonsense writer can, in fact, only succeed if he takes his nonsense seriously. If his humour is forced or self-conscious, then children will not fail to censure him as "being silly".

Many grown-ups have this gift for inventing nonsense, but they modestly reserve it for their own private amusement or for that of their family. They should take courage and cultivate it for the entertainment of a wider public of both children and adults alike. Nonsense *must* be spontaneous, yet, to be effective, it must have neatness, grace and style. The charm of Lear, even for the child, comes from an unconscious pleasure in his felicitous rhythms. ("On the coast of Coromandel where the early pumpkins blow"—the lines are as musical as any in Swinburne.) Carroll's style is deceptively simple, but what art there is in his restraint and what naturalness in his dialogue! Hilaire Belloc's humour is sharpened by the neatness of his rhyming and his delightful trick of understatement.\* There can be only one Carroll, one Belloc, one Lear, yet, if they cannot be imitated, they can at least teach the valuable lesson that humour, charm, and a gift for nonsense by themselves are not enough, but depend for their full effect on finished craftsmanship.

\* As when Jim is eaten by a lion at the Zoo—

"Now just imagine how it feels  
When first your toes and then your heels,  
And then by gradual degrees,  
Your shins and ankles, calves and knees,  
Are slowly eaten, bit by bit.  
*No wonder Jim detested it!*"

("Cautionary Tales for Children").

This lesson is, of course, applicable to all that is written for children, and gives the lie to the too common opinion that style is unimportant in this field and that all that children care about is a "story". It is true that the "story" is of first interest to them, and equally true that they will enjoy anything, however ill-written, if the story pleases them, but this is because most children at a certain age (say from eight to twelve) are omnivorous readers, ready to devour anything from the latest escapade of Bessie Bunter to "Christy's Old Organ". To assert that children therefore do not care for what is well-written is entirely false, else how can we account for the continued popularity of Hans Andersen, that delicate poet and humorist, or the great stylist, Robert Louis Stevenson? All children have imagination, though it may sometimes lie latent; very many of them feel an unwitting delight in beautiful words and images; it is for the writer to awaken the one and satisfy the other, and if he has any sense of responsibility, it is work well worth his pains. Moreover (to fall back on a more material argument) the standard of children's books has risen so much in the last twenty years that, unless he takes the trouble to write well, he will have no chance of finding a publisher. Shoddy writing still finds a market among some of the innumerable children's weeklies, but it is a market that is overcrowded, and success in it will not bring much material profit nor any self-satisfaction.

Bishop Corbet's "Farewell, Rewards and Fairies" might well seem more appropriate today than in his own seventeenth century. Sophisticated modern children, one might imagine, with their serious passion for motor-cars and wireless and aeroplanes, would have no



use for fairies and fairy tales. But their sophistication is only skin deep. Like their elders, they need some imaginative escape from reality, and they find it, like previous generations, in stories of magic and fantasy. Small girls, of course, are more interested in fairy tales than boys, and for a longer period, since they rarely have the same bent towards science and mechanics as their brothers, but small boys enjoy fairy tales too, especially the robust variety that involve killing giants and slaying dragons.

Fairy stories, indeed, make the same appeal to younger children as adventure stories to older ones. They are, in fact, adventure stories with a much wider scope, since the adventures they recount take place beyond the borders of reality, where anything may happen, however surprising. There is a tendency among amateur writers, especially women, to confine the scope of fairy tales to a "prettified" fairyland where silver-winged creatures in gauzy nightgowns dance by the light of the moon. There is nothing wrong with this conventional conception except that it *is* conventional, and has become in the course of time somewhat tawdry. The spangled fairy of pantomime is all very well on the stage, but can be a very dull creature in the story-book. It is the insipidity of such tales that makes the small boy condemn them as girls' stuff, and his tough little sister in the end dismiss them as silly. "Fairy story" is by its limitation a misleading title: one has only to re-read Hans Andersen to be reminded that its domain is boundless and that its magic casements open upon an infinite world of delight.

It must, then, if it is to make a wide appeal, be something vigorous and robust, since it reproduces in the world of unreality the adventures and excitements of the real world. Insipidity frequently comes from an



over-anxious regard for the maxim that there should be nothing frightening in children's reading. But this, like most sensible maxims, can be overstressed. Children, like grown-ups, enjoy being mildly frightened when they know it is only in make-believe, and, if they do not find a safe imaginative outlet for this instinct in their story-books, they will create nightmare fantasies of their own and will frighten themselves far more effectively. Few children surely suffered any but enjoyable fear from reading about the witch's house in "Hansel and Gretel", but many imaginative children, carefully reared on the most innocuous reading, frighten themselves into hysteria by self-created terrors.\* Nothing could be more wicked than to introduce what is really ugly or terrifying into children's fiction (though grown-ups would do well to remember how easily their own careless conversation may introduce children to the real horrors of everyday life). No child, however, will be seriously the worse from acquaintance with the crocodile in "Peter Pan" or the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk", and they will bring him far more imaginative satisfaction than the pretty-pretty banalities of the conventional fairy-tale.

Children, though they love strange wonders, are more generally satisfied by stories which are not entirely divorced from reality. ("The Arabian Nights' Entertainment" is, of course, a notable exception to this generalization.) The magic world should lie on the borderland of the world they know, so that they feel that they too may one day stray across its boundary. The link between reality and unreality is strongest when

\* As, for instance, the small girl of the writer's acquaintance who nightly lay quaking with terror, because she had persuaded herself that the rucks in the bedclothes were snakes that had crawled into her bed.



the hero of the story is a child like themselves, and the magic more convincing the more it is mingled with the stuff of everyday life.

This fact is admirably illustrated in Walter de la Mare's "Dick and the Beanstalk",\* which, as the title suggests, begins where the nursery tale left off. Jack, you remember, had climbed a magic beanstalk and found himself in a land of giants. He had entered a giant's castle and had run away with a goose that laid golden eggs, and, when the giant was climbing down the Beanstalk after him, had cut it down and brought him tumbling to his doom. But the Beanstalk (according, at least, to De la Mare) had grown again, and Dick, a Gloucestershire farmer's son, coming suddenly upon it one winter's day, cannot resist the temptation of climbing it. He comes, like Jack, to a giant's castle, and is grudgingly admitted by the giant's wife, who proves to be the great-grand-daughter of the giant whom Jack had killed. She persuades her husband to accompany Dick back to earth to find the dead giant's grave, and after spending an uneasy night tied to the table-leg lest he escape, Dick leads the way back next morning to the Beanstalk. He does his best to convince the giant that it will not bear his weight, but cannot prevent him from following him down. Reluctantly he takes him home to his father's farm, and father and son are very hard put to it to find food and lodging for their over-sized visitor. So good is their catering, however, that the giant refuses to leave them, and they find their stock and provender rapidly vanishing, while the giant grows daily more greedy and more difficult. Dick at last hits on the plan of returning up the Beanstalk and seeking the help of the giant's wife. He finds her

\* From "My Lord Fish" (Faber).



stricken with grief at her husband's absence, and gets from her a locket to serve as token and a message urging him to return in time for a great feast she is preparing, and, as his own reward, her husband's magic watch. Greed persuades the giant to return for the night of the feast, but he is determined to come back to earth again after. Dick, however, knows better, and, as soon as the giant has reached the top, he sets fire to the Beanstalk and so destroys it for ever.

The story could hardly be simpler; all its elements are part of the common stuff of fairy-tales. Its charm for children lies in the way it extends the old story and makes it seem a part of everyday life—something that really happened. "Jack the Giant-Killer", taken by itself, belongs to the world of fairy-tale; "Dick and the Beanstalk" to the world of reality. De la Mare, by telling his tale in so concrete a fashion, has made both Jack's adventure and Dick's seem credible. There is no longer any perceptible division between romance and reality. Dick's beanstalk rears a strong, solid ladder into the winter sky; Dick's giant lies snoring in his barn, well-stuffed with Gloucestershire pork and cider; Dick himself, sturdy, glib of tongue, independent, might, as children unconsciously realize, be one of themselves.

This air of reality comes partly from the vitality of the characters, partly from the solidity of the background and the realism of its detail. Dick is a simple but original creation. He is brave, adventurous, self-sufficient, like all good fairy-tale heroes; his originality lies in his plausible tongue and his solemn and grown-up good manners, which carry him triumphantly through every peril. The giant and his wife are original also in their own way. The husband is not at all the con-



ventional ogre with his "fee-fie-foh-fum", but a weakly, oafish creature; \* his wife, dour as she is, shows a very human anxiety and grief at her man's absence. Even their grim humour has a homely quality, as when, for instance, the giant falls asleep after his meal and waking "seemed to be in a good humour after his nap, not sulky or sharp as some people are. 'What *I* say', he said, with a laugh on seeing Dick again, 'what *I* say is, there's more than one kind of supper!'"

The setting, like the characters, is solid and realistic, the land of giants no less than the homely countryside below, and it is especially to be noted that the magic ladder that links them both is as solid as the Cotswold stone of which Dick's home is built. This is important, for unless we accept the fantastic beanstalk as a fact, we shall be unable to accept the rest. Look, then, at the careful particularity of De la Mare's description:

"It went twisting and writhing corkscrew fashion straight up into the air and so out of sight. Dick could not guess how far because the sunlight so dazzled his eyes. But when he examined this great growth closely, and its gigantic pods of dried-up seeds as big as large kidney-shaped pebblestones that still clung to its stem, he decided that it must be beans. . . . He went close and tugged with all his might at the tangle of stalks. A few hollow cockled-up bean-seeds peppered down from out of their dry shucks. He ducked his head. Once more he tugged; the stalks were tough as leather. And he began to climb."

Not only is De la Mare cunning in selecting those details that give solidity to the story, but he knows also what will entertain or intrigue his child-readers,

\* Compare the similar reversal of convention in Kenneth Grahame's story, "The Reluctant Dragon".



as, for example, the account of the giant's supper: "By good chance there was not only a side of green bacon but a cold roast leg of mutton in the larder that had been prepared for dinner the day before. . . . With this, a tub of porridge, half a dozen loaves of bread, a basketful of boiled hens' eggs and a couple of buckets of tea, they went back to the barn. Two or three journeys the giant gave them before he licked the last taste out of his last honey-pot, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and said he had had enough." But most skilful of all are the small details he selects in order to evoke a picture—"So Dick began to climb down the Beanstalk and the giant followed after him so close with his scissor legs that Dick had to keep dodging his head to avoid his great shoes with their shining metal hooks instead of laces." It is that last meticulous touch that makes us see the picture clear.

None of this detail would be effective were it not that it is sharpened and made bright by the crystalline quality of De la Mare's writing. By the purity of his style and his precision in the choice of words he does indeed make us share his exquisite perception and imaginative power. Such qualities can, it is true, be recognized only by adults, but it is their *effect* upon children that matters. The story will delight them all, but there are many whose imagination will be stirred by something more than the story, who will share Dick's excitement when, looking down from the Beanstalk, he sees the red sun low in the heavens and "beneath him the vast saucer of the world", or when, perched on the giant's shoulder, he sees the "strange hills and valleys sparkling cold and still in the glare of the moonlight".



De la Mare's success as a writer of children's stories lies in the double fact that he is able to see through a child's eyes—Dick's eyes—and can invest what he sees with his own poetic imagination. His work illustrates the distinction between true and false values in children's fiction. The commonplace writer can create a picture as pretty as the transformation scene in a pantomime; but the writer with imaginative power can make the child see the real world in all the lucent colours of morning.

Arthur Ransome, though so very different a writer from De la Mare, owes his success in writing for children to this same gift for seeing the world through children's eyes. His book, "Swallows and Amazons", is concerned with nothing more sensational than the adventures of a family of children who spend a summer holiday in camping and sailing; but, because he understands so well the excitement of being young, the incidents of their holiday seem like high adventure.

The Walker children, John, Susan, Titty and Roger, are adept in sailing; they spend their holiday camping on an island in a lake and pass their days sailing in their boat the "Swallow". Their friends and rivals are two wild tomboys, Nancy and Peggy Blackett, who have a sailing-boat, the "Amazon", and the common enemy of them all is the Blacketts' Uncle Jim, who lives in a houseboat on the lake and doesn't want to be bothered with children.

But all this, though true in outline, is very much an understatement. The Walkers, led by the bold Captain John, are really explorers who camp on a desert island, make daring journeys to the mainland to parley with "natives", and sail and bathe in shark-infested seas, while the Blacketts are nothing less than pirates, whose



flag is the Jolly Roger and whose behaviour is very much in keeping with it. Their adventures, though mild enough to an uncomprehending grown-up view, are correspondingly exciting and romantic. The Swallows and Amazons (as they call themselves) make mutual war and raid each other's territories by night: Titty captures the "Amazon" single-handed and maroons the Blacketts on the island they have invaded. Peace is signed and the rival crews declare war on Uncle Jim (*alias* Captain Flint, a retired pirate); they attack his houseboat, sieze him and compel him to walk the plank, but when he pleads for mercy, magnanimously save him from the sharks. Nor is the book complete without a treasure hunt: Uncle Jim's houseboat has been burgled, but the children find his stolen sea-chest on a little island where the thieves have buried it. Such are the great adventures that make up "Swallows and Amazons", but the book is crowded with minor incident that is made almost equally exciting. Ransome knows that children are essentially practical and like to know just how things are done, so he explains very clearly indeed how the tents were constructed, how Susan scrambled the eggs, and how John set up the mast and sails for their first trip in the "Swallow".

This brings us, of course, to one of his outstanding qualities. He knows all there is to know about the craft of sailing and can make it clear to those who do not. It might be thought that most children's ignorance of sailing matters would be a disadvantage, but this is not the case. Every child would like to sail a boat, just as every child would like to ride a pony—and that is why books about boats and ponies are invariably popular. Words like "reef", "starboard", "halyard", are enthralling even when their meaning is



hazy, but no one who reads Ransome can be hazy about them for long.

His appeal is twofold: he stimulates children's practical interest at the same time as he satisfies their romantic imagination. "Swallows and Amazons" is quite as romantic as a story about real explorers and real buccaneers, and in many ways more satisfying. To the practical-minded (and it is for these in particular that he writes), the Spanish Main and Captain Flint may seem remote, but the adventures of the Walkers and the Blaketts come well within the bounds of credibility. This impression is strengthened by the characters of the children themselves. There is nothing remarkable about any of them, but one could not ask for a more delightful family than the Walkers or gayer company than the Blaketts. Each one of them has a clearly marked personality, though the Walkers (good, thoughtful, responsible children) present a family contrast to the Blaketts, who are a very wild pair indeed. Arthur Ransome has the gift (not altogether common) of creating good characters who are not at all priggish. John, as captain of the crew and head of the family, is sensible and level-headed; Susan, who comes next in age, is very careful and motherly indeed; and Titty and Roger, their small brother and sister, are in their different ways darlings, though they would hate to be considered such. Ransome makes us conscious of their strong family feeling and of their devotion to their mother, and it is an achievement that he can do this without mawkishness or exaggeration. He knows that the emotions of childhood are simple and direct, and he presents them in their simplicity: it is only the adult mind that exaggerates simple feeling into sentiment.

It is worth noting that, as the book is intended chiefly for children between the ages of ten and fourteen, the standpoint from which it is written is that of John and Susan and the Blacketts who fall within that age group. Roger and Titty, being younger, are seen chiefly through the eyes of the elder brother and sister. This may be illustrated by the following passage (which also serves to show the ease and charm of the dialogue)—

“ ‘ Roger,’ said Mate Susan, ‘ go into your tent and put on two pairs of everything.’

“ ‘ Everything?’ said Roger.

“ ‘ Everything,’ said the mate. ‘ Two vests, two pairs of drawers, two shirts, two pairs of knickerbockers, two pairs of stockings.’

“ ‘ I can’t put on two pairs of shoes,’ said Roger.

“ ‘ You won’t have to. March. Put on two of everything else. Pretend you’re going to the North Pole.’

“ ‘ Two ties?’ said Roger, going into the tent.”

It is hardly necessary to add a word about the style of the book, for it is of the kind that so beautifully fits its subject that we cease to be conscious of it. Always simple, it is never deliberately or self-consciously so. There is much good writing, but no “ fine ” writing at all. Above all, it is admirably clear and direct, so that even the most technical matters (and sailing is full of technicalities) are easily understood.

The days are happily over when history, to the school-child, meant the names and dates of the kings and queens of England and geography was a list of chief towns and rivers. Fundamental changes are taking place in education, and it is now generally acknowledged that it is at least equally important to



stimulate the child's desire for knowledge as to cram his luckless head with it.

This changed conception has naturally brought about a change in the educational books designed for children. Textbooks, it is true, are slow to change; they must be predominantly factual as long as they remain part of an examination system that places chief emphasis on the acquisition of facts. There is, however, a great and growing number of books designed to broaden children's minds and stimulate their interest—short biographies of famous people, simple books on every subject under the sun, compendious books that seek to cut a path through the mazes of modern knowledge. In their diversity they have one quality in common—that they aim to lure the child down the road of learning instead of hauling him along it by the ear. To this end they must make knowledge attractive; they must anticipate the kind of things that children want to know, answer their unspoken questions and make them want to ask yet more.

Earlier educationists believed that children wanted, or ought to want, solid facts, and they gave them facts in plenty. "Papa" in "The Swiss Family Robinson", who disgorges information unendingly for the benefit of his offspring, is a figure characteristic of his times, whose loquacity would not be tolerated for five minutes by the rising generation. Children are not interested in knowledge for its own sake, but in the practical "whys" and "hows" of living. The answers to their questions must be simple and sufficient; to be given more facts than they can digest will only stifle their hunger for information and prevent them thinking for themselves. To select what is essential and reject the rest is the writer's first task, and it is much more difficult than it



sounds. He must be able to discard in imagination all his adult knowledge, so that he will not make the common mistake of assuming too much knowledge in his readers or plunge them suddenly into unfamiliar waters. His method must be to pass from the familiar to the unfamiliar, linking their new knowledge with their old, and making it in this way more easily remembered. Not least important, he must be honest and unprejudiced in his choice and presentment of facts; suppression of some and over-emphasis of others will distort the truth and make the child's vision crooked from the start. This danger is greatest where personalities are involved: the slightest over-stress on Charles I's squint eye inevitably conveys a squint view of his character; emphasis on the part played by the guillotine in the French Revolution obscures the greater importance of the revolutionary doctrines. Whatever our grown-up opinions may be, it is unfair to pass them on to children: they have the right to facts and the right to form their unbiased opinion from them. This does not mean, of course, that the facts presented must be bare and colourless. Those that stir the heart and imagination are just as important as those that explain or inform, and details that appeal to the eye remain vivid long after those that make only a mental appeal are forgotten. That horses are bred on the plains of Hungary, as the dull geography primers inform us, is of no interest at all, but when we are told of the way the Hungarian horse-drovers live, and the food they eat, and the clothes they wear, the fact becomes memorable.

Care for planning and arrangement, important always, is especially so in books for children. The adult, with his developed reasoning power, can follow a devious argument without fatigue, but children need it pre-



sented to them in direct and straightforward fashion. Not that the chief points must be set out like the heads of a sermon—" firstly . . . secondly . . . thirdly . . . " That belongs to the preliminary planning, and the writer whose " firstlies " and " secondlies " persist in the finished work should turn to some other trade. But the planning itself is a stage that cannot be skipped, even though you are in the mood when words slip without effort from the pen; without it children will find your work rambling and full of confusing digressions, and, if they are able to read to the end, will retain only a muddled impression of what they have read. Absolute clearness is essential whether you are writing a brief article on how to make a model boat or a full-length book.

Anyone who intends to write for children would do well to study " The Seasons and the Farmer " by F. Fraser Darling, which is a model of clearness and orderly planning. Its scope is immense, for it aims to bridge the gap between town and country, by presenting in a simple way the elements of farming and explaining the significance of country tasks through the changing seasons. The writer's difficulty here has been not to find material, but to decide what to leave out. Without ruthless pruning the book would have been of immense size, and children would have found it unreadable. As it is, it is a slim book of some seventy pages—interesting, informative, and offering just as much knowledge as will stimulate children to ask for more. This is a remarkable achievement, since it is the expert's instinct to pour out all he knows; one imagines that Dr. Fraser Darling used a blue pencil very freely on his manuscript before he had reduced it to its just proportions.



The problem of arrangement in such a book is nearly as great as that of selecting the material. Where should one begin? How decide what is most important? How find a guiding thread through this maze of matter? It was necessary clearly to find some way of dividing it up into sections, and several ways lay open. It would, for example, have been possible to divide the book into parts, one dealing with the different kinds of farming in Britain, another with the land and its crops, another with stock and poultry. But this arrangement, though clear and logical, would have been monotonous. Instead, Dr. Darling shows work on the farm in the four seasons, adding a preliminary chapter on the land, crops and animals in order to make the rest of the book clear, and ending with an epilogue on "the produce and the people" to show the part played by the farmer in the nation's life.

This plan has not only the merit of variety; it has an imaginative appeal besides. It evokes a picture of each season and its familiar sights: lambs in the spring meadows and the ploughman leading out his team; the yellow cornfields of summer and the loaded haywains; in autumn the level sun on the stubble and the tawny leaves scattering down. So, from evoking familiar scenes, he goes on to explain their significance. Most children know what a plough looks like, but how many know just how it works? They are used to the sight of the mown hayfields, but do they know the whole elaborate process of haymaking before the hay finally reaches the stack? Or why haystacks are smaller in Scotland than in the drier south?

The attraction of the book for children is that it provides practical answers to all the questions they would like to ask. It explains how the blacksmith



fits the shoe to the horse's hoof; how the hedger hacks and bends the hawthorn twigs to make a level hedge-row, and the dry-stone-dyker without the use of mortar builds loose stones into a solid wall. Nor does Dr. Darling present a romanticized picture of country life. The farmer whom he pictures leaning over a gate planning the work for the days ahead is not the conventional Farmer Giles of children's fiction, but a practical man of affairs. He tells how in the old days seed was sown and hay scythed by hand, but he explains very carefully the workings of the modern mechanical drill and mowing machine.

The style of the book is admirable for its purpose. While it is simple enough for a child of eight or nine to read, it never gives the impression of being deliberately simplified. Its simplicity is natural and easy, and seems to spring from a close understanding of children. It is intimate, and has the quality of conversation without being over-colloquial. Though the author never intrudes his personality, we are pleasantly aware of it, and are brought closer by occasional fragments of reminiscence, as when he recalls his delight as a small boy in helping in the blacksmith's shop.

To sum up, the virtues of Dr. Darling's book are that it gives sensible information in a clear and easy form; that it kindles children's interest by telling them what they want to know instead of stifling it by telling them all the author feels they *ought* to know; that it is written without self-consciousness or patronage, yet in a way that children will understand; and that it does not deal with a subject already over-worn, but fulfils a real need.

## EXERCISES

(1) Write a short fairy story or animal story designed for children between eight and ten years.

(2) Sketch the synopsis of an adventure story about a boy of thirteen evacuated to one of the Dominions.

(3) Write a short biography of a famous statesman, soldier and explorer, such as would interest children of twelve to fourteen.

## SUGGESTED READING

"Writing for Children." George Northcroft. (A. & C. Black.)



## CHAPTER XI

# VERSE

“POETRY is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” wrote Wordsworth, and A. E. Housman has suggested that it originates somewhere in the pit of the stomach. However that may be, it is clearly not a deliberate creation of the intellect, nor is it reducible to principles and rules. The poet cannot explain by what means he creates poetry, any more than the oyster can explain how it creates a pearl. The process is, for the most part, passive and involuntary. Verse, on the other hand, can be written by anyone who has mastered the craft, and, though it may never rise into poetry, it can be charming or witty or entertaining none the less.

The market for verse is almost as limited as the market for poetry, and the number of people who, like Mr. Deeds, earn a living by writing verses for Christmas cards, must be very few. There is much to be said, however, for writing verse for fun—odes for birthdays and family occasions, limericks, valentines, even “sonnets to your mistress’s eyebrow”, if she is worthy the compliment. Our Elizabethan forefathers counted the writing of verse one of the necessary accomplishments of a gentleman, and it would add much to the elegance of everyday life if this graceful accomplishment were still general.

This chapter is confined to discussing very briefly indeed the main elements of verse, which are metre, rhyme and form. By metre we mean, in English verse, the combination of stressed and unstressed syllables in

a line, which make up a recurring sound pattern. The unit of metre is the metrical foot. This may take various forms of which the chief are :

the *iambus*, consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable (e.g., *remain*, ∪—)

the *trochee*, consisting of a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable (e.g., *merry*, —∪)

the *dactyl*, consisting of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed (e.g., *Julia*. —∪∪)

the *spondee*, consisting of two unstressed syllables (e.g., *lipstick* — —)

The commonest metrical line in English verse is the *iambic pentameter*, a line which, in its regular form, consists of five iambic feet (e.g., “*Ā fierȳ soul̄ that̄ workinḡ out̄ its̄ waȳ . . .*”). But it must be noted that, though these five iambic feet form the basic pattern of the line, it can admit of infinite variations and irregularities. This can be seen from the line which follows the one just quoted—

‘*Fretted̄ thē pygm̄ȳ bōdȳ tō dēcaȳ . . .*’

where the first foot is not an iambus, but a trochee. The iambic foot can, in fact, be replaced by any other kind of foot, provided there is not so much irregularity in consequence that the basic pattern is obscured.

The *iambic pentameter* is used in many verse forms—in blank verse, in heroic couplets, in the sonnet; and it can be combined with other lines in a number of lyric forms.

*Blank verse* consists of unrhymed iambic pentameters. It is used very largely in poetic drama and in epic poetry. It can be, and usually is, very irregular, but should never depart too far from its metrical norm.



*Ex.* :—

“ If music be the food of love, play on . . . ”

*Heroic couplets* are rhyming pairs of iambic pentameters.

*Ex.* :—

“ A man so various that he seemed to be  
Not man, but all mankind's epitome.”

Their effect depends on their comparative regularity and on the neatness of the rhyme. They are especially adapted for satire and for witty verse of all kinds.

The *sonnet* is a lyric poem consisting of fourteen iambic pentameters arranged in an elaborate rhyming pattern. It falls into two main forms—the English and the Petrarchan. The English form usually consists of three quatrains, ending with a couplet; while the Petrarchan form falls into two parts—the octave (or first eight lines) and the sextet (or last six lines). They are best illustrated by examples. Shakespeare uses the English form and adopts the loosest rhyming scheme admissible in the sonnet.

“ Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd:  
But thy eternal Summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:  
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

Here the rhyming scheme is : A B A B C D C D E F E F G G,  
but it would be equally possible to use one that bound

the quatrains more closely together, as thus: A B A B B C B C C D C D E E. Many other variations in the rhyming scheme are also possible. The Petrarchan form is more exacting as may be seen from this sonnet by Christina Rossetti:

“ O Earth, lie heavily upon her eyes;  
 Seal her sweet eyes, weary of watching, Earth;  
 Lie close around her; leave no room for mirth  
 With its harsh laughter, nor for sound of sighs.  
 She hath no questions, she hath no replies,  
 Hush'd in and curtain'd with a blessed dearth  
 Of all that irk'd her from the hour of birth;  
 With stillness that is almost Paradise.  
 Darkness more clear than noonday holdeth her,  
 Silence more musical than any song;  
 Even her very heart has ceased to stir:  
 Until the morning of Eternity  
 Her rest shall not begin nor end, but be;  
 And when she wakes she will not think it long.”

Here the rhyming scheme is A B B A A B B A C D C E E D. In this form also other variations are possible, particularly in the sextet.

Rhyme, though by no means necessary to poetry, adds much to the grace and charm of verse. Rhymes are of two kinds, masculine and feminine, the masculine rhyming on the last syllable, the feminine on a preceding syllable.

*Ex. :—*

“ One more unfortunate	(Fem. rhyme)
Weary of breath,	(Masc. rhyme)
Rashly importunate,	(Fem. rhyme)
Gone to her death.”	(Masc. rhyme).

The feminine rhyme often produces a softer, more emotional note, as here, but the over-ingenious or non-sensical feminine rhyme can be used also for humorous purposes, as in the couplet of Ogden Nash's:

“ Farewell, farewell, you old rhinoceros  
 I'll think of something less prepoceros.”



Of all rhymed verse forms the sonnet form is most difficult, owing to its exacting rhyming scheme, while the ballad form is the easiest, since only the second and fourth lines of its four-lined verses need rhyme.

*Ex. :—*

“ Now Gilpin had a pleasant wit  
And loved a timely joke,  
And thus unto the Callender  
In merry guise he spoke.”

Two verse forms are used solely for humorous writing—the limerick and the cleriheW. Everyone knows the first form, with its unvarying rhyming pattern  
A A B B A

*Ex. :—*

“ There was an old man with a beard  
Who said ‘ It is just as I feared.  
Two owls and a hen,  
Four larks and a wren,  
Have all built their nests in my beard.’ ”

The metrical unit of the limerick is the dactyl, which gives it lightness and speed. Thus the regular pattern for the long first, second and fifth lines is  $\cup\text{---}\cup\cup\text{---}\cup\cup\text{---}$  and for the short third and fourth  $\cup\text{---}\cup\cup\text{---}$ . As in all other verse strict metrical regularity should not be aimed at, but the pattern of long and short lines should always be retained.

The cleriheW, which is called after its inventor, Edward CleriheW Bentley, is sheer doggerel, depending for effect on the absurdity of its rhymes and its subject matter.

*Ex. :—*

“ Jonathan Swift  
Never went up in a lift.  
Neither did the author of ‘ Robinson Crusoe ’  
Do so.”

It has no fixed metrical pattern, and the only rules for its composition are that it should consist of four lines, the first two and the last two rhyming, and that it should be as ridiculous as possible.

### EXERCISES

- (1) Write a limerick beginning "There was a young lady of Gloucester . . ."
- (2) Write a clerihew on some prominent statesman.
- (3) Write an ode for a child's first birthday.
- (4) Write a sonnet celebrating the end of the black-out.
- (5) Write a parody of a topical nature based either on Wordsworth's ballad, "We are seven" or on the song, "The Campbells are coming . . ."

### SUGGESTED READING

"Common Sense about Poetry." L. A. G. Strong.



## PART II

### CHAPTER I

# THE WRITER AND THE PRESS

THIS is a chapter for free-lances only, for the amateurs who are happy to earn an odd half-guinea for an article or a story, not for the hardier souls who mean to become professional journalists. Between them there yawns a great gulf that is rarely bridged even by the most successful free-lance writer. The journalist reaches Fleet Street (if he ever does) after long, hard training. He usually begins his career by working in a humble capacity on some provincial newspaper, existing on an even humbler salary, and reporting local council meetings, weddings, funerals and charity concerts. If he has merely average ability he continues to do this for the rest of his life, or else migrates to some less exacting profession. It is only a journalist with real talent and a flair for news who achieves a position on a London daily. It is only one with a strong constitution, a tough and resilient temper and a lively, wideawake mind who can hold the position he has gained.

By comparison, the free-lance treads a primrose path. But it must again be emphasized that he must regard free-lance writing as a hobby, not a means of livelihood; to depend on it for bread-and-butter, or to believe that it will ultimately lead to a post as professional journalist is to court disappointment.

Leonard Russell \* regards two pieces of equipment as essential to the aspiring free-lance—a typewriter and a

\* "Writing for the Press."

good collection of periodicals. The possession of a typewriter and the ability to type (it is worth while, by the way, to learn to type reasonably well) will ensure that your contributions arrive in time. To have them professionally typed is expensive and involves delay. A news item or an article of topical interest should be written, typed and posted in as short a time as possible. Delay of even an hour or so may mean that another contribution on the same subject has been accepted first.

Study of the market has already been stressed as the first duty of the free-lance—hence the importance of a large and varied collection of periodicals. They can, it is true, be studied in the reading-room of a free library, but intensive study (and this is essential) is easier at home, and it is convenient, besides, to have them at hand for reference. The needs of different editors as to length and type of contributions should be noted and tabulated; notes should also be made of the subjects treated and the style and tone appropriate to different periodicals. The daily papers, of course, need daily study, for any piece of news may provide an opportunity for an article—whether it is one that is already written and laid by, or one based on some special information that can be quickly written to meet the occasion. At least two daily and two evening papers should be taken regularly, as well as the local daily and weekly papers.

Qualities necessary for successful free-lance writing are alertness, wide general knowledge, and a gift for writing quickly and fluently on whatever subject comes to hand. (It is no use being able to write exquisitely if it takes you half an hour to perfect one sentence.) Versatility and originality are not always so useful to the beginner as might be supposed. Success is more



often achieved by the steady writer who specializes in one kind of article, or knows one subject thoroughly, than by the versatile one who tries his luck in every field. Editors grow to associate a certain name with good work of a certain kind, whereas contributions on widely different topics or in widely different styles may make no impression anywhere. Originality, unless associated with obvious brilliance, may even stand in the beginner's light. A cautious editor prefers to print what is safe and familiar, and will only welcome originality from writers of established reputation. The original writer is therefore advised to insinuate himself into an editor's confidence by an air of conventionality. Only when he has proved his worth can his fancy be safely unleashed.

Free-lance contributions may be roughly analysed into the following groups :—

(i) Articles of topical interest for the daily or weekly Press.

(ii) Articles of more general interest for periodicals.

(iii) Learned articles by specialists for specialist periodicals.

(iv) Technical articles for trade journals.

(v) Articles of practical interest for specialist papers (such as gardening papers), for special pages in the daily press or for women's magazines.

(vi) News items.

(vii) Articles for "diary" or gossip columns in the daily Press. (These are very often of composite authorship, though freely edited by the gossip writer or diarist.)

(viii) Short stories for magazines, weeklies and dailies.

(ix) Serial stories (usually written by established novelists).

It is worth remarking on the growing place of fiction in the daily Press (at least in peace-time). It is the practice of many daily papers to print a short story daily or regularly once or twice a week. These stories, since space is limited, are often no more than sketches or impressions, and they are often of high literary standard. The magazine story varies enormously in style, subject and treatment, and only long and careful study of the market can help the beginner here. Versatility is not an advantage in this field. For commercial purposes it is best to discover the type of fiction in which you excel, and then to write for a definite market, limiting yourself in length, subject and style to the magazines you have in mind.

Every chance of sending in contributions should be taken. However many times they are returned, it is a reasonable certainty that one will ultimately be accepted and will serve as a passport for others. One reservation must nevertheless be made. It is a mistake to send in anything you know to be below standard on the chance of its acceptance, for once your name is associated in the editor's mind with bad work, even your best efforts will not stand a fair chance. A reputation can be built up only by steady and careful work. Shoddiness never pays.



## CHAPTER II

# THE WRITER AND THE PUBLISHER

### *The Publisher.*

BYRON is said to have sworn that Barabbas was a publisher, but this we may take merely as a witticism. Publishers are, as a profession, kind, sympathetic, honourable, and as generous as their business instincts will allow. Disgruntled authors may regard them as grasping capitalists who take the lion's share of the profits, but it must also be remembered that they take more than the lion's share of the risks. They may bring out a book at considerable financial loss; but the author, on the other hand, is always sure of his royalties, and almost always receives an advance sum in cash on the day of publication.

The kind of books different publishers want can be learnt by general observation, by a study of their publishing lists (which they are glad to send post free to anyone who asks), and by consultation of "The Writer's and Artist's Year Book". Although most publishers deal with books on a variety of subjects, almost all of them specialize in one particular field. Fabers, for example, publish a large amount of poetry, Hodder and Stoughton many books on theology, while Gollancz go in for political books of a "leftish" turn. It is worth while studying their tastes and standards in order to avoid unnecessary disappointment in submitting your manuscript.

Certain general requirements may be noted. There is a large market for novels, particularly romantic novels, but the market for collections of short stories

is limited. Those that are published are usually the work of well-known writers, and are for the most part reprints of stories previously published in periodicals. Novels by new writers should be of not less than average length (about 75,000 words), though short novels by established writers have often been highly successful (as, for instance, "All Passion Spent" by V. Sackville-West, or "Invitation to the Waltz" by Rosamond Lehmann).

Non-fiction is, on the whole, less remunerative than fiction, though educational books and technical books, which have enjoyed a steady sale over a period of years, may bring in more money than more spectacular works. It is unnecessary to point out that the writer must have a very thorough knowledge of his subject before attempting work of this kind. Books of topical interest on current affairs, politics, or economics are usually sure of a good sale, provided the author has first-hand knowledge and can write well in a popular vein. In this field it is almost essential to anticipate what is going to be of topical interest later, so that the book may be printed and published while the subject is still "news". "Watch Czecho-Slovakia", published as a Penguin some time before Munich, is a good example of a book that anticipated the march of events.

### *The Literary Agent.*

Whether to send your manuscript direct to the publisher or through a literary agent is a debatable question. The function of the agent is to undertake the business side of authorship. His task is to sell the manuscript to the publisher on the best possible terms for the author, and to assist him in dealing with the outside rights of his work. For all this he usually



charges a commission of ten per cent. on the author's total profits, and, though this may seem a large and unnecessary expense, the system has certain definite advantages. The agent has a business mind, while the author frequently has not; he can obtain good terms where the author is too shy to haggle or bargain. He is an expert in the now very complicated question of outside rights (film rights, translation rights, broadcasting rights, territorial rights, etc.), and he has experience of what different publishers want. If he is a reputable agent his name serves as a recommendation to the publisher, and (perhaps most cogent argument) his handling of the manuscript will spare the sensitive author the pain of repeated rejections.

It is very important indeed to go to a good agent: bad agents exist only to exploit the guileless author. Beware of those who charge a reading fee, who suggest that you should pay them to re-type your manuscript, or who offer to revise and improve it—for a handsome sum. Their acceptance of your manuscript will not help you to sell it; good agents, on the other hand, are almost as difficult to satisfy as publishers, so that their acceptance of your manuscript is a definite step forward.

In general, the agent is more useful to the established writer than to the beginner, since the question of outside rights is more likely to be important, and to require the help of a business brain.

### *The Manuscript.*

Care must be taken in the preparation of your manuscript. It should be accurately typed on white quarto paper, one side only being used. Margins at the top and left-hand side should be wide enough to allow for



corrections, and double spacing should be used in preference to single spacing for the same reason. If you type badly it is worth while to pay to have your work typed by a professional. Bad typing can make even a work of genius seem no better than the outpourings of an illiterate. (Professional typing, however, is somewhat expensive, so the alternative solution is to take infinite pains to type accurately yourself.) Pages should be clearly numbered. If, after typing, it is desired to delete some pages the rest need not be re-numbered. If, for instance, pp. 62-67 are to be deleted, then alter the number of p. 61 to 61-67 and leave the following pages unchanged. In the same way, if pages are to be inserted, this can be done without altering the numbering of the rest. The additional pages will then be numbered p. 61 (a), 61 (b), etc. The front page and also the cover of the manuscript should bear the title and the author's name and address. If a nom-de-plume is used the real name should be put in brackets after it. Manuscripts are best bound, and if bulky are best bound in two parts. A snap cover (which can be bought at most stationers) is the most practical form of binding, so that at the printer's the pages can be taken out and divided up among the compositors, who set up the different parts of the book simultaneously.

The accompanying letter to the publisher should be brief and formal, merely stating the title and nature of the book (e.g., whether it is a novel, a travel book, a volume of belles-lettres, etc.). Do not give a history of how the book came to be written, or add excerpts from your personal history, and do not on any account attempt to see him in person. He is much too busy, and is more likely to be irritated than charmed by your personality. It is unreasonable to expect criticism



of your work or an explanation of its rejection, though some publishers may be kind enough to offer criticism of work that shows promise.

It may be interesting to know what happens to your manuscript after it reaches the publisher. In most offices someone is employed to sift the manuscripts that come in. Some will be seen from a quick reading to be unsuitable, and these are returned to their authors as speedily as possible. The rest are sent to outside readers, who after careful and judicial reading, submit a report on their likelihood of success if published. A manuscript that is strongly recommended by one reader will be sent to another and perhaps to a third, and if the opinion of the first is endorsed, the work will most probably be accepted.

### *The Contract.*

Then comes the question of the contract. This is usually made on a royalty basis; that is to say, the publisher agrees to pay a percentage of the retail price of the book to the author. It is usual also for him to pay on the day of publication a sum in anticipation of the royalties which the book will earn. Royalties over and above that sum are then paid at yearly or half-yearly intervals as long as the book continues to sell. In some cases the publisher may offer to buy the copyright outright. The author then receives an agreed sum down, but, should the book be successful, he will enjoy no further sale in the profits. Though the sum paid may exceed that usually paid in advance royalties, the disadvantages of this form of sale are obvious. It is possible also to have your work published by paying for all or part of the cost of production. Volumes of verse are not infrequently published in this way, but in

general it is not to be recommended. If your work has real merit it will eventually find a publisher; if it has not, there is little point in having it printed merely to satisfy personal vanity.

All contracts should be studied very carefully before final agreement is reached; the parts dealing with outside rights deserve especial study, and should, if possible, be submitted to the judgment of an expert.

### *Copyright.*

A note may be added here about copyright. It is illegal to quote without permission from any other author during his lifetime or for fifty years after his death. Brief quotations may of course be made, and longer quotations are usually allowed provided the source is given and permission obtained from both author and publisher. (In some cases a small fee is charged.)

### *Proof-reading.*

The contract settled, the author's next care must be for proof-reading. The manuscript is usually set up by the printer first in galley-proofs (i.e., sheets about fifteen to twenty inches long, equivalent to three or four ordinary printed pages). These are first corrected by the printer's reader, then by the author. The queries of the printer's reader should be noted carefully, never resented; he will frequently save you from many careless mistakes in spelling, grammar and style. If you agree to his suggestions, they should be marked with a small tick.

The galleys are next made up into pages, and page-proofs sent to the author for correction. The importance of sending in an accurately typed manuscript and of



correcting the galley proofs with care is here apparent, for corrections made in the page proofs are expensive and the publisher usually stipulates in the contract that correction expenses above a certain amount should be paid for by the author.

# APPENDIX A

## REPORTS

THE writing of reports is an important part of business routine and, since writing a really good report is difficult, it is worth while giving some space to the subject.

Reports may take diverse forms, but we may take three types as examples—a memorandum of a meeting or an interview, an account of a visit of inspection to school, shop, factory, etc., and a general survey of any given subject.

The preparation of a memorandum is a comparatively straightforward affair, since the material is at hand, and has only to be summarized. The greatest difficulty lies in remembering clearly and accurately what was said. Notes cannot always be made at the time, especially if the interview takes the form of friendly discussion, or if the meeting is one in which the writer himself has taken an active part. In these cases it is important to listen with concentration and to make careful notes at the earliest possible moment. It is inadvisable, unless you are very experienced, to attempt to write the report without making these preliminary notes. Important points may very easily be omitted so that the whole may have to be re-written, or the finished report may be confused or disorderly because the writer's mind has not had time to absorb the subject.

In making notes after the meeting or interview, all that is irrelevant will be automatically discarded. If, however, the notes are *verbatim*, they will need careful sifting. The objects of the meeting must be kept in mind, and whatever does not contribute to them must



be dismissed as irrelevant. How briefly these *verbatim* notes should be summarized depends on the purpose of the report, but some summarizing will always be necessary, since spoken English is more verbose than written. Brevity is important, but only as far as it is consistent with accuracy.

In reports of any kind the speaker's words must always be turned into indirect or "reported" speech. This may need some explanation. When we give the very words used by a speaker we are said to use the direct form. "I cannot discuss the matter" is an example of the direct form. In reported speech this would read: "He said that he could not discuss the matter." Thus the tense is always changed to the past in reported speech, and the person of the verbs and pronouns is also changed. There are other changes too. "Here we are on the verge of bankruptcy" becomes in reported speech: "There they were . . ." *Here* is changed to *there* and, similarly, *this* is changed to *that*. Where the change of first and second person pronouns to the third person produces a confusing number of *him's* and *he's*, ambiguity can be avoided by replacing the doubtful pronoun by a proper name or by inserting the proper name in brackets after it. Thus, "Mr. Jones declared to Mr. Brown that his partner was willing to consider any suggestion that he might make to him" is ambiguous, but the sentence can be made clearer by substituting a proper name for a pronoun: "Mr. Jones declared to Mr. Brown that his partner was willing to consider any suggestion that Mr. Brown might make."

In making a report of a visit of inspection the same qualities of brevity and accuracy are all-important, and accuracy of observation, as well as accuracy of memory, is indispensable. It is, of course, impossible



to make notes at the time, so that it is clearly essential that full notes should be made as soon as possible after the visit. A comprehensive account of all that was seen and done is almost never necessary: the purpose of the visit must determine what is to be put in and what omitted. Anyone inspecting working conditions in a factory will write quite a different report from the man who is studying its production and output, though both may have been shown exactly the same things. Irrelevancies must be ruthlessly pruned away if the main points are to stand clear. In arranging the report the description of the visit should come first, recommendations and conclusions later, and these, for the sake of clearness, may be restated in summarized form at the end.

The third kind of report, which consists of a survey of any given subject, requires most preparation. Points to be made should be set down at random, and then carefully checked to make sure that nothing essential has been left out. This is important, since an after-thought, occurring when the report is half-written and inserted in the wrong place, may make havoc of a clear argument.

The next stage is to make a plan of the whole. It is worth taking pains over this, since it is far quicker and easier to write a report from a detailed plan than from a rough one. The subject matter should first be divided into its main parts, each indicated by a heading, and these in turn should be re-divided under sub-headings, with perhaps brief notes on what is to be included in each paragraph. For the sake of example we may imagine that the city of Bruddersfield has decided to spend a considerable sum on its educational system and



has asked the Education Officer to prepare a report suggesting how the money might best be spent. This is the kind of plan he might make before writing the report, though an actual plan would, of course, be more factual and more detailed than an imaginary one could be.

*Plan for a report on the education system of Bruddersfield with suggestions for its improvement.*

*First stage.*

Main divisions :—

- I. Existing schools.
- II. Defects in present system.
- III. Proposals for improvement.

*Second Stage.*

I. *Existing schools.*

- a. Nursery schools.
- b. Elementary schools.
- c. Secondary schools.
- d. Technical schools.
- e. Evening classes.

II. *Defects in present system.*

- a. Old-fashioned buildings, badly-lighted classrooms, lack of facilities for games and gymnastics.
- b. Large classes, inadequate teaching staff.
- c. Excessive concentration on examinations.
- d. Lack of encouragement of cultural interests.

III. *Proposals for improvement.*

- a. Grants to be made for building new schools, modernizing existing schools.

*b.* General increase in number of teaching staff, especially in nursery and elementary schools.

*c.* Formation of musical, dramatic, literary societies under direction of teachers appointed for the purpose.

In writing a report of this kind there is no need to take pains, as in an essay or an article, to conceal this structural plan. Indeed, it is often best, for clearness' sake, to use the original headings and sub-headings for the main divisions and sub-divisions, as in the plan. It is often useful also to summarize the main conclusions of the report at the end, so that they may be seen at a glance by anyone who has not had time to read the whole. This is particularly advisable in very long reports, or where sub-headings have not been used.

The style of all reports should be clear, precise and impersonal. There is no scope here for flowers of speech or idiosyncrasies of expression, nor, on the other hand, for that obscure jargon that passes for "business English". Technicalities are to be avoided, since a report has often to be read by people who have no close familiarity with the subject, and the aim of the writer should be to express himself in language that will be clear to laymen as well as to the initiate. Short, crisp sentences should be preferred to long, involuted ones, and good paragraphing and careful punctuation are important aids to clearness.



## APPENDIX B

### EXAMINATION ESSAYS

EXAMINATION essays fall into two kinds—those which are set to test the candidate's knowledge, and those which are set to test his literary skill or to make him reveal something of his personality. Both are made difficult by the intrusion of the time factor. With one hour or less in which to produce an essay it is important that the time should be used to the best advantage and none of it wasted. To apportion your time well is part of the technique of passing examinations. Ten minutes should be allowed at the beginning for reading over the paper and choosing the questions to be attempted, and at least ten minutes at the end for critical re-reading of what you have written. Where several questions are to be answered the time should be divided evenly between them. Though it is permissible to devote a little extra time to questions which you feel able to answer especially well, it is folly to write voluminously on one or two questions and scamp the rest.

Whether you are writing short essay answers or a general essay, planning is of first importance. Time spent entirely in writing is always wasted, since you have no time to think what you are writing about, and can only bring out half-digested knowledge. Time spent in planning is never wasted, since it means that the finished essay will be clear and orderly. Examiners are more often depressed than impressed by a lengthy essay, and they will always prefer a briefer one that is well-arranged and well-proportioned. It can be argued, moreover, that it is easier and quicker to write an essay

that has been previously planned, for otherwise there must always be pauses for thought and long intervals haunted by the nagging question, "What *else* can I say?"

Let us consider first the simplest kind of examination essay, that consists in answering a question and displaying a knowledge of facts. Here only the briefest plan is needed, but it must be sufficient to enable you to marshal your knowledge and to present it in the best possible order. Supposing in a history paper you are asked to give an account of the causes of the Civil War; you will first jot down at random a list of points that occur to you, and next arrange them by the simple method of numbering them in order of importance. Then, having in a few minutes clarified your mind, the writing is easy. It is worth noting that in all examinations the plan should be made on the examination paper itself and then scored through. This will show the examiner your good sense in making a plan, and, if you have not time to finish the question, he may possibly give you credit for knowing more than you have actually written.

The longer essay, which, though still designed as a test of knowledge, is on a more general subject, requires, of course, more elaborate planning and more preliminary thought. Thus, if you are asked (which Heaven forbid!) to write an essay on the nature of Greek Drama, you must begin by dividing and sub-dividing the subject matter into its component parts (very much as was advised in the preparation of a general report), and the finished plan might be something like this:—

### *The Nature of Greek Drama.*

#### *I. Its religious significance.*

##### *a. Its place in religious festivals.*



- b.* Its subject matter—myths of gods and heroes.
- c.* Its ceremonial character, derived from religious ritual.

## II. *Conditions of the Greek Theatre.*

- a.* Open-air performances.
- b.* Simple symbolic scenery.
- c.* Stylized acting.
- d.* Use of chorus.
- e.* Introduction of music and dancing.

## III. *Dramatic forms.*

- a.* Tragedy.
- b.* Comedy and satire.

## IV. *Great Dramatists.*

- a.* Æschylus.
- b.* Sophocles.
- c.* Euripides.
- d.* Aristophanes.

In discussing the writing of reports, it was suggested that the headings and sub-headings of the original plan should be included to give clearness to the finished work. They must never, however, be allowed to remain in the essay, even though it be of a very formal and academic kind. The examiner should be aware of an underlying structural order, but he should not be able to see the ribs of the skeleton showing through.

Good proportions are all-important in producing a satisfactory final impression. It is a common tendency, in writing examination essays, to treat the first part in great detail and scamp the last part for lack of time. A plan will help to save you from this, but it is necessary also to work by the clock and endeavour to reach

a certain point in a given time. Time must be allowed to find a satisfactory concluding paragraph that will draw together your main points and will round off the essay. Though it may not add much in the way of factual knowledge, it will help to leave a pleasant impression in the examiner's mind.

Although this kind of essay does not demand the display of literary skill, style still counts a great deal. Slipshod writing is a reflection of slipshod thought, and a well-written essay, free from faults of grammar, punctuation and spelling, will win credit, quite apart from the knowledge, or lack of knowledge, displayed in it. Fine writing is unsuitable, and there is little room for picturesqueness or originality of style, though a neat or witty phrase never comes amiss. Clearness and exactitude must be chiefly striven after, for only thus can your knowledge be shown to the best advantage.

So far we have considered only essays whose chief importance lies in the facts they present. In the general or literary essay facts matter less than the way in which they are presented. The purpose of such essays (and they are now compulsory in almost all examinations) is to reveal the candidate's individuality and his power of thinking for himself. The material is obviously important, since you cannot make bricks without straw, but the manner is of greater importance still.

As in every kind of essay or article, planning is a necessity. In reading the essays of such a writer as E. V. Lucas, one has the impression that they were written without plan, the ideas being set down just as they came into his head. On closer examination, however, they are seen to be very carefully constructed



indeed, though the construction is deliberately and cunningly concealed. Because of this underlying plan we follow the thread of the essay without effort: if the ideas had really been set down at random the effect would be confusing and disjointed.

With practice the planning of an essay is a straightforward matter, but it often happens that the better the plan the more difficult it is to conceal it in the finished essay. The plan must be there, but the reader must be unaware of it. Words and phrases like "in the first place", "secondly", "moreover", "in addition", are plain reminders of the original skeleton, with all its paragraph-headings methodically numbered, and they bring with them an oppressive air of formality. To avoid this pains should be taken in linking paragraphs, so that the reader passes from one to another by easy transitions. It is necessary in the plan to treat each paragraph as a separate unit, but in the finished work these units must merge into one another without abruptness.

In selecting the subject matter remember that the aim of the essay is to entertain rather than instruct. If you are asked to write an essay on the subject, "Cats", you should not discourse learnedly and at length on the history of the Domestic Cat, or try to catalogue its various species. Even if you knew enough about the subject to attempt this, your erudition would seem out of place. The subject (like most subjects set in general essay papers) is too wide to be treated thoroughly and systematically. The right course is to treat it from an individual angle, to put forward your own observations and illustrate them from your own experience. In short, in deciding what you are to write about, avoid what is ponderous and general, and



draw instead on your personal knowledge. In this way only will you produce an essay that strikes the examiner as "something different" from the rest.

This brings us to a disputed point—whether it is wise to use the first person. Many teachers insist that "I" should never be used in an essay, but this advice is quite contradicted by the practice of almost all good essayists. It is certainly unwise to use "I" so often as to sound self-important, but it is far better to use it naturally as in speech than to take obvious pains to avoid it. The use of the impersonal "one" sometimes sound stilted, and often produces very clumsy sentence-constructions, while such ponderous phrases as "in the opinion of the present writer" should never be used in place of the unobtrusive "I think" or "I consider".

Beginnings are important, endings almost equally so. An interesting first sentence catches the weary examiner's notice, and puts him in a favourable mood. It is worth taking trouble first to find a good idea as starting point and then to phrase it as neatly as may be. Most candidates realize this. It is common enough to find a good opening paragraph, less common to find an equally good closing one. Yet the ending of an essay is almost as important as its beginning, since it must leave a final impression for good or ill in the examiner's mind. Very often there is no time left to think about the ending. The candidate writes till it is time to stop and then breaks off—sometimes in mid-sentence. This is bad planning, both of time and material. You should have a very good idea of how you are going to end the essay before you begin it, and your final paragraph should be planned to round off the whole, giving it an air of completion.

Here you may imitate the composer, who, in the last



movement of his symphony, re-introduces themes and phrases from the earlier movements to draw the whole work together. You, in the same way, can introduce kindred ideas and phrases into the first and last paragraphs, so that the end brings us back to the beginning. Again, you may give the essay cohesion by summarizing (as informally as possible) its main points, or may achieve an air of finality by closing with an apt quotation, or, better still (but how difficult in practice!), a neat and original epigram.

Quotations provide a useful and easy way of beginning or ending an essay, provided they are apt and unhackneyed, but it is folly to waste time racking your brains to find one. Warning may be taken from the girl who spent the night before an examination reading a dictionary of quotations from end to end, and on the morrow could not remember a line. It is a mistake, too, to think that they necessarily provide the best form of opening. A hackneyed quotation easily defeats its purpose. It is safe to reckon that, when the essay subject is "Leisure", at least one-third of the candidates will begin with W. H. Davies' couplet:

" What is life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare? "

Or, if the subject is "Gardens", with that exasperating line from T. E. Brown: "A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot." A story, provided it is brief and to the point, often provides a more interesting opening or a neater close. Lacking that, some piece of personal observation is better than a stale quotation or a dull generalization. Definitions are to be avoided unless they are really epigrammatic. They are more often cumbrous, and almost always unnecessary, since the examiner, having



chosen a theme for an essay, does not need its meaning explained to him. A final word of advice—let your opening sentence be brief. A long-winded first sentence in which he has to struggle for the meaning will prejudice him from the start.

The great importance of style in this kind of essay is obvious, but a good style and a grand style must not be confounded. The one is easy and familiar, the other pretentious and often absurd. Never try to write above your natural level or use fine words of whose meaning you are uncertain. To write naturally, yet with dignity, avoiding colloquialism and slang, is the only safe rule. No examiner is so simple as to be misled by a grand phrase or a purple passage into thinking you cleverer than you really are.

Lastly, the necessity for careful re-reading of your essay cannot be over-stressed. This is often regarded as a formality, occupying two minutes at the end of a paper, but it is much more important than this. Bad punctuation and spelling can wholly mar an otherwise well-written essay, and will always suggest slovenliness. (Over-punctuation, by the way, is to be avoided. Many people seem to think that the more commas used, the better the effect. Punctuation, like pepper, should be added sparingly.) In re-reading, look carefully for common errors of grammar, such as mixed pronouns, singular verbs with double subjects, split infinitives, "only" in the wrong place in the sentence, etc.\* Read over your essay "aloud in your head" to make sure that it sounds well and to prevent the awkward repetition of words and phrases. Never refrain from making

\* E.g., "Everybody enjoyed *themselves*".

"The snow and rain this winter *has* been terrible".

"To *clearly* define . . ."

"He *only* speaks French".



necessary improvements in style through fear of producing an untidy paper. A certain amount of alteration is almost always necessary if you read your work over critically. As long as alterations are clearly made and the work is legible, no examiner will object to them.\* Tidiness matters, it is true, but good style matters far more.

\* It is a good practice, if you are addicted to scoring out, to write on alternate lines, using the line-space in between for alterations and omissions.