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The Writer's Trade

BY

L. A. G. STRONG



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FOREWORD

THIS foreword must, I am afraid, take the shape of a warning. I do not advise any young man or woman to think of making a living by writing.

There are three reasons for this warning. The third may be local and temporary only. The other two seem to me basic. True, it is just possible that a different attitude towards education generally may do something to alleviate the second; but I see no prospect of it at present.

The first reason against attempting to make a living by writing is that there is nowhere any guarantee of employment. You may work till you are black in the face, avail yourself to the full of such meagre facilities for training as can be found, and never make a penny, or have the slightest prospect of making a penny. I am leaving out such specialised branches of writing as advertising and work on the staff of a newspaper, which do not directly come within the scope of this book. Within any of these branches, even, there is no certainty that you will ever get a job.

Outside them, you will have to scramble in the open market, with hundreds and hundreds of others, offering your wares to people who have not asked for them, and who very probably don't want them.

Writers do get work accepted, of course; a few make a living by writing; quite a number combine it with some other occupation. BUT THERE IS NO CERTAIN PROSPECT OF WORK AS A WRITER FOR ANYBODY.

The second reason against thinking of writing for a living

is that there is no recognised course of training, no school of writing, no institution of any kind where you can be taught the craft you want to practise. If you are lucky, you will have been taught the rudiments of composition and grammar at school—though there are still some schools where English as a subject is not taught at all. The authorities at these institutions seem to believe that anything which may be necessary the student will pick up from his studies in Latin, Greek, French, History, or whatever else may involve the incidental use of English.

A course in English Language and Literature at a university will not help you much further along your road. You will find it academic. It will not help you to write novels, short stories, plays, radio scripts, or newspaper articles. You will learn to write the kind of things that examiners wish to read, but not the things that people read for pleasure or excitement or quickening of the heart. You will not be taught the writer's craft.

One or two universities have approached the problem indirectly, through the study of some specialised branch of writing, but, here again, there is little in their courses that will mean anything to a professional writer, or help anybody to become one.

The third class of institution, which offers to teach the art of writing by correspondence, I will be considering in its proper place. One can also, it is true, study by correspondence for certain degrees at certain universities: but this course is not adopted by anyone who can get to the universities themselves, nor have I ever heard it recommended as a reasonable substitute.

The third and final reason against thinking of writing for a living is that conditions have never been so bad for the beginner as they are at the time that I write these lines. The shortage of paper has restricted space for everybody, and in such circumstances the beginner's opportunity has

shrunk to something very small indeed. It used to be possible to sell a short story of three or four or even five thousand words. Today, one thousand five hundred to two thousand words, and in exceptional cases three, is the maximum. Occasional articles in newspapers are few, and for such scanty space as is left to the free-lance a host of writers, many of them experienced, are struggling.

Young writers today are apt to complain that no one will give them opportunity or encouragement. No one ever has, since the days of the private patron. But there used to be space for them, if they were fit to occupy it. No one used to be kind to them because they were young, but they were given a chance to fight their way to the front. That chance is very slender indeed today.

This condition, of course, may improve, may even disappear. All I can tell you is that things have been getting steadily more difficult since 1939, even for the experienced writer who is not restricted to any one branch of writing.

I do not therefore advise you to think of writing as a career. What you may think of, what you should think of if you have talent, what you will think of anyway, no matter who warns you, is to work at the craft of writing, to learn to write, and so to make for yourself chances to say what you want to say and to add to your income.

One final warning, which has to do with the art of teaching and giving information. Teaching depends on personal relationship between two people. It is a collaboration between the so-called teacher and the so-called pupil. As such, it is indeed personal, and depends for its success on the knowledge and understanding which each has of the other. It follows that *general* teaching, that is, instruction given not to a specific person who is known, but to a stranger who is not even a name, can at best be vague and unfocused. The whole secret of instruction is individual work. If the instructor is talking to a class, its members

will make less progress, and learn less, than if each was in session with him alone. When, too, the instruction is not even spoken, but set down in cold print, there is a further loss of precise aim and accuracy.

This final warning, as you will see, is to tell you that the value of a book like this is sadly limited. None the less, I will do my best to make it as useful as I can.

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CHAPTER I

WHAT IS WRITING?

FIRST of all, let us be clear about one central point. There is only one way of learning how to do a thing, and that is to do it. The only way of learning how to write is to write.

No book will teach you how to write. No amount of reading will teach you how to write. Reading is essential, and a practical book can help; but unless you have the germ of the writer in you, the unbreakable will to write, you will get nowhere.

What is more, if you are to make a success of writing, you will have to work. Many people who say they want to write mean only that they want to be writers. They want the status without the work. They would like to be hailed as writers, but are not prepared to pay the price and walk the long road. A writer's life is as free as any in the modern world. It can be a wonderful life. But it means work; hard work; regular work.

A book about writing can lay down broad principles, give you obvious tips, tell you some things to aim at and some to avoid. If the author is experienced, and can communicate something of his experience, his book may be useful to you. *But it cannot teach you to write.* Only you yourself can do that.

2

The next point is almost as important. This is an age of specialisation; and many people are anxious to specialise straight away. They wish to write film scripts, let us say,

or short stories, and nothing else. Therefore they rush straight away to the manuals or chapters which deal with these branches of writing, and ignore all the rest.

Not long ago I met the Director of a very good provincial school of art. Every week, he told me, he had people coming to him and asking if he would teach them fashion drawing, or commercial art, or cartoon work, or whatever special branch they were interested in. His reply was always the same.

'No,' he said. 'I can't teach you to draw fashions, or commercial work, or posters'—or whatever it might be. 'All I can teach you is to DRAW. When you are competent at that, and not before, you can then turn your ability in whatever specialised direction you please.'

It was very hard, he added with a smile, to get these impatient people to realise the truth of this. They thought he was being difficult, pedantic, or just what they call bloody-minded.

I am afraid that all my experience goes to support him, and to show that the same is true of writing. Once you have learned to write, you can turn your ability in any direction you wish. You can write advertisements, leading articles, one-act plays, novels, radio features, whatever your talent fits you for. But the fundamental requisite is the same: the power to make words convey the desired, the definite meaning: the power to write.

3

I intend this book to be practical and, so far as a book about writing can be, useful. In order to make it so, I shall have to go my own way, and take my own time. If there are any short cuts to good writing, I have never heard of them. I cannot tell you how to become a writer. What I can do is to give you some idea of the necessary qualifications

and training. I can give you some account of what writers do, and how they do it, and in what conditions they work.

First of all, if you are approaching this business in a practical way, you will want to see my credentials. I began writing in 1915, and have made my living by it since 1930. In that time I have sold MSS. to close on a hundred periodicals, ranging from the more august, such as *The Fortnightly Review*, *The New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *The Observer*, *The Dial*, *The Nineteenth Century*, etc., to popular journals such as *Nash's*, *The Strand*, *John o' London's*, *The Argosy*, *The People*, *Everybody's*, *The Bystander*, and *Punch*. I have produced novels, short stories, serials, biographies, and books for children. I have written and collaborated in a number of film scripts, more than fifty radio plays and features, and have broadcast well over a hundred of my own short stories. I have done a great deal of reviewing, and I am on the board of a well-known firm of publishers. The original idea for this book came from the Society of Authors, who suggested that I should write it—probably because of my long apprenticeship and varied experience.

It is possible, therefore, that as a working writer whose progress was demonstrably slow, and who made all manner of blunders, I may be able to tell you more about the practical side of the business than could the writer who has leaped into fame with his first book and never had to peg away on the lower rungs of the ladder. The writer whom editors humbly and persuasively seek out does not know as much about selling MSS. as the man who goes on for years labouring to get his toe inside the door.

4

A juggler works hard for years to achieve his skill, and practises continually to maintain it. So do a billiard player

and a boxer. A painter studies hard, and practises; so do a pianist, a violinist, a composer. But, because words are the common traffic of conversation, and because every literate person can write after a fashion, the man in the street is unwilling to believe that writing also is an art, and needs no less skill and practice. This sounds extraordinary, when one considers it, but it is a fact. There are everywhere, and at all ages, people who believe that they have only to put pen to paper in order to produce something not only interesting to others, but valuable. Only the lunatics among them would expect to be paid for singing or playing the piano or painting or dancing or performing in any other medium which they recognise as needing both proficiency and practice. Yet they refuse to believe that writing is at least as difficult as painting or balancing billiard cues on one's chin.

Every editor and every publisher can bear witness to this, for he receives each week dozens of MSS. which, for proficiency, do not get beyond the standard of a child's water-colour daub. Every week I am sent short stories, essays, poems, and what not, of such crudity that even the least instructed person, if he were shown a drawing of the same quality, could at once see it to be wrong. Yet the authors do not realise how bad their work is, and are often offended or discouraged when, as gently as I can, I tell them that they will be wasting time and stamps if they send it to an editor.

It is not easy to write well, even well enough to get into print. Writing is an art, and demands constant work and constant practice. Dr. Edith Sitwell told me, years ago, that she wrote technical exercises daily, just as a pianist practises his scales and arpeggios. I do not know a writer of quality who does not work constantly to keep his hand in.

If you are not willing to work and to practise, then, unless you are unusually gifted, you will not succeed as a

writer. Even if you are unusually gifted, you will not write as well as your gifts demand.

5

The would-be writer suffers a handicap, when compared to other kinds of artist, in that there is nowhere for him to learn his job. If you are gifted with a singing voice, you can go to a school and be taught the theory of music and the proper management of your voice. Music schools teach the piano, the violin, and every other instrument. There are art schools for the painter, stage schools for the actor, schools of ballet for the dancer; but no school for the writer.

It is true that one or two universities have established a school of drama, where, presumably, writing for the stage will be among the subjects taught. Another at one time ran a diploma in journalism. The fact remains that nowhere can writing be learned from a teacher as can the other arts.

In the long run, this may not be a disadvantage, but it greatly perplexes would-be writers and adds to their difficulty in making a start. They are thrown on their own resources, and, as the letters received daily by professional writers show, they have little idea where to turn for guidance.

6

Since we are to be practical, we had better start at the beginning, and take nothing for granted. What is writing?

Writing is the communication of meaning from one person to another by means of an agreed set of symbols arranged in an agreed manner. The name of a thing, the spoken word, is a symbol of the thing itself; the written word is a symbol of the spoken word. Thus by the time we have got the word down on paper we are at two removes from the thing itself.

Take the word BUCKET, the prosaic useful name for a prosaic useful object. It is made up of six letters, the symbols for a series of sounds arranged in an agreed order (spelling), to make a more or less agreed composite sound (pronunciation) for an object which we agree to recognise by that composite sound. Further, we agree that a series of marks made on a piece of paper, arranged in order from left to right, B U C K E T, shall be the symbol for that useful object.

What is the word bucket? It isn't the bucket itself. It isn't a piece of the bucket. It isn't even a picture of the bucket. It is a quite arbitrary symbol for the bucket: arbitrary, because the person who first christened the object by that name could just as well have given it any name that did not already stand for something else. When he wanted to convey the same meaning, an ancient Greek said *angos*. A modern Frenchman says *seau*. Each of these names is therefore an arbitrary symbol for the bucket, and has no force or reality apart from an agreement (the English language, the Greek, or the French) that this combination of sounds, this series of black marks on a page, shall represent the object.

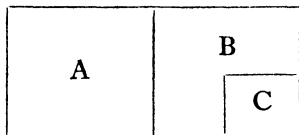
How well does it represent the object? In fact, not at all. If I suddenly say 'bucket' to you, what do you see? My bucket, with a dinge in its side? Your bright new bucket? The old battered bucket your neighbour mixes pig food in? A wooden bucket? A child's toy bucket? One particular bucket, perhaps, appears before your mind's eye; but what you *understand*, what we agree to see, is a metal or wooden container with a handle. In other words, we see an *idea*, something abstracted from the particular bucket, a lowest common denominator which all buckets share, or they cannot be buckets.

If, then, I am to make you see my bucket, or any particular bucket, I have to add to the general symbol for all

buckets a precise description. My power to make you see the uniqueness of the particular bucket which I am describing will depend on my skill as a writer.

7

Next, let us look at a very simple diagram.



The square marked B stands for the material world, the world of things, to which you and I and buckets belong. The little square in its right-hand bottom corner, C, is the page on which the writer makes his marks, arranges in an agreed way the agreed symbols for the things he sees in B, i.e. the world around him.

What about A? A stands for the world of ideas, the world of the mind, of the imagination, the emotions; as it is sometimes called, the world of values. The things in A are no less real than the things in B, the material world. Religion, art, philosophy, and, lately, physics testify to their reality. Many scientists now proclaim that mind is the ultimate reality; that the things at A are of a deeper order of reality than those at B. Without arguing about that, we can at least admit that they are real; that your feeling about a keepsake given you by someone who has since died is as real as the pressed flower, or snapshot, or whatever it may be, and that its value to you (which is a thing at A) is at least as real as, and far transcends, its market price (a thing at B). The history of the past twenty-five years is a sufficient testimony to the reality of ideas, and to their power to emerge from A into B and alter B's whole character.

Now let us see how this affects the writer. Living in B,

incarnate in his physical body, he sees a thing which deeply moves him, which moves his mind and feelings, in A. In A he can do nothing. He cannot enter A physically; he can only reach it through his feelings, his ideas, his thoughts.

But, he has learned an art of so arranging symbols, of making a series of marks in B, on the page C, as to leave some sort of record, however dim and imperfect, of what he felt so deeply in A. You and I come along, in B, and read C, the page where he has written. If nothing more happens, if our minds and thoughts and feelings stay in B, if, literally, we remain unmoved, then the writer is a bad writer for us, or we are bad readers for him. But if, as so often happens, we *are* moved; if our minds and thoughts and feelings experience in A something like the original excitement which the writer felt there, and which he has tried to pass on to us, or at any rate to record for his own satisfaction, then he is a good writer for us, and we are good readers for him.

But what a lot of obstacles and difficulties there are in the way! It was hard enough for the writer to make us see accurately so simple a thing as a bucket. What about ideas which are far more complicated, which cannot be at once related to any familiar object, which, perhaps, are new? Pioneer ideas, now seen for the first time by a writer of genius? Delicate and rare emotions, moments of vision and revelation, realities for which as yet there are no agreed symbols, no agreed patterns of words, for the excellent reason that no one has experienced them before?

8

The difficulty is as old as writing. Goethe, a genius, spoke of it thus:

If now a man of genius gains an insight into the secret operations of nature, the language which has been handed down to him is inadequate to convey anything so remote from ordinary affairs.

He should have at his command the language of spirits, in order to express truly his individual perceptions.

That is to say, in our terms, that if he sees into the heart of reality, there will be no agreed set of symbols at B to convey something so far outside B's normal range of experience. He should be able to command the language of spirits, i.e. language at A, to make a true record of what he has seen. But he can't: as long as he remains here, on earth, he cannot use the bodiless language which belongs to another level of existence. His spirit can enter A, but his body remains obstinately at B; and all he can do, in order to record what he has seen, is to work patiently and with prayer at B, where he lives, making some new arrangement of inadequate symbols on the page C, which shall somehow, through a glass darkly, hint at the purity and splendour which inspired him at A.

Genius, however, can look after itself. We are concerned with ordinary mortals like you and me. This much is true of us: we have all, at one time or another, felt how inadequate is what we say to what we are trying to say; and we can all see at once, that, if it is hard to convey exactly the picture of an object at B, it is far harder to convey exactly an idea at A. Realities from the world of feeling and emotion, of speculation, the world of vision and abstract thought, the world of imagination and values, are more difficult to symbolise and to express in C than realities at B, the familiar objects of everyday experience.

Small wonder if poets and inspired writers have been driven to use these symbols magically, as parts of an incantation, with every grace of rhythm and music, in order to call our spirits to A and make us hear with our spiritual ear.

Such harmony is in immortal souls:
But while this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close us in, we cannot hear it.¹

¹ *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Sc. 1.

The preoccupations at B can hinder our power to receive at A. How much more difficult to write, to set down the symbols at C, in the heart of B, which shall liberate the reader's spirit and call him to A, where he can hear!

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them;

While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain:

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened.

And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail; because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners shall go about the streets:

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern.

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was; and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.¹

Or, in another vein, but with no less magic, no less mastery:

Nay, sure, he's not in hell: he's in Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. A' made a finer end and went away an it had been any christom child; a' parted even just between twelve and one, even at the turning o' the tide: for after I saw him fumble with the sheets and play with flowers and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a' babbled of green fields. 'How now, Sir

¹ *Ecclesiastes*, Chap. 12.

John!’ quoth I; ‘what, man! be o’ good cheer.’ So a’ cried out ‘God, God, God!’ three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him a’ should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. So a’ bade me lay more clothes on his feet; I put my hand into the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any stone, and so upward and upward, and all was as cold as any stone.¹

9

‘This is all very well,’ objects a type of reader very common nowadays, ‘but we’re not geniuses. We’re just plain chaps, living at B and content to stay there, with no pretensions to get anywhere else. We don’t want magic or poetry. We have, or hope we have, a knack of stringing words together, and we want to know if there’s any chance of earning money by it. I thought you said this book was going to be practical. What has all this high-flown stuff to do with us?’

It has everything to do with us. We cannot discuss writing intelligently and profitably till we know what it is. I am being strictly practical, strictly professional. I am not wasting time. If you will read the beginning of the next chapter, I think you will agree.

¹ *King Henry V*, Act II, Sc. 3: the Hostess tells of Falstaff’s death.

CHAPTER II

THE NEED FOR EXACTNESS

THE job of the writer who wants to communicate to someone what he has seen at B or felt at A is to make marks on the piece of paper at C in such a way as to describe or suggest his experience. The closer his words approximate to an ideal account of that experience, the better will be your chance and my chance of understanding it, of seeing what he saw, or feeling what he felt. And, since experience at A, though it can be more convincing than any at B, is likely to be more subtle, newer, less accessible, than experience at B, it will probably call for greater skill and delicacy from the writer to express it.

But at this point, fortunately, a fact about the human mind comes to the writer's help. The best way to express the abstract is through the concrete. The best way to attain delicacy of effect is through precision. The best way to suggest an enormous meaning is by exact attention to something small and particular. The illimitable can best be communicated through the sharply limited and defined.

This is one of the most difficult things for the beginning writer to believe. In order to express something delicate, tenuous, idealised, he tends to look for a delicate, tenuous, and idealised vocabulary. To convey a fine meaning he goes in for fine writing.

He is wrong—wrong as a beginner, at any rate—because of this law which arises from the very nature of our ex-

perience. We are so constituted that we can only apprehend the general through the particular. To make an abstract idea, the idea of a quality, we have to draw it from a number of concrete instances. The idea of whiteness is abstracted from a number of white things. The idea of bravery is abstracted from a number of brave deeds; and so on.

And the process works the other way on. To express a general truth we take a particular instance. Some truths are so great, so illimitable, that they can only be expressed in symbols. Look at the quotation from *Ecclesiastes*, on p. 10. The meaning is infinite, but the symbols are precise—the golden bowl, the silver cord, and so on. All religions have a parable, a story, in which to express their central truth. These stories are sometimes quite homely. They make real to people what otherwise would remain an abstraction. They state A in terms of B, which all can recognise.

So it comes about, mercifully for the art of writing, that the best way for a writer to express truth at A is by the fiercest concentration upon truth at B.

3

The poet Blake put the whole matter in four lines:

To see the world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower;
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.

Coleridge's poem *The Ancient Mariner* gets its tremendous effects by the utmost simplicity and directness of language, and by vivid concentration on truth at B. You will find the same thing all through literature; meaning at A conveyed by the most scrupulous attention to truth at B. Poets', wrote a great poet, W. B. Yeats, 'are not permitted

to shoot beyond the tangible.' They are restricted to language, to the use of symbols, to B. We can only reach A through B. If I had space, I could collect for you a thousand witnesses to the same effect, from writers of all kinds.

This ae nighte, this ae nighte,
Every nighte and alle
Fire and sleet and candle leet
And Crist receive thy saule.

It is from the limited language of B that the illimitable language of A arises; Goethe's language of spirits, to which we cannot attain directly, because of the nature of our life here on earth.

Now, I hope, you see the practical relevance of all this. It means that from every writer, whatever his aim, whether it be the communication of a supreme ecstasy on the furthest fringes of human consciousness or the description of a bucket, the same thing is required: that is, EXACTNESS; precise description of the object at B.

Whether your aim is to write mystical poetry, to pay the expenses of your holiday by writing newspaper articles about the things you see on it, or to write technical articles about aero engines, you have first of all to aim at the same quality: EXACTNESS. Exactness, in this context, we can best define as a faithful account of the object at B.

4

Once, when by invitation I was speaking to the staff of a great public school on the teaching of English, I was at great pains to make this point, that the aim of all writing was exactness. One of the staff solemnly protested.

'Surely, surely, it is something far higher! The true writer's aim is beauty.'

And how, I wonder, did the poor man imagine beauty

was to be hit, save by exactness? It is this kind of soft, muddled, woolly-wittedness that is the poet's bane, the enemy of all clear and lively thinking. Beauty and truth—Keats, we must not forget, proclaimed them one—are only to be snared in words by the utmost delicacy and exactness, the most ruthless precision. The poet is of all writers the most exact. This contradicts the man-in-the-street's view of him, but it is true, none the less. Magic is not wrought by haphazard means. To communicate experiences and visions at the furthest rim of human perception calls for a disciplined skill, a supreme accuracy in finding the one phrase, the perfect symbol which alone can record what has been felt and seen.

5

Naturally, there are many kinds of exactness. The kind you use is governed by the effect you need to produce. If you are describing an aero engine in a technical journal, that is, to readers who already know about aero engines, you will concentrate on the difference between this particular engine and others, and will enumerate the various points of difference.

If, as happens far more often, you are writing for the non-technical reader, you will want to give him an impression of the engine's power and efficiency, and you will go another way to work. A description by enumeration would confuse or bore the general reader. For him, you would select whatever would appeal most to his imagination: something that would *suggest* to him the power and beauty of the engine.

Once I asked the scientist J. W. N. Sullivan to explain to me a certain aspect of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. Sullivan grinned.

'You're like the rest of them,' he said. 'When you say "give me an explanation" you really mean "give me a picture".'

'Of course I do,' I replied. 'I'm a writer. I think in pictures.'

So he indulged me with a picture which suggested the explanation I sought, much in the way that an actor's gesture suggests the character he is portraying.

Here again is a fact which is highly fortunate for the writer. Our minds are so made that suggestion is far more effective with them than description by enumeration. In fact, one may go so far as to say that the great writers never enumerate. Even those who seem to do so, such as Dickens and Scott, are really selecting very cunningly what they put down from a mass of detail which they leave out. Look at this account of Mrs. Gamp's bedroom, from *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

Mrs. Gamp's apartment was not a spacious one, but, to a contented mind, a closet is a palace; and the first-floor front at Mr. Sweedlepipe's may have been, in the imagination of Mrs. Gamp, a stately pile. If it were not exactly that, to restless intellects, it at least comprised as much accommodation as any person, not sanguine to insanity, could have looked for in a room of its dimensions. For only keep the bedstead always in your mind; and you were safe. That was the grand secret. Remembering the bedstead, you might even stoop to look under the little round table for anything you had dropped, without hurting yourself much against the chest of drawers, or qualifying as a patient of Saint Bartholomew, by falling into the fire.

Visitors were much assisted in their cautious efforts to preserve an unflagging recollection of this piece of furniture, by its size, which was great. It was not a turn-up bedstead, nor yet a French bedstead, nor yet a four-post bedstead, but what is poetically called a tent; the sacking whereof was low and bulgy, insomuch that Mrs. Gamp's box would not go under it, but stopped halfway, in a manner which, while it did violence to the reason, likewise endangered the legs of a stranger. The frame too, which would have supported the canopy and hangings if there had been any, was ornamented with divers pippins carved in timber, which

on the slightest provocation, and frequently on none at all, came tumbling down, harassing the peaceful guest with inexplicable terrors. . . .

. . . The chairs in Mrs. Gamp's apartment were extremely large and broad-backed, which was more than a sufficient reason for there being but two in number. They were both elbow-chairs, of ancient mahogany, and were chiefly valuable for the slippery nature of their seats, which had been originally horsehair, but were now covered with a shiny substance of a bluish tint, from which the visitor began to slide away with a dismayed countenance, immediately after sitting down. What Mrs. Gamp wanted in chairs she made up in bandboxes; of which she had a great collection, devoted to the reception of various miscellaneous valuables, which were not however, as well protected as the good woman, by a pleasant fiction, seemed to think; for, though every bandbox had a carefully closed lid, not one among them had a bottom, owing to which cause the property within was merely, as it were, extinguished. The chest of drawers having been originally made to stand upon the top of another chest, had a dwarfish, elfin look, alone; but in regard of its security it had a great advantage over the bandboxes, for as all the handles had been long ago pulled off, it was very difficult to get at its contents. This indeed was only to be done by one of two devices: either by tilting the whole structure forward until all the drawers fell out together, or by opening them singly with knives, like oysters.

This is detailed: it includes more than most writers would use today; but when you look closely into it, and if you read the rest of the chapter, you will see that most of it is suggestion, and the rest is a preparation for what is going to happen.

In any case, you will agree that, despite its exuberance of language, it is exact. Great and precise attention has been paid to the objects at B.

6

I have chosen Dickens deliberately, because he is an exuberant writer, and not particularly economical in his

use of words. He is aiming at a comic effect, which permits of extravagance. A modern disciple of Dickens, Mr. P. G. Wodehouse—a great master of words; Oxford University did not give him an honorary degree for nothing—relies more on suggestion. When he compares the laugh of one of his female characters to a regiment of cavalry galloping over a tin bridge, he is suggesting rather than describing, but the suggestion is powerful.

In a play by Lord Dunsany, some daring and sacrilegious beggars impersonate the stone images of gods in the desert, and the townspeople honour them and prepare a feast. The beggars sit after the feast, waiting for dancing girls to come and amuse them. Instead, the stone gods shuffle in and turn the pretenders to stone. The audience does not know what is going to happen; Lord Dunsany has to prepare them for it. He makes one of the expectant beggars say that the approaching footfalls do not sound like the light steps of dancing girls, but 'like the footfalls of heavy crabs'. A shudder of delighted horror runs through the audience, as they realise what is coming—yet even then they do not know what the avenging gods will do. Here is a good example of suggestion through exactness.

7

The writer's task is, of course, to stimulate the reader's imagination. If you look back into your memory, and pick out three or four occasions when your mind was set violently to work and your emotions roused, you will find (I suggest) that in each case the stimulus was something very definite: a picture, a thing clearly seen, a scent, the fragment of an old tune: something so clear, so precise, that it impressed your mind with what seemed to be a disproportionate power.

Somehow, the writer must do this for his readers. In

such a case as we have been discussing, life provided the stimulus, and you yourself the associations which it recalled. (Otherwise, there would be no reason for the powerful flood of feeling, the sudden leap of the imagination.) But the writer has a double task. He has to provide the stimulus *and* the associations. He has to create a world so real that the reader enters into it, lives and moves in it, meets the people, the objects, the incidents, *and feels about them as the writer has felt*: or, at any rate, agrees with the writer that they are important.

For a number of reasons, the writer's best way to achieve this difficult feat is by suggestion. Suggestion, in turn, depends upon exactness.

W. W. Jacobs, in his famous horror story *The Monkey's Paw*, describes most accurately the setting of the story, but does not say a word, directly, about the terrible shape that was presenting itself at the door when the last wish was desperately made that sent it back to its grave. The reader is left to imagine the details (if he wants to), and his imagination is helped by the exactness of everything else in the story.

Henry James, in *The Turn of the Screw*, builds up a scene of brooding, electric horror, and by one physical detail intensifies it to an almost unbearable point of pain. (Read the story, if you do not know it, and see if you can pick out the detail I am thinking of.)

H. de Vere Stacpoole, in *The Pools of Silence*, leads up to and describes with sickening accuracy a single atrocity which far more effectively makes his point than fifty such crimes described in detail.

The last sentence of John Collier's great short story, *Green Thoughts*, is infinitely more effective than the most elaborate description of the cry; and its explosive power has been built up by a hundred touches of the greatest exactness before we reach it.

W. B. Yeats's poem *Byzantium*, recording experiences at the deepest human level, is concrete and exact, in the imagery that leads to the triumphant, ringing last line.

That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

And what a vista is opened, what wealth of suggestion is there in the spare precision of L. H. Myers's lines about the Guru, the holy man, in *The Pool of Vishnu*:

The Guru had a pleasant voice: it was kindly, matter-of-fact, and more often than not expressive of a gentle amusement. 'After all, what does it really matter?' he seemed to imply, and one felt that it didn't matter—not because nothing mattered, but because what did matter was elsewhere and secure.

'Elsewhere and secure.' How easy, almost casual, the writing seems. Only the trained writer can fully realise the exactness that gives it its evocative power.

Space is limited, so I will give no more examples, but, having suggested what writing is, pass on to the question of practising it as a profession.

CHAPTER III

TO CREATE OR TO CATER?

IF you are going to write professionally, there is one point on which you will have to make up your mind at the start. Are you going to create, or to cater? Are you going to write what you personally feel and believe, or what you imagine the public feels and believes? Are you going to please yourself, or please editors?

In one sense the two aims are not in conflict. If they were, then no writer of integrity would get published at all. Editors—and publishers—are the gate through which what you write reaches the public. If no publisher or editor will accept what you write, then it cannot get beyond the circle of your family and friends. The existence of large numbers of honest writers who write of life as they see it, and tell what they believe to be the truth about human beings, is sufficient proof that editors and publishers are ready to accept work of this kind. In other words, it is possible, to please oneself and to please editors.

In another sense, however, the two aims are, and always must be, mortal enemies.

Let me explain.

2

You are, let us say, on holiday at a Scottish village. You notice an old man who sits doing a mechanical job with his hands and reading from a book. You get into conversation with him, and find he is reading Dr. Johnson's *Lives of the*

Poets. This strikes you, and you decide to write an article about it. You do so, and look for suitable journals to sell it to. You pick out three.

Journal A, a daily newspaper, likes what it calls 'literary' articles to be eight hundred words long, divided into three main paragraphs with cross headings, and with a double space and row of asterisks two-thirds of the way through.

Journal B, a weekly, likes its articles to begin with a generalisation, and to be informative rather than picturesque.

Journal C, another daily, likes them to start with a remark in inverted commas, and to be personal. It wants 'the human touch': this sort of thing:

'“Dr. Johnson makes a verra just observation about school-teachers.”

'The scene was not a university; the speaker was neither a teacher nor a don. . . .'

3

Now—are you going to pay attention to these editorial whims? If A rejects your article, are you going to rewrite it in terms appropriate to B? And, if B rejects it, rewrite it for C?

If you want to sell your article, you not only will do these things, you must. *But you can do so, and still say exactly what you think and feel about the old man and the whole situation.* In this sense, you can be a creator, and yet please editors. You are a creator, not a caterer.

If, on the other hand, you falsify what you think and feel, and serve up the sort of stuff which your imagination or your experience tells you that editors and readers will think appropriate; if you sell, not only your article, but yourself and the old man; then you are not a creator, but a caterer.

If your aim is to find out what people expect you to think

and feel and say, and then pretend to think and feel and say it; if you set out to supply a demand; if you fake your story, and construct it so that it ends in a way that flatters and pleases the thoughtless reader: then you are not a creator, but a caterer.

If you follow your own bent, and write faithfully what you yourself feel to be true, and respect the demands of editors only in matters of length, presentation, etc., then you are not a caterer, but a creator.

4

A great deal of correspondence has come my way since I drew attention to the difference between caterer and creator in a previous and much smaller edition of this book. Some correspondents misunderstood the point, many were worried by it, and a few were abusive. May one not, some readers ask, supply what an editor wants and yet be a creator? Or, since our aim is to earn money by writing, what is the sense of making niggling distinctions about the way we do it?

The difficulty arises, I think, from the popular notion that a writer is a clever person who makes money by thinking up stories and articles which people want to read. I was up against this difficulty from the first, since my parents quite honestly saw an artist of any kind as a tradesman who supplied the public with what it wanted. The only justification for his work was that he was able to sell it. Therefore they never took my work seriously until I began to earn a living by it. Until then it was a hobby, like Albert's fretwork, or May's embroidery, or Doreen's sketching. When I told my father that it was as much against my conscience to alter my belief about a character or situation because an editor didn't share it as to commit any of the sins in the decalogue, he simply did not understand what I

was talking about. In his view, my first and only duty was to find out what the public liked, and then industriously to supply it.

Now I am NOT setting up this attitude of mine as a standard for other writers. The provision of what editors want, the deliberate satisfaction of public taste in reading, is at best a perfectly honest trade, like the manufacture of anything else which the public wants. It is a craft calling for skill and practice.

But there is, there always has been, and there always will be a distinction between the artist and the tradesman, between the creator and the caterer. The artist works primarily to please himself. His opinions (on life and character) may be unpopular, but he cannot help expressing them, and he cannot alter them or water them down to suit the opinions of other people. He can do a little, sometimes, to modify their presentation (2,500 words instead of 3,000), but he cannot radically change them. He cannot tack on a happy ending to a story he feels must end tragically. He cannot leave in each other's arms, to please the thoughtless, two people who he knows quite well would soon be spitting in each other's faces.

The distinction is one which arises more strongly in the writing of novels and short stories than of articles, but it is always there, from the very first moment. Some writers never consciously meet it at all, but most of us have to face it sooner or later, and it is well to face it at the beginning.

A man may express himself sincerely in many media and under many conditions. His most distinctive personal quality will be his sincerity. All of us, I take it, wish to remain sincere.

So—how far can the sincere writer go towards meeting editorial requirements? In what papers or magazines may he appear without loss of self-respect? What compromise, if any, may he make between his ideals and market demands?

5

There is a great deal of snobbery on this point, and we will do well to keep clear of it. The use of such terms as 'serious writer' and 'entertainer' confuses the issue. Many genuine creators are highly entertaining. Some contributors to popular magazines are serious writers of the greatest integrity. The test of any work is not where it appears, but its essential quality. Certain highbrows and undergraduates sneer automatically at work which is popular. Because, very often, work of the highest quality is not understood by the general public, they conclude that anything which the general public does understand must be bad. This is snobbery, and silly snobbery, as silly as to suppose that work which is popular is better than work which is not, and that Mr. X, who sells fifty thousand copies, is a better novelist than Mr. Y, who is lucky if he sells five thousand.

When I was struggling, a certain old and kindly man told me I was going the wrong way to work. I had said I would write *my* way, and wait till editors came round to it, or till I had made a name and they were obliged to take what I wrote. He smiled and shook his head.

'No, no,' he said. 'Write what *they* want first. Then, when you have made a name, write what *you* want.'

I repudiated the advice as damnable, and I repudiate it even more passionately today. It is wholly damnable; and, what is more, even from the practical, professional point of view, it is fatally bad tactics. In writing, as in anything else, honesty is the best policy. With two exceptions, all the successful writers I have known are sincere: creators, not caterers. They often took a long time to get going, but they did far better in the end. It is personality that marks off a good writer from his contemporaries; individuality,

a voice and accent of his own. What personality has the caterer, who never puts a word on paper without wondering if his readers are going to like it? What individuality has the writer who must always be following the fashion, and changing with it? In the long run, the public will respect and turn to the man whose voice is his own, who writes in his own way, and means what he says.

I spoke in the last section about altering one's opinions to please other people. I think this is really the test. The writer who is an out-and-out caterer can be compared to the person who is always changing his opinions to suit his company. His intention is very often the perfectly understandable and human wish to please, but it is not often successful, at any rate for long. Sooner or later, his friends compare notes and become tired of talking to someone who is not so much a person as an echo. There are plenty of writers of this type, who can immediately adapt themselves and their opinions in the service of any editor who will pay them. Such successes as they have are apt to be short-lived.

The best-seller, in my experience, is sincere. Often he or she writes rubbish, the sincere outpouring of a commonplace, or, if you like, of a rubbishy mind. Insincerity has always been dangerous, and it is more dangerous now than ever. Long bouts of sharply realized experience, during the war years, have made people less tolerant of dope and nonsense. It was not only paper shortage that put so many popular magazines out of action in those years. They had lost their public. Their former readers were no longer content with the rot that was served out to them.

I have, as I said, known only two successful writers who were insincere. One was an immensely successful novelist, now unread and all but forgotten, who secured an unexpected success with a quite sincere early novel, and copied it deliberately for the rest of his life. The other is still at work, but his popularity is on the wane; and even he pre-

tends to more insincerity than he possesses, because he wishes to appear more sophisticated than he is, and is inwardly ashamed of certain traits in his own make-up which, he has found, appeal to his readers, and which he therefore indulges to the full.

Another reason against following my friend's advice is that, once one has learned the trick of insincerity and lowered one's standards, it is extraordinarily difficult to go back to being honest. I know several writers who promised themselves they would do this once they had made their name—only to find that they could not.

My own experience is all on the side of honesty. Once, for a short time, when I was very hard up, I tried desperately to write what I thought the public wanted. The result was a disastrous failure. I never sold a line of it. For the rest of the time, I have written as well as I could of the things I saw and felt and believed. If an editor or publisher liked the result, grand. If he didn't, it was just too bad.

I will not pretend that I have not sometimes written articles which I would never have written if they had not been commissioned; but I have never said in them anything I did not believe. Nor will I deny that, when sometimes an idea came for a short story which did not deeply interest me, but which I knew I could sell, I thanked the Lord and wrote it out as well as I was able. But, save for the brief and entirely deplorable interlude referred to just now, I have never faked my work to please anyone; not only because to do so is against my conscience, but because it doesn't pay.

6

Do not think, please, that I am advocating an aggressive and priggish idealism, or that what I am saying has no relation to ordinary professional standards of work. I am

still intensely practical. I am drawing your attention to the fact that the greatest commercial success has, in my experience, always gone to those who write honestly. But, as I said just now, one can write honestly and yet be acceptable to editors (publishers are easier to satisfy; they have fewer local requirements). In certain, relatively unimportant, respects one has to pay sympathetic attention to their needs. If this were not so, the best writers would not appear in the popular magazines, and publishing would be an even more difficult business than it is.

Let me elaborate this point. It is all-important, and we must think clearly about it. When you offer a manuscript to an editor who has not asked for it, you are making a definite request of him. You are asking him (*a*) to print it, (*b*) to pay for it. You are proposing to him a perfectly ordinary and straightforward commercial transaction.

When you ask a man to take something from you and give you good money for it, you must offer him something he wants. What is more, he is the judge of what he wants, not you. So, if he sends your goods back to you, and says they are not what he wants, you have no sort of grievance against him. In the case of an editor, who makes it perfectly plain what he wants, both by his advertisement in trade journals and, even more explicitly, by the type of work he accepts and prints, you have not the ghost of a shadow of a grievance. You may think he is a fool not to want your MS., and he very well may be; but you have no cause for complaint. You have proposed to him a transaction which he is not willing to make, and that is all there is to it.

But you can go a long way to guard against such rebuffs by studying intelligently each editor's particular needs. If they are such as you cannot honestly meet, then leave that paper or magazine alone. Don't crusade against it. It is sheer lunacy to send in work which you can see (or could see, if you studied the paper) stands no chance of being

accepted. You must, obviously, choose those editors with whose policy, as revealed in the pages of their journals, you are most in sympathy; and you must suit your *approach* to their idiom and their needs. You cannot handle the same subject in the same way for, let us say, *The Spectator*, *John o' London's Weekly*, and *Answers*.

7

Take an analogy from life, which is and should be the inspiration to letters. You do not speak in exactly the same way when

- (a) talking to a child of six;
- (b) talking to the head of your department;
- (c) talking about a technical matter to friends who are also specialists in it.

You can be, I hope you are, entirely sincere in each case; but you suit your way of speaking, your approach, to your hearer.

To that extent, and to that extent only, you may suit your approach to editors. If an editor says, 'I like your MS., but my weekly story can't run to more than a page, that is, 1,750 words, and your story is 2,000. Can you cut it?' he is making a proper request which you can properly accept. (Incidentally, there are very few stories which are not improved by cutting). If he points out that some local, inessential detail in your story, a name, a nationality, a district, will offend a large number of his readers, you may pause and consider his views, even if you decide that you cannot fall in with them. But if he says, for example, 'The last paragraph on page two of your article must come out; it is against our policy to draw attention to infantile mortality in industrial towns'; if he, or some so-called tutor, or other emissary of the devil, says of your short story, when every rule of art and logic enjoins that the girl must die, that

it will do very nicely if you will just change the last page and give it a 'happy ending'; then tell him to go where he belongs and have no more to do with him.

A writer may no more adulterate the quality of his work for cash than he would adulterate his own personal quality. The writer who sells his work by such manœuvres is selling himself, and in a woefully unstable market.

8

'That's all very well for the writers who have a strong original talent, or who can afford to wait. I've just got a knack of stringing words together, and I want to turn it to the best advantage. I want to make money by it, as soon as possible.'

Everything I have said still applies. Insincerity is no substitute for talent. The sincere writer, however small his gift, has a better chance of success than the faker. To supply entertainment is an honest trade—when it is practised honestly. I cannot advise the purveyor of dope—although I can analyse dope as well as the tutors who get a living by teaching people how to manufacture it—because I cannot write it (at least, not on purpose. If I have ever succeeded in writing dope, it has been an accident!). All I can do here is to offer the results of a longish and by no means unremunerative career as a writer, plus what I know of other writers and their methods, with the assurance that these methods have yielded higher returns in cash and reputation than the truckling, give-'em-what-they-want methods sometimes advocated elsewhere.

CHAPTER IV

BREAD AND BUTTER

THE first essential, if you are going to write for a livelihood, is to get a safe bread-and-butter job first, something that will house and feed and clothe you; and write in your spare time.

This recommendation is neither timid nor cynical, but practical common sense. If you are to write as a creator, you must be free from pressing material anxieties. If you are to write as a caterer, you need time to learn your trade. So, unless you have money enough to carry you along for a year or two, you must have a bread-and-butter job.

Let me give you my own experience. I began to bother editors in 1915, in the interval between leaving school and going to a university. Of the first forty MSS. I sent out, thirty-nine came back. I have never forgotten the fortieth, nor the guinea I got for it, nor the books I bought with that guinea (J. M. Synge's works, in the Maunsell pocket edition), nor the journal that accepted my MS. The name of that journal—I affirm it with pride—was *Answers*. Fourteen years later, I read somewhere that no free-lance was worth his salt who could not catch the eye of the editor of *Answers*. Put on my mettle, I sat down and wrote an article, which I called *The Difficult Boy* (I was at the time a schoolmaster). The article was at once accepted, and I preened myself; though my pleasure was modified when the article appeared under a new title, *Tackling the Tough Nuts*.

But I am leaving my theme. At the university I contributed only to undergraduate journals and non-paying, esoteric publications. In 1921 I got down to the business

in earnest. My first twelve months brought me a few shillings over twenty-nine pounds. I worked for seven years before selling a single short story. My diary for 1928 records ninety-two submissions and fourteen acceptances, bringing in about eighty pounds. Two years later, the situation had so far improved that my wife and I decided to take a chance. I threw up teaching, and have lived as a writer ever since.

2

Two points emerge from this record, and one of them is worth remarking at once. Whatever follies and ineptitudes I was guilty of, and I was guilty of plenty, I had one essential quality of the free-lance writer—persistence. I confess that I am often staggered by the letters I get from beginning writers who say that after one or two rejections of a given piece of work they become discouraged, and do nothing more about it. Discouraged! There are a lot of comments I would like to make on this, but unfortunately none of them is printable. What sort of writers are these, who, if their work is not immediately appreciated, put it away in a drawer and sulk? More, even preen themselves, sometimes, on their sensitiveness? This sort of thing is not evidence of sensitiveness, but of sheer gutlessness. These tender spirits have chosen the wrong calling. If they knew how often even the practised professional has to rewrite and alter; if they had any idea of the amount of good dialogue that has to be scrapped in the writing of a film script; if they saw the anguish and travail that can afflict even the suavist and gayest of columnists, as he tries to make his matter fit his space, they might well blush over their own lack of fibre. The poet W. B. Yeats used to write at regular hours every day. Work, sheer hard work, is the backbone of all writing; there is no hope at all for the thin-skinned dilettante.

3

On the other hand, there is no virtue in making heavy weather of writing, and doing unnecessary work.

I am far from suggesting that everyone need be as slow in getting off the mark as I was. (I have known some slower, but that is neither here nor there). The second thing that stands out from the record above is that, even after thirteen years' experience, I was still sending MSS. to places where they stood no chance of being accepted. The change brought by the next two years was due, not to a sudden access of wisdom, but to the fact that the third novel I wrote, after being rejected by one publisher, was a success with the next, and brought me contracts which made us decide that we could give the new life a trial. By 1939, although I had scrapped another novel, I was selling nine-tenths of what I wrote.

My difficulties were that the form I liked best was the short story, and that I was not prepared to accept the conventional formulae beloved by magazine editors; that I did not study with sufficient care the journals to which I tried to contribute; that I did not produce enough work, and so tended to peg away with what I had got, rather than scrap or rewrite; that I had no one to give me technical advice; and that, living away from the world of editors, I had no contacts in high places. When I came to live in London and to give all my time to writing, these last four hindrances were removed.

4

That seems to contradict what I said at first about the need of a bread-and-butter job. If my chief difficulties arose from not giving my whole time to writing, why do I advise others to work under the same disadvantage?

The answer is that, by the time I broke away from my bread-and-butter job, I had enough money to keep the two of us in lodgings for a year, irrespective of anything extra I might earn, and that the school where I had taught promised to take me back if the venture failed. *This meant that I could still concentrate on trying to write what I wanted to write.* I was not obliged, by sheer need, to take on work I hated or despised. I was not obliged to tout for work. I was still free to reject offers that went against my conscience.

The pen is like fire, a magnificent servant but a merciless master. I can think of no life more soul-destroying than to be compelled to write what one does not believe and what one hates. There is quite enough responsibility, quite enough difficulty, about writing what one wants to write. But to fake or go hungry—and see one's dependants go hungry—will not bear thinking about.

If you have the stuff of a writer, it will come through. If you have the unsubduable urge to write, the will to learn, and the pertinacity to keep on in spite of difficulties and rejection slips, you will get what you want. If you haven't, then I doubt if any nursing or any help will do you much good.

Do not think, please, I am basing all this on my own experience, and imagining that, since I made so costive a start, you should do the same. I know personally scores of writers. Almost all began with bread-and-butter jobs. Of those who wrote for a living from the start, few have survived. One was a scholar, and lived precariously by editing and reviewing until his friends got him an academic post. In two more, a brilliant talent was crushed by the necessity of pleasing editors. Others, beginning as journalists, have remained journalists; that is to say, they have succeeded in a career very different from that which they hoped for. One had private means. Only two of this group are really well known, and each has had a struggle which would have

finished all but the toughest. They are the exceptions, the men who combined great gifts with indomitable courage, and were prepared to face years of hard living for their work's sake.

If you look into the careers of successful writers, you will find that nearly all of them held other jobs first. Conan Doyle, Somerset Maugham, A. J. Cronin, Warwick Deeping, De Vere Stacpoole practised medicine. Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, Hugh Walpole, Dorothy Sayers, Richard Llewellyn, Cecil Day Lewis, Evelyn Waugh, Thornton Wilder, James Joyce, James Stephens, T. S. Eliot, and dozens of others had bread-and-butter jobs to start with. Either they did not depend on writing for a livelihood, or they were able to concentrate their energies on the particular kind of work they wanted to do.

You may be one of the brilliant exceptions who please editors from the word go, or who thrive on a long and ferocious struggle against adversity. That is for you to decide. All my experience, however, points to the need of first providing for shelter, food, and clothing by some means other than writing, if one hopes to make writing one's career.

5

A final reason is the extreme difficulty of making enough by writing when one is a beginner, even if one gets plenty of work.

Nine educated aspirants out of ten want to start by reviewing. Apart from the fact that experienced writers often beg for work of this sort, the beginner has to have credentials of some kind, and, even if he gets a few books to review, the payment will be in shillings rather than in pounds. Three guineas per thousand words is a generous estimate. If he made thirty shillings a week, the beginner

would be deliriously lucky. An experienced reviewer with a very good name (he had a bread-and-butter job, fortunately) told me that he was hard put to it to make £400 a year by reviewing.

The other job for which aspirants propose themselves is that of publisher's reader. This is a specialised job, for which the boy or girl fresh from a university is as a rule quite useless. To appraise a book's chances requires long experience, and is only incidentally a matter of literary criticism. It is also very badly paid. I did not take it on till I could ask reasonable terms, but some publishers pay as little as seven shillings and sixpence for a MS. of novel length; not only for reading it, but for writing a detailed report. The average fee is a guinea. I have known a writer (with a bread-and-butter job) read on an average fifteen MSS. a week in order to make £250 a year. If the beginner gets one MS. a month, he is lucky. He is lucky to get any at all.

The price of articles contributed by free-lances varies considerably. A fair average is from one to three guineas per thousand words, and not many periodicals want anything as long. You will have to do pretty well to make £100 a year, that is, until you are known.

If you write a novel, and it is accepted, you will be offered an advance payment varying from £20 to £40, or in exceptional cases £50, on account of royalties at 10 per cent up to two or three thousand copies, and 12½ per cent or 15 per cent thereafter. The average sale of a first novel before the war was well under five hundred copies, a sale which, at ninepence a copy, would not earn more than a very small advance. I have known a novelist who, until I took her to an agent, wrote twelve novels a year and sold each outright for £25 to £30, according to length; but I do not recommend such frantic fertility, even if you could achieve it, and you can see from the figures above that, unless your

novels are successful, you will be getting a very poor cash return for the time you spend on them. Also, from my experience of several London publishing houses, I doubt if one novel is published for every hundred submitted.

A first novel that sells two thousand copies or more is a success. A literary periodical just before the war doubted if a dozen English novelists could live from their novels alone. I can't pronounce on that, but I know hardly any who do, and very, very many who don't.

6

All the same, there is a lot of money to be made from writing. As much as £50,000 has been made from one novel. A single successful one-act play has earned its author five or six hundred a year for many years. A popular writer of romantic serials before the war told me that she made £15,000 a year. I knew two brothers who made from £17 to £20 a week from reviewing. A number of American short-story writers could command £500 for a single story.

I myself, in the year 1930-1, the first year of my venture, made some £1,700, a sum which included only two three-figure cheques, neither large, the rest being derived from short stories, free-lance work, reviewing, etc., and the vast majority of the cheques being under £5. But—it was my sixteenth year as a writer, and I was able to go and see editors, most of whom already knew who I was.

On all counts, therefore, my advice to you is—secure your livelihood before you start.

7

So much for general considerations. The rest of the book we can give to technical matters. You may not believe me, but what has gone before is no less practical, no less necessary, than any technical how-to-do-it or how-not-to-do-it

that may follow. The essential points, if I may sum them up, are:

- (a) Are you going to write your own stuff or other people's? Is your literary personality going to be genuine or synthetic?
- (b) How are you going to solve your economic problems—since it is very unlikely that, for a few years at any rate, writing will solve them?
- (c) Money *can* be made, and quickly, by the skilful cultivation of a synthetic personality. He or she who learns to cater for the fashion of the moment will have his or her immediate cash reward. But fashions change, and to keep up with them may well prove wearing and anxious work; and, on every level of writing, the genuine personality, growing naturally with the years, stands a far stronger chance of making money and reputation in the long run.

CHAPTER V

MAKING A START: ARTICLES

THE question 'How shall I start?' is put to every practising writer, and, until he knows something about his questioner, he cannot answer it. When the question is accompanied by a sample of the questioner's work, it is a little easier, but not much. For instance, a rank bad article may give no hint of the author's potentialities as novelist or short-story writer. A rank bad story may prove nothing but that, this time, its author has written a rank bad story. On the other hand, it may suggest that he should set about writing a novel, or that he knows so little about people that he had better try writing articles, and so on.

This boils down to the fact that one cannot give general advice. The only thing is to say something about the various forms open to the beginner, and leave the choice to him.

All else being equal, the market that offers the best chance to the beginner is free-lance journalism; that is, the contribution of short articles to newspapers and magazines. Radio work offers excellent chances, and it becomes more and more hopeful as shortage of paper lessens still further the space open to the free-lance. But writers tend to be scared of it, and to shrink from learning its needs; and it is still, up to the time of writing, a monopoly market, and therefore restricted. What it rejects is no good elsewhere.

Therefore, in spite of the cruel curtailment of space open to the free-lance, it is still true that writing short articles is the best way to start—unless, of course, the beginner has a special talent or inclination for short stories, serials, or some other recognised form of writing.

2

The first need for any article, whatever its length, is certainty of intention. Ask yourself (a) what do you want to say? (b) what point or points do you want to make? (c) what paper are you writing for? (d) how long is the article to be?

These four questions should be settled before you put a single word on paper; that is, if you want to sell the article. None of them needs interfere with your integrity, or influence what you are going to say. All they should influence is the way you are to set about it.

Let us look at the four questions in order:

(a) You would be astonished to know how few beginners ask themselves this question. They take a subject, and put down all they can think of, in no particular order. Then, if they feel the result is too short, they repeat themselves in different words; or, if their mind rambles on to something else, they pop that in, and end up nowhere. It is not enough to say to yourself 'Bank Managers' or 'Rambles in Devon' or 'A Week on a Canal'. You must make up your mind what line you are going to take, and stick to it. You have, in most cases, only a short space in which to say your say. In that short space, you must produce a definite impression. The reader must be able to make contact with your personality. What you say to him about bank managers or canal barges must be what *you* say, not a characterless, lowest-common-denominator thing that anybody could say. Be definite from the first sentence to the last, and leave a complete impression on the reader's mind. This brings us to question (b).

3

(b) A great many articles are spoilt by the attempt to get too much into them, to make too many points. The safest rule you can adopt for a short article is to make *one point only*. One main point, that is: you can support it with two or three subsidiary points—provided that they do support it.

I have made this a rule now for many years, for newspaper articles, for short films, for broadcast talks, for all short work which is designed to convince. You have only a short space and a short time in which to make your effect. Choose the most effective point, and make it as clearly and briefly as you can. Make it early in the article, follow it up with additional evidence or argument, and clinch it at the end.

This sounds exceedingly simple, but a lifetime is not long enough to teach one how to do it. The golden rule is to limit your aim. Decide the right point of attack, and attack forcibly, honestly, and economically. Just as, in boxing, a punch well-timed and neatly planted in the right place is worth a whole battery of wild blows, so in writing it is more than half the battle to choose the right point and hit it cleanly. Decide what you are going to do, and do not let yourself be distracted from it.

The time I have spent in composing publishers' blurbs (i.e. short accounts of books, intended to attract the reader), in drafting memoranda and prospectuses, in writing war-time propaganda,¹ articles, and films, has impressed on me the paramount importance of choosing one point and concentrating all one's powers upon it. Although it sounds like a play on words, it is fair to say that all work of this kind

¹ By this I mean presenting as forcibly as possible a point of view with which I am in full agreement. I have never written propaganda which I did not believe.

should be sharply pointed as a spear. A tapered point, that is, the whole attack concentrated in a narrow focus, has far greater penetrative power than a blunter, broader missile, the striking power of which is spread over a wider area. In effect,

I believe that all short work, designed to persuade or to convince, should concentrate on one point only, and should never attempt to make more.

Think of any effective advertisement you have seen, whether pictorial or verbal, and you will find that it made, or suggested, one simple, immediate point. The advertiser who buys a space in a newspaper, and makes his point in a single sentence, easily seen, with lots of white space around it, is going to get a better return for his money than his rival who, having paid for the space, seeks to get full value by crowding it up with material. One point at a time: if you make that your maxim, you will not go far wrong.

4

(c) The need for this question—what paper are you writing for?—often distresses beginners. They feel, quite naturally, that their duty is to write their article as well as in them lies, and then see if anyone will buy it.

If we were talking about short stories, poems, or any work governed by artistic principles alone, I should at once agree, with all my heart. But articles of the kind we are now considering come under a different heading. I doubt if one writer in fifty would express himself in this medium of his own free choice, if there were no question of being paid. In the short article, the writer is learning to use words for the purpose of giving information in a readable and convenient form, or is putting his already practised talent at the service of an editor for a special purpose. Very many prac-

tised writers write an article only when it is commissioned. They usually make a good job of it; the result is easy and attractive to read, and the information or the theories are vividly transmitted to the reader; but few, except the natural essayist, choose this form—and he as a rule likes a longer space than most newspapers will allow him.

There remains, of course, the army of free-lance journalists who make a living by writing short articles, and stick to this form because they find it the easiest and the most remunerative for their particular abilities. I did a great deal of it at one time. Now I hardly ever write an article which has not been commissioned. I have written perhaps two uncommissioned articles in the past five years; not because I have lost the knack, but because I can now use my time in ways that are, to me, more interesting.

Since, then, you will be writing your articles in order to sell them, it is only common sense to make a study of the journal to which you hope to sell them. By making sure of the right length and manner of presentation, you will save yourself a deal of time and disappointment and trouble. Remember, you are asking something of the editor. He doesn't want you—yet. You want him. Very well. Go part of the way to meet him.

First of all, find out what he wants. Don't send a women's magazine an article about rugby football, or a yachting magazine an article on white mice. (Neither is more idiotic than the submissions that are made every day.) Don't send in criticisms of plays and books which you have not been asked to review. (You will hardly believe it, but numbers of young writers do this. In most cases they haven't even bothered to find out that the paper had a regular dramatic critic, fiction reviewer, or whatever it was.) Don't, without consulting the editor, send in a refutation of an article he has already published (if you should be fantastically lucky and the editor nibbles, be prepared to write *at once*). Read

at least a dozen issues of your chosen paper, so as not to send in something on a subject recently handled.

See *how* the subjects are treated: factually, anecdotally, theoretically, or from the personal angle. Write and re-write your article until it looks like the sort of thing that editor has been buying. I am assuming, of course, that this implies no sort of dishonesty or sacrifice of principle. If the paper's outlook, as expressed in its literary articles—i.e. articles on all subjects other than politics—is not one to which you can subscribe, you have no business to be trying to contribute to it. Suit your manner to your company. Do no more to meet the editor's needs than you could do without hypocrisy to meet him or any other human being in person; but do no less.

If I had learned this lesson at the start, and really studied the papers I wanted to write for, I should have saved hours and hours, pounds and pounds, reams of stationery, and much trouble to the postal services of this country and the U.S.A.

5

(d) The question of length does not depend only on the journal to which you want to sell your article. There are standard lengths, as you will see from the papers themselves, or from any Writers' Reference Book (see Chapter XI). Length is determined by the subject and by the way in which you approach it; or, equally true, the approach is determined by the length at which you have chosen to write.

What matters is that approach and length are closely bound together, and should therefore be decided together. *Never write at random.* I am always getting bits and pieces sent to me, things written without a purpose, fragments of self-expression, descriptions of this, that, and t'other thing, character sketches, and so forth. Fine. Splendid—as long

as that's all. But the authors almost always want to know where they can sell these pieces. They have just dashed them off in odd moments (of inspiration, they imply). They have souls above mere professionalism; so will I, a mere professional, kindly tell them how to get their work into print?

If I do tell them, they are left with a sense of grievance. Any idea that writing is a craft, and like any other craft or profession needs hard work, is displeasing to them. And the odd thing is that these ladies and gentlemen look down on the craftsmen, and regard their amateurish productions as being on a higher artistic level than his.

It may be fearlessly said that the efficient performance of an ordinary job never did any craftsman harm, and that the better craftsman he is, the more efficiently will he do that ordinary job. I do not mean that a Conrad should be asked to write fashion articles, or a Max Beerbohm to give you a column of information about scientific bookkeeping or mica deposits in the Balkans (though I should never be surprised to see genius wipe the eye of ordinary competence in any field). But the good writer can use his pen for a wide variety of purposes, and remain himself throughout.

In my early days as a writer I anxiously asked A.E., one of the saints of literature, whether free-lance journalism would do me any harm. His eyes twinkled behind his glasses.

'Not if you're good enough,' he replied.

CHAPTER VI

ARTICLES (continued)

THE best way of saying a thing is the plainest, and the shortest. Make that your motto when you start; remind yourself of it every time you sit down to write, and soon you will remember it of your own accord.

I remember that, when I was an undergraduate, a friend who wanted to be a writer showed me something he had written, and asked me for my opinion. It was very highly decorated, by Wilde out of Pater, with a tincture of Dowson thrown in; and it was violently and virulently bad. With the brutality of youth, I said so. My friend was terribly hurt. His idea of writing was fine writing, a luxuriant and precious vocabulary, long involved sentences, slow nostalgic rhythms, the incense and draperies of language; modes of expression wholly foreign to him, and far beyond his powers.

I could see the truth of this, in someone else's work. But, both while I was at school, and when I uttered those uncompromising remarks, I wrote verse in two styles: mock Tennysonian, and Irish or Devon vernacular. My best school friend and I agreed that the vernacular verses were 'not poetry', and I was almost ashamed of them. I wrote them because I couldn't help it, and laboured devoutly at my sonnets and odes and what-not. It took a couple of years at Oxford, in the society of older writers, to show me that the vernacular things, whatever their value may have been, were infinitely better than the Tennysonian stuff, which was worth nothing at all. (I showed some of it, not long ago,

to a young poet who was lamenting that he had done hardly anything at twenty-two, and he had to admit that, at any rate, he'd never written anything as bad as *that*.)

The vernacular verses were better because they were my own voice, and because they were short and plain. The longer I live, the more firmly I believe that the best way is the plainest. Even if at a moment of deep emotion you are trying to suggest the most delicate of atmospheric effects, the most subtle of correspondences between nature's mood and man's, the most elusive of those shapes that glimmer round the corner of the mind's eye, in that twilit realm where one level of consciousness shades into another, the simplest words are the best.

Read a few of Blake's lyrics, and see what work simple words will do. Not all great writing is simple, but the power to wield the complex is founded on the power to wield the simple. It will be time enough to think of writing elaborately when you have learned to write simply—and then, as likely as not, you will not want to.

In any case, for the special work we are now considering, simple writing is essential. You are going to pass on what you have to say to a very large and not at all sophisticated audience, who must be able to understand at a glance anything you say to them.

2

If you have never done any of this work before, and are in doubt where to begin, I suggest that you get hold of as many copies as you can of papers that specialise in giving interesting information to a wide audience: say *Answers*, *Titbits*, and some of the papers published by the houses of Leng and Thompson. In these you will find a number of short articles which are little more than statistics put in an attractive form. Have a shot at something of this kind. Take a subject you know something about, or something

topical; look up or check your facts in a reference library; select those which can be put in the way favoured by the paper you have chosen; paragraph your article in the way the paper likes, and send it in.

If it does nothing else, a week or two at this sort of work will give you valuable practice at saying clearly what you want to say, and in the shortest possible space. *Don't despise it.* It is an excellent exercise. Not a minute of the time you give to it will be wasted. To be able to give in short, simple, and orderly form the gist of something long and complicated and disordered is one of the most useful qualifications a writer can have.

3

From this sort of writing you may proceed to so-called 'literary' articles for provincial newspapers. *Study your paper first.* Don't send on spec. to Glasgow or Liverpool or Plymouth an article modelled on something you have seen in a London paper. Such submissions are ignorant, patronising, unprofessional, and will get what they deserve. I recommend provincial papers because their rates of payment tend to be lower, and therefore the general flood of amateur stuff does not come their way. They are wooed by local writers and by the better-informed beginners. I have sold a great deal of work in the provinces. Unless the subject was local—i.e. something seen on holiday, and sent to the local paper—I used to try the London dailies first, and then either find a provincial paper which might take the article as it stood, or rewrite or remodel it to suit the one that seemed to offer the best chance.

Dull work? You may think so, but it brought in many a thirty shillings or guinea for something which otherwise would have remained a debit, a useless consumer of stamps and envelopes. And a connection with a provincial paper

can be very useful. Please its editor, and you may easily sell him five or six articles a year, if not more. Half a dozen such connections make a real difference to one's receipts book.

4

The secret of free-lancing is to maintain a steady and copious flow of work. You should have a large number of MSS. always on the go. From your own knowledge and with the help of your reference book (see p. 148) plan an itinerary for each article, story, verse, or whatever it may be, and *keep to it*. As soon as one journal sends an MS. back, post it off to the next. I am always coming across people who, if an MS. is rejected once or twice, lose heart and put it away. If you can see something wrong with your MS., then put it away by all means, until you see clearly enough to rewrite or scrap it. But, if you can't see how it may be improved, post it off until every paper on your list has turned it down.

I once sold a story for fourteen guineas at the twenty-second try. As for the articles I have cut down, rewritten, turned inside out, played hell with, and sold in the end—I could dig out the details from my record books, but they would take up the rest of our space.

Keep a record book, giving the date of each article, and the places you send it to. Write regularly, and keep a steady volume of work in circulation. Study carefully the papers to which you wish to sell your work. These are the golden rules for the free-lance, and they can bring him a comfortable income.

5

'But what shall I write about? I know people always say, write about your own life, and what you know at first-hand. But my life is dull and uneventful. I'm a bank clerk, shop

assistant, student, typist, teacher, railway porter, hospital nurse, suburban wife, chemist, etc., etc., etc., etc. I never come across anything really interesting.'

Every writer hears this, from nearly every beginner who asks him for advice, and he can see perfectly well, from the listener's face, that his reply sounds unconvincing. All right. Let me give you practical examples.

I followed a career which is commonly regarded as uneventful and humdrum. I was a schoolmaster. That is to say, the material of which I had first-hand knowledge was of no particular interest to the public that reads papers, and by no means exclusive to myself. One day I saw in my reference book the specifications of a golfing magazine. At once I thought of our school course, with its comic hazards, the pigsty, the hen-run, the roller for the cricket-pitch, and the dread things that happened to the greens if a cow succeeded in jumping over the wire fence. A thousand words? Three guineas? They were mine!

Here, from my file, are some of the free-lance uses to which I put my supposedly humdrum profession:

The Difficult Boy. *Answers*. Three columns.

The New Schoolmaster. *Fortnightly Review*. 3,000 words.

Sex Teaching in the Preparatory School. *Spectator*. 1,200 words.

Series of Six Articles. *Evening News*. 1,000 words each.

Our Changing Schools. *Nineteenth Century*. 3,000 words.

How to Choose a Boy's Preparatory School. *Good Housekeeping*. 2,000 words.

Schoolmasters I Hate. *Radio Times*. 1,500 words.

Schoolmasters. *Time and Tide*. 1,200 words.

The Future of Education. *Listener*. 1,500 words.

Fair Play for the Teacher, and numerous other articles on teaching and education, to a syndicate of provincial newspapers. 1,000 words each.

What Children Read. *Woman's Journal*. 2,000 words.

The Schoolmaster in Wartime, and other articles for official use.

Numerous lectures and addresses on educational matters.

6

The earnings from these productions ran to many hundreds of pounds, for one subject alone, and that in no way new. I do not include the use I made of teaching experience in novels and short stories. All the above is free-lance work based on the practice of my bread-and-butter job as a teacher.

I have not, you will notice, included the golfing article, but have kept it to point a moral. When you pick on a subject, write your article at once, and send it off. I merely noted this subject down, and waited for a suitable time. Then a very great journalist, Mr. Bernard Darwin, came back to the school where he had once been a pupil, played over the course, and wrote an article about it in *The Times*. I had lost my chance. No editor would now take an article which could only look like a pale copy of a master's.

7

A consideration of other questions, reference books, agents, correspondence schools, technique of submissions, etc., I have kept to a short final chapter, since they govern all sorts of written work.

CHAPTER VII

PLAYS

THIS chapter is going to be very short, for two reasons.

The first is that I do not recommend any beginner to write a play. This advice will, I know, sound ridiculous to an intending playwright, and be entirely useless to him. Nevertheless, I must repeat it: I do not recommend any beginner to write a play.

I give this negative advice because, if he does write a play, there is not one chance in ten thousand that it will be put on the stage. To stage a play in London costs a great deal of money. Theatre rents are high, skilled players command large salaries, stage hands, electricians, and front-of-the-house staff are numerous and expensive. Heavy costs must be incurred before the first-night audience pays to come in; and the play may flop, and be withdrawn after half a dozen performances. You can see why managers are chary of putting on plays by unknown writers.

I do not think it an exaggeration to say that, unless a star player becomes passionately interested in a beginner's play, and can communicate this enthusiasm to manager or backer, its chances of being presented to the public are so small as to be invisible. Repertory theatres, especially in the provinces, offer a better chance, but they are besieged with manuscripts, and even if they do put on a play for a week, the author is not going to make much out of it unless other companies follow suit. The same applies to amateur productions, with even greater force.

I cannot therefore, in a handbook which I have promised to make practical, advise anyone who wants to make a

living by his pen to spend hours and hours on specialised work of peculiar difficulty, when there is virtually no chance of his getting a cash return for it.

Fortunes are made from plays, yes; anyone in the theatre can tell you dazzling stories of success. People also win fortunes in sweepstakes, and football pools. They have a better chance, and do very much less work to get it.

2

The second reason for the shortness of this chapter is that, even if written advice could help you to write a play—and we have the authority of many dramatists, including Mr. St. John Ervine, that it cannot—my credentials are weaker here than for other branches of writing. I have written only one full length-play, and collaborated in two others. An American manager took an option on one of the collaborations, but did not stage it. It is now, after many years, finding its way to the repertory theatres. My own play was written at the request of a well-known producer, and was scheduled for production in the West End. A dispute arose between producer and management, he walked out, and that was the end of that. It had to wait three years for a professional production in Dublin.

Several one-act plays of mine have been staged at various times by amateur companies. I have written a large number of radio plays, but that is a very different matter, and one which I shall be dealing with in its proper place. I have written, to date, two full-length plays for television.

Thus I cannot talk to you on this subject with the authority of the working practitioner. Years of adjudicating at drama festivals have taught me something about plays, and, some time ago, I wrote a little book entitled *Common Sense about Drama*, of which theatre folk spoke well. But no amount of theory will take the place of practical ex-

perience in the theatre, and I have, up to the time of writing, very little of such experience.

Even so, I have done and seen enough to be aware of the problems involved. As editor of a series of plays for a publisher, I see a great many play scripts, many of them bristling with obvious faults. It may not be entirely a waste of time if I say a few general things about the broad problems of playwriting, as shown by these faulty scripts and by experience as a playgoer.

3

The great difference between writing for the stage and writing a novel or a film script is that, while the novel and film can follow the characters wherever they go, the dramatist is obliged to bring them to a single place and keep them there for as long as he can. Frequent changes of scene are unpopular with theatre managements, both because of the expense of construction and the time taken to substitute one for another. The dramatist's first problem is therefore psychological: to provide a plausible reason for the characters to be in a given spot at a given time.

This may, and often will, involve preparing for their arrival on the stage. The entrance of somebody about whom the audience's curiosity has been roused is naturally much more interesting and more effective than an entrance they have not been led to expect. And, once a character is on the stage, the duty arises of providing a satisfactory reason for him or her to leave it.

The heart of dramatic writing, the point in which it must differ from the novel, is that the audience all the time sees what is happening. The audience is in from the start on what is taking place, and shares with the characters, in time and very nearly in space, the development of the action. This should be so obvious as not to need saying; but the number of plays written by beginners in which there are

enormous chunks of narrative, things told instead of shown, is a recurring astonishment. Seventy-five per cent of beginners' plays start at the wrong point in the story, in such a way as to necessitate a deal of dull and often quite implausible explanation as to what has happened already.

4

This brings us to the greatest requisite for the playwright, the ability to write dialogue. Nobody who does not naturally shine in dialogue can hope to be a playwright.

Now, quite obviously, there must in almost every play be a certain amount of background information which the audience cannot be shown, but which must be conveyed to them through dialogue. This is a problem which calls for all the playwright's resource. No point causes more mistakes, no device is more flagrantly abused by the amateur. It is a cardinal rule that any information which has to be given to the audience in dialogue between the characters should come naturally to the lips of those characters; in other words, the play itself must provide a natural and reasonable occasion for them to speak to each other the lines containing the information which the audience needs to have.

Nowhere does the amateur playwright fall down so heavily as here. I once read a play—indeed, it was entered for a festival, and I had to hear it—in which an old couple, sitting on either side of their hearth, reminded each other at great length how long they had been married, how long they had lived in the house, how many children they had, and what those children were doing. We did not get to the point at which the play started until nearly the bottom of the fourth full page. Now this, from the point of view of play construction, was imbecile. How were we to believe in two characters who spent some ten minutes telling each other what each knew perfectly well already? And, what was

more, why should they choose this particular occasion for so improbable an exercise? Even if, let us say, the old lady had lost her memory, and required reminding of her life history, the playwright would be in honour bound to show why she needed the reminder on this particular occasion.

There are, of course, a hundred ways round this difficulty, and one of the easiest is to bring in a character who, for the purposes of the play, needs to be given the information required by the audience. The playwright who knows his business will preface such disclosures by some little puzzling piece of action which will make the audience eager to have the explanation anyway.

5

A very good example of how to do it and how not to do it can be taken from the greatest dramatist of them all. Get out your Shakespeare, and look first at the opening of *As You Like It*, and then at the opening of *Hamlet*. One is a masterpiece of dramatic writing, a consummate example to every kind of writer of how to jump straight into his story, one of the greatest beginnings in all literature. The other is bored, perfunctory, and incompetent—an opening that would make any journeyman dramatist smile and pull out his pen to rewrite it. I need hardly say that this is the opening to *As You Like It*.

As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion . . .

Here is a play starting with a long speech in which one character explains to another, who knows the whole business perfectly well already, a set of circumstances which the audience requires to know in order to appreciate what follows. There is no excuse whatever for this lumbering device. Oliver could come on immediately, and speak in front of Adam with a harshness which would at once attract the audience's sympathy to Orlando, and make them

anxious to know the reason. The business about the will could come out in the quarrel between the two brothers, and, after Oliver's exit, a word or two from Adam by way of condolence would clear up any point that was left over.

In case anyone thinks it impudence or sacrilege to question any detail of Shakespeare's dramatic technique, we can convict him out of his own practice by turning to the opening two dozen lines of *Hamlet*. Here the scene is set, and the plot introduced with consummate economy and power. We get, in the first lines, the time of night: the place ('Friends to this ground,' 'And liegemen to the Dane'), and then, almost before we have time to draw breath, the challenging line,

What, has this thing appear'd again tonight ?

Within three minutes of the rise of the curtain, we are plunged into the action of the story. The contrast between these two openings will tell one more about writing for the theatre than half a dozen handbooks.

One more example, on a very different level, but from a great dramatic craftsman. Look at the opening of Sir James Barrie's *The Twelve Pound Look*, and see how, inside half a minute, in pantomime before our eyes, the information is given to us that a pompous and solemn person is about to receive a knighthood; situation and character set down in a few bold strokes.

This example is valuable because it brings home to us the importance of the visual element in dramatic writing. What the audience can see has an effect outweighing anything that is said upon the stage. The shouts of warning to the heroine, uttered by unsophisticated playgoers when the villain creeps up behind her, are sufficient evidence of this. The celebrated screen scene from *The School for Scandal* reads splendidly, but no effect which we can get in the study approaches the effect of this *dénouement* on the stage

in front of an audience. It is amusing enough to read in the stage directions of Jack Worthing's entry dressed in deep mourning in the second act of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but we can form no idea of its full dramatic effect until we have sat in a theatre and shared in the delighted laugh that goes up as he comes in, before a word has been spoken.

The melodrama, *Mr. Wu*, in which Matheson Lang gave such a magnificent performance, reads excitingly as it approaches its climax; yet the script gives no idea of the audience's breathless expectation when they see Mr. Wu change tea cups with his victim and drink from the cup which she has poisoned for herself in order to escape from what he proposes. I shall never forget the hammering of my heart as I waited to see how soon the poison would take effect.

6

Dialogue for the stage (and for the radio, and for films, and for television) is far more compact, far swifter, far more immediately purposeful than dialogue in a short story or a novel.

It is a safe rule, when one is writing out the first draft of a play, to be sure that every line of dialogue either advances the plot or establishes a detail of character necessary to the plot. The line of story development can be compared to a river. Sometimes it may be allowed to slow up and spread into a pool of atmosphere, characterisation, or sheer fun; but such a delay must be compensated by rapids later on, so that the log floating along the surface of the stream, which is in this case the attention of the audience, must be kept moving, and never sidetracked or becalmed. Many a popular and successful play has passages of sheer amusement and diversion which do not substantially advance the story at all, but these are extremely perilous for the begin-

ner, and in any case should be filled in at a later stage, once the story has been unfolded, and the dramatist knows how much time he has left to play with. In a really well-constructed play there are no such passages; there is nothing which does not develop plot and deepen character. The dialogue, the jokes, arise from situation and character and belong to their setting. The decoration is part of the design.

What is more, the born dramatist is always on guard against boring the audience with too long a stretch of dialogue unrelieved by action. No dramatist in our time has relied more on dialectic than Shaw—yet observe with what unerring sense of how much an audience will stand he breaks his dialogue with action. Take a scene which at first sight is all dialogue, the discussion of the feudal system between Warwick, Cauchon, and de Stogumber from *St. Joan*. The action that breaks this static scene of three people seated at a table is no more than the angry jump of one character to his feet, and the shout of an insult, but in this scene it has the effect of a cataclysm. Look up, too, the miraculous and brief appearance of Captain Shotover (*Heartbreak House*), where Ellie asks him for how long one can concentrate on a single theme. It is true that no study of the script can give the effect which comes from performance; and this leads to the only sensible and practical advice which I can give anyone who wants to write plays. Go to the theatre as often as you can, see play after play after play, and work out in your own mind afterwards how the effects were produced. Once you have good standards in your mind, it is safe to see mediocre and even bad performances. If you want to work for the theatre, you must think it, live it, dream it. And, once more, if you are a beginner, I can only advise you to keep away altogether from the writing of plays. There is no possible harm in repeating this advice, since anyone with the germ of playwriting in him will pay not the slightest attention to it.

CHAPTER VIII

FILMS

WRITING for films is fascinating, exasperating, and very well paid. It is not a branch of writing which the beginner can be advised to try, if only because he will find it extraordinarily difficult to get anyone to take notice of him. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, film companies are not interested in a writer until he has achieved success as a novelist or a playwright, or perhaps has written a biography about some colourful character whom they wish to make the centre of a screen play.

To submit work to them out of the blue is almost always useless. In fact, many of the biggest companies make a practice of returning unopened all unsolicited material. They do this in order to avoid subsequent charges of plagiarism. The world being the wicked place it is, you and I might very well put our heads together and concoct a scenario which included almost every possible type of cliché and situation. It would, as we anticipated, be thrown back at us; but when, a year later, the studio in question produced a film containing an incident something like one of the incidents in ours (and we would have made our scenario so comprehensive that they could hardly help doing so) we would threaten them with a lawsuit; and very possibly, to save expense, they might settle the business out of court by paying us something to abandon our claim.

So, as a general rule, it is a waste of time to send material to a film company unless it has asked you to do so.

2

Suppose, however, that you have met a producer, or a director, or somebody connected with a film company, and so have secured an invitation to let them look at the story you have in mind.

WHATEVER YOU DO, SEND IT IN AS A PLAIN STORY. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO WRITE IT IN WHAT YOU IMAGINE TO BE FILM TECHNIQUE.

In other words, send it in, whether complete or in synopsis, as if you were sending it to an editor. Do *not* attempt to make a screen play of it.

This will seem a hard saying, I know, but there is a good deal of experience behind it. What the studio wants from you is a story, an idea. They have plenty of clever boys on hand who can set it down in film form. That is their job. Yours is to give them the material to work on.

I was for some time a story scout to one of the biggest film companies. My hardest job was, not to find possible stories, but to stop their enthusiastic authors from writing them out in what they imagined to be film technique. One particularly poignant instance comes to my mind. A quite well-known actor told me he had a marvellous idea for a film. I asked him to let me see it, warning him at the same time to write it out straight, as a story.

'Impossible!' he cried. 'I think film! I live film! I see all in film terms. That's the only way for me to write it.'

I warned him again, but it was no good. He sent the story in. I looked at it, sighed, and handed it over to my employers—knowing perfectly well what would happen. It did happen. They shot it back, with a few blistering remarks about the pretensions of the author.

I returned it to him, explaining the rejection as tactfully as I could, but he absolutely refused to see the point.

'I'm sorry they didn't accept the story,' he wrote back to me. 'But, now that they have seen how well I understand film technique, perhaps they would like to employ me as a screen writer?'

When I tell you that the first thing a film company does, after buying a story, is to have it rewritten as a second and shorter story for the much shorter compass of the film, you will realise that film companies prefer to make their own arrangements for the technical preparation of their material.

3

This does not mean that the free-lance writer may not often be employed to do this specialised work. Very often he is. I have written treatments, that is, preliminary shorter versions, of many stories which were afterwards filmed; and, on all but two occasions, I have worked upon the screen play as well. But one's introduction to work of this kind almost always arises out of one's other work as a writer. My first film job of all was to work with an established screen writer on an adaptation of part of one of my own novels. I say 'of part' because the novel was a long one, containing several important characters, and two films were ultimately made from it, each centred in a single character.

As soon as a writer shows aptitude for script work, or for writing treatments, he will get his share of such work as is going; which, in this country at any rate, is not very much.

Even for the established screen writer, unless he has a long-term contract with a busy company, film work is precarious. Most writers look upon a film assignment as an occasional and welcome bonus. The work very often has to be done in a hurry, and everything else dropped while one is engaged upon it. Two-thirds of what one writes is usually

scrapped, or has to be done again—not necessarily because one has done it badly, but because of changes which have nothing to do with the story or the way it has been written, but are endemic in the film business itself.

4

Two axioms govern the making of films. One is concerned with space and time, the other with economics.

A film made from a novel will always be much shorter than the novel on which it is based. This means that a good deal of the original story will have to be left out, and such changes made as will bridge the gaps left by what has been cut out, and make the remainder intelligible to an audience. The purists who complain that the film of a novel which they have read is not faithful to the original, that it has left out their pet character, ignored the scene they specially went to see, and changed the story, nearly always end their lament with a heartfelt cry: 'Why on earth can't they leave the thing alone, and give us the story as it was written?'

We may sympathise with them, but they demand a vain thing. If you had the desire, the pertinacity, and the stamina to read the average modern novel to yourself out loud, you would need anything from twelve to fifteen hours to do it. The screen play which reads the story to you out loud in your local cinema takes, on an average, one and a half to two hours. It is immediately obvious that you cannot get twelve or fifteen hours' worth of reading aloud into one and a half hours or two. It is not a question of getting a quart into a pint pot, but into an egg-cup or a thimble. It can't be done. Something must go. Parts of the novel must be left out.

Axiom number one, therefore, is that you will never get the original story in its entirety.

Axiom number two, cruder, sadder, is this: The more

money has been invested in the production of any given work of art or entertainment, the less freedom will the artist have.

If you write a novel, it is possible that you may find a publisher willing to put it on the market at his own risk. At the worst he would be jeopardising some three or four hundred pounds. He may suggest one or two changes to you, but in the main they will be artistic changes, designed to improve your novel as a novel.

Should you, however, write a play, which is going to cost three or four thousand pounds to put on in the West End, you will find the manager far more cautious than the publisher. He will show a greater disposition to tinker with your play, and, for scenes which are perhaps original and therefore, in his mind, risky, to substitute episodes of a type which have frequently been known to succeed in the theatre, and are therefore reckoned safe. In other words, he does not wish to invest his money without making as sure as he knows how that he will get it back, plus a reasonable profit. You will be lucky indeed if your play is heard on the first night without alterations which seem to you substantial, and—to say the least—artistically undesirable.

But if the form which your self-expression has taken should be a screen play, which may well cost a hundred thousand pounds or a hundred and fifty thousand to put before the public, then you will find the people who put down the money exceedingly cautious. They will show an acute disposition to meddle with your story, and, for the scenes on which you have set your heart, to substitute others of a hackneyed kind for which the public has already shown a liking. You will be requested to alter various characters to suit the personalities of the stars whom the studio has engaged as one means of ensuring that their investment will not go down the drain.

The stars are necessary, or are thought to be necessary

by the business men involved in films, because the public go to see this or that star rather than this or that story. Put two popular stars opposite each other in practically any story you like, and their fans will attend the cinemas.

What is more, the vast mass of film fans, who are adolescent in physical or at any rate mental age, know very well what they want when they go to the pictures. They want elaborate and sumptuous dreams in which they can take the places of hero or heroine. Nothing must happen to disturb or shatter these dreams, for which reason the most satisfactory conclusion to any film is the swooning collapse of the heroine in the hero's arms. True, films built to a more intelligent prescription get made, and occasionally succeed. There is a small but resolute public for adult films made with artistry and integrity. The trouble is that such films can only be shown sporadically and in small theatres. We have in Britain no minority circuit for films in which the story is more important than the players. The patrons of the big commercial circuits want the players—and, what is more, want the players as themselves, not as the characters they are supposed to portray.

Thus, for many reasons, we are brought back to the second fundamental axiom which governs film-making. I will repeat it. The more money there is invested in the production of a work of art or entertainment, the less freedom will the artist have.

5

At this point you may well turn round upon me and ask why I have anything to do with films at all. Throughout this book, I maintain that honesty is the best policy, artistically as well as commercially. If film-making is subject to such purely industrial conditions, if (as is the fact) it is an industry rather than an art, what excuse has an artist

for being concerned in it? Is he not compelled by his principles to turn his back on it altogether?

To put it crudely—you may say to me—are you in it for the sake of your pocket?

To this leading question I answer without hesitation, yes. But that is only part of the truth. It is true that to sell a story to the films, and to work on film scripts, are the best paid opportunities a writer gets. But there are two attitudes open to him, even when he accepts the bait dangled before his eyes by a film company. He may stick out for the highest possible price for his rights, then wash his hands of the whole affair, and complain to his friends of the mess which these vandals have made of his book: or he may ask a smaller price, and make a condition of the bargain that he is to work upon the script.

This second course seems to me the more honest and the more courageous. The writer will not get his own way completely, but, *provided that he has some understanding of the film as a medium*, he will get a good deal of his own way. However far the final result may fall short of his ideal, it will be a good deal better than it would have been if he had left everything to the studio. A good deal better, that is, from the author's point of view. I do not think anyone can deny that, if more and more serious writers have a share in the writing of screen plays, the artistic standards of the industry are likely to rise.

For an example one has only to look at those admirable films made by the collaboration of Graham Greene as writer and Sir Carol Reed as director. Graham Greene is known everywhere as a writer of unquestioned integrity and serious standards. Instead of selling his stories to the highest bidder, he has taken off his coat and gone to work himself to translate them from their original medium as novels or short stories into their new medium as films. Many other serious writers have done the same thing.

They have accepted, ruefully, humorously, or with complete goodwill, the restrictions imposed by a costly medium where the final authority rests not with artistry, but with finance. The director of the film has to satisfy the producer, who puts up the money, and the producer in turn has to satisfy the industrialists who control the distribution of his product. If they will not accept it from him, he is at a loss.

Anyone who goes into film work should go into it with his eyes wide open to the conditions he will have to meet. Yet, even under these conditions, he will find excitement, interest, and fascination—plus a shrewd test of his own temperament.

6

It is obvious, from what I said earlier, that the shorter time allowed to the film as compared with, say, a novel, means a completely different tempo and different method of story-telling.

This difference I can best illustrate by describing briefly the opening sequence of an old silent film of Charlie Chaplin's called *The Pilgrim*. This sequence is very short; I doubt if it takes more than a couple of minutes; and it is one of the best pieces of film technique I have ever seen.

The first shot shows the wall of a building, presumably the American equivalent of a police station, with a poster on the wall. The poster has on it a portrait, which, even at some distance, looks suspiciously like a photograph of Charlie.

The camera trucks quickly up to the poster, and we see that it is indeed a photograph of Charlie, in convict dress. The lettering on the poster informs us that a dangerous criminal has broken loose, and offers a large reward for his apprehension.

We are given just long enough to read this, and then, with what looks like complete irrelevance, we cut to the bank of a river. A parson walks into the shot, carrying a

towel and bathing-costume, and looks modestly about him for somewhere to undress. He sees a clump of rushes, expresses satisfaction, and disappears behind them.

In the next shot, he emerges, clad in his bathing-costume, and goes into the river for his dip.

A moment later, we see him come out again, and return to the place where he has left his clothes. They are not there!

Then we cut to the platform of a railway station, and behold, walking demurely along it, Charlie, dressed as a parson.

This brilliant opening takes us straight into the story. In a matter of two minutes, or even less, we have reached a point which would have cost the most economical novelist several pages. What is more, we ourselves have made the inferences which link the pictures. Without a word of dialogue or explanation, we have followed what has happened, with the result that when the parsonic Charlie is shown upon the railway station, there is an infinitesimal pause, and then, from the whole theatre, a gasp of laughter and delight. We, the audience, have collaborated with the writer of the screen play, and supplied the comment that is needed.

This visual telling of a story, this conveying of information by things shown instead of told, marks the main difference between writing for films and writing for the printed page. I know that this is the flattest of platitudes; but if you had seen as many beginners' attempts at film scripts as I have, you would realise that it is over such blatantly obvious points that they most often go wrong.

In another film written and directed by Charlie Chaplin, *A Woman of Paris*, we find ourselves at an early stage in the film in some doubt as to the relationship between the man about town, played by Adolphe Menjou, and the girl,

played by Edna Purviance. Obviously good friends, they are in her flat, dressed to go out for dinner. Has he just called to collect her?

Before we can make up our minds, he goes to a drawer, takes out a handkerchief, and puts it in his pocket. Now we know.

7

Next come the technical processes whereby a novel or an original story is turned into a screen play.

The first step, as I said, is for a writer to prepare what is known as a treatment. This writer may be a salaried employee of the studio, or he may be a free-lance like myself. He reads the original story, makes up his mind what aspects of it, what episodes, and which characters are best suited to the new sort of story-telling to which it must be translated; and rewrites the story from this new point of view. His rewriting will be much shorter than the original. It will, in most cases, contain all the dialogue that he plans to use in the screen play, and, while it is written out in the form of a short novel, or a long short story, as if still for the printed page, he will have so visualised each scene that the director will at once be able to see the story in terms of sequences, if not of individual shots. The object of the treatment is to present in narrative form the story which is to be transferred to the screen, so that producer, director, and whoever else may be interested will be able to envisage it as a film and form an estimate of its chances.

The treatment of an eighty-thousand-word story will probably run to ten or fifteen thousand words. I have never seen a treatment of more than twenty thousand words, however long the original story.

Over this treatment a deal of argument will probably rage. At all events, this is the stage in the process at which argument should rage, since here is the architecture of the

new story, its trunk, branches, and twigs, the proportion of its various episodes. When at last this argument is over, the treatment, with whatever modifications may have been decided upon, is either handed back to the writer (if his contract includes work on the screen play) or passed on to another writer altogether.

What happens then depends on the studio concerned, and on whether the man who is going to direct the film is free, or is working on something else. If he is free, there is no reason why the next version should not be the proposed final screen play. If he is not free, the next stage will be the preparation of a master script, that is to say, a script broken down into shots and action and dialogue, but without directions for the camera. These can only be added in collaboration with the director, since he alone decides whether the shot is to be close-up, medium, long, etc., etc. Thus it would be a waste of time for the writer to put these instructions into the script, if the director were going to change them all before getting down to work on the studio floor.

8

Well—let us suppose that producer, director, and writer have had their final conference, and the screen play is finished. Now, you would think, all argument must be at an end, and there is nothing to do but cast the play and start shooting.

In theory, there *is* nothing else left to do. In practice, it very often works out otherwise.

I think the best way to show you the sort of thing that can happen is to give you an example of what happened in the making of a film from my own novel, *The Brothers*. The story of how this film came to be made is instructive, since it shows the hazards which attend every stage of this business.

The novel was published in the early spring of 1932. By 1936, after approaches had been made, all of them abortive, by five different film companies, I got so far as to go up to that part of the West Highlands where the story is set, with a producer and a cameraman, so that I could show them the actual scene and background of every incident in the book. Nothing came of this visit, except that, as I will explain in my chapter on the Novel, it gave me the idea for one of the most profitable stories I ever wrote.

In the following year, a film director named David McDonald, himself of Highland extraction, got into touch with me and told me how much he would like to film *The Brothers*. Under his guidance I wrote what was rather more than a treatment, a shot-by-shot scenario in which he hoped to interest some producer. He was not at once successful, and had to direct other films. Then, in the summer of 1939, all seemed set. We planned to start shooting in September; but in September other things happened. David McDonald went into the army, where he became head of the Film Division, and ultimately directed those magnificent films *Desert Victory* and *Burma Victory*.

As soon as he was demobilised, he rang me up, exclaiming, 'Now—*The Brothers*!' This time no hindrance arose. The contract was signed, he and I did the first version of the screen play, and finally had the satisfaction of seeing some 80 per cent of our work in the screen play that was handed to David to direct.

9

The opening sequence of the screen play, which was my work, had as its task the getting over of certain vital information as quickly as possible to the audience. The points that were to be conveyed were these.

The scene was a wild part of the Western Highlands, on

the mainland, facing, across the narrow strait, the mountainous islands of Skye, Rum, and Eigg. The hero was a young man of great physical strength, a fisherman, living in a croft or cottage with his father and older brother. Besides fishing, the family distilled illicit whisky, which they delivered by boat at night, in order to escape the excisemen. Living also in the croft was a girl who was not one of the family, but a foundling from Glasgow.

My opening shot therefore gave a wide panorama in which the camera moved slowly from right to left, passing the Point of Sleat, and coming to a stop with the mountainous peaks of Rum straight ahead.

In the foreground is a long beach of white sand, and down on this beach a small dark object which, in the distance, looks like a beetle.

The camera swiftly approaches this object, which proves to be a rowing boat with its keel stuck in the sand. Two old fishermen are tugging and jerking at it, but cannot shift it an inch.

The camera, still following its sweeping curve, pans away sharply to the left, picking up the figure of a tall and powerful young man striding along on the top of a ridge of sand-hills. In one hand he carries a hank of fish, in the other a coiled rope. Suddenly he stops, stares at something outside the shot, smiles, waves his hand, then comes sliding down the sand-hill, bringing white avalanches of sand with each long stride.

We go back again to the boat, where the old men are still tugging ineffectually. The young man walks into the shot, changes the hank of fish from his right hand to his left, seizes the boat by her gunwale, and with one powerful heave, lifts her clear from the sand. The old men break into exclamations of wonder.

'My, my, but it's you are the strong man, Fergus Macrae!'

(Notice that the comment is not made until the audience have seen for themselves that the young man is strong. The line of dialogue merely serves to underline this conclusion. It carries out the third part of the famous old dramatic rule: 'Tell 'em you're going to tell 'em. *Tell* 'em. Tell 'em you've told 'em.' It also tells us who the young man is.)

Fergus now leaves the boat, and we see him walking away towards his croft, which lies at the top of a small cliff. At the foot of the cliff, against some rocks, is a heap of lobster pots. When he reaches them, Fergus looks cautiously left and right, to make sure that no one is watching, then lifts aside one of the pots. Behind it we see several stone whisky jars. He replaces the pot, and goes bounding up the little path towards the croft.

Now we cut to the inside of the croft, where a girl is preparing a meal. She has just finished scrubbing the kitchen table, and is busy at the hearth. Hearing Fergus's whistle, she drops what she is doing, rushes to a small mirror, and pats her hair. Then she goes back to the hearth, so that Fergus may take her by surprise.

(Notice here again that, without a word of dialogue, we have established the fact that the girl is interested in Fergus. Our presumption is already that she is not a blood relation.)

Fergus comes in at the door, and dumps his hank of fish on the newly scrubbed table. The girl cries out and scolds him.

'Och!' he exclaims laughingly, 'I'll never get used to your fine city ways. I suppose the holy nuns fussed at you that way in the convent?'

They spar affectionately for a sentence or two, and then, in a different tone, the girl asks him, 'Are ye going across tonight?'

'Aye.'

'Och!' she says, pressing her hand to her breast, 'I can never sleep till I know you're safe back.'

And then, with no more delay, we are plunged straight into the story, and see how Fergus and his father, rowing that night to deliver their whisky, are all but caught. An informer has given word to the excisemen. Soon he is caught, tried, and executed.

10

Now I do not hand that opening any bouquets, but it satisfied an experienced director and several other old hands. It is sound, workmanlike cinema. But if any reader of these lines happened to see *The Brothers*, he will remember that the opening of the film was entirely different.

When we were almost ready to start shooting, the producer called in David McDonald and me.

'I'm sorry, but we have had to scrap your opening. We've got to start the story in the convent.'

'In the *convent*?' I said. 'But—won't that be a little misleading?'

'Can't help it,' he said. 'We've got to plant the fact that Mary was a foundling. Oh, I know you've put it in the dialogue, but that's not enough. They'll never remember that. You've got to *show* them that she came from a convent.'

Now this comment was artistically sound, since the whole art of the film is to show and not to tell. At the same time, such an opening would make nonsense of a story in which it was essential that the audience should from the first realise fully the wild and savage background against which the wild and savage story was to develop. Accordingly we reached a compromise, whereby we saw the girl arrive by boat, and be met by the parish priest, who drove her to her new home and handed her over to Fergus's father as a sacred charge.

The real reason for this change we did not learn till some time afterwards. It had nothing to do with the art of the cinema. The star who was first engaged to play the part was extremely proud of her ability to look fourteen years old. She had already demonstrated this ability in an extremely successful film, and demanded a further opportunity. She had, however, a dispute with the producer over another matter, and relinquished the part. The star who took her place said, 'Well, I may not be able to look fourteen, but I can look sixteen,' and the producer welcomed this information, because he did not want to have to change the script any further.

This kind of thing—I could give you a dozen examples from my own experience alone—happens all the time. In another screen play of mine, a new ending had to be devised, less appropriate artistically than the original ending (which, by the way, was the same as the ending of the novel from which the story was taken), because in the original the male star was last seen lying waterlogged and unconscious, and thought that this would leave an unsuitable impression on the mind of the audience. He therefore demanded a strong final scene; and, films being what they are, he got it.

Why do producers and directors alter stories at the request of a star? Simply because they need stars. Stars are their insurance against the loss of the enormous sums needed to put a story on the screen. The first query of nine hundred and ninety-nine film-goers out of a thousand, about any forthcoming production, is 'Who's in it?'

The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,
commented a playwright many years ago, and it is true today of a form of drama which he never envisaged.

II

I have said enough, I hope, to show that this is no field for the beginner. To the experienced writer, who is prepared to accept the limitations imposed by working for an industry that involves huge capital sums, screen writing offers extraordinary opportunities, and teaches valuable lessons, particularly in the writing of dialogue, which will benefit everything else he writes. I personally love film work, and, provided I keep time for the work which I wish to do for its own sake, I do not mind how much film work comes my way.

CHAPTER IX

SHORT STORIES

THE first thing you will discover, when you try to sell a short story, is that there is a radical difference between the stories published by newspapers and popular magazines, and those published by reviews and in the collected volumes of the best-praised authors.

This difference is largely artificial, and due to an accident. The vogue of the short story is very new, compared to that of the novel. Short stories did not become popular until the late eighties and early nineties; and it so happened that the writers who made the form popular delighted in stories of plot and action. As a result, editors came to look upon plot and action as vital to the short story, and to deny the title to anything that did not have them.

Any movement in art necessarily provokes a new movement in sharp contrast to it, and, encouraged by examples from the Continent, a new generation of British short-story writers began to dispense with plot and to study atmosphere and character for their own sakes. The best of their stories were no less complete, no less well constructed, but their structure and completeness were inner rather than outer, and the editors could not recognise them.

The short-story writers who began work between 1915 and 1930 soon learned that acceptance by a popular magazine depended on the rarest kind of fluke. The great majority of the editors went on lamenting that no one could write like the giants of old, and brought about the total debasement of the popular short story by demanding a type

of thing which could no longer arise naturally from contemporary life, but had to be manufactured according to out-of-date formulae. The caterer was in, and the creator was out.

One result is that most of these once-popular magazines are dead, killed, not by war, but by their own insipidity; and periodicals which always turned their back on formula, John Lehmann's *Penguin New Writing*, for example, had large circulations and taught readers to look for imaginative reality.

2

There was nevertheless one thing to be said for the magazine editors.

However we define a short story (and the definition is not easy), it must, if it is to succeed, give the reader a sense of completeness, of satisfaction. The British love action, and are little given to introspection or to analysis of the finer shades of character. It was only natural, therefore, that they should recognise completeness and derive satisfaction from stories of action, and from that neat, visible solution of problems, that tying up of the threads of interest, which editors call plot.

At all events, the new writers (H. E. Bates gives a list of them in his book, *The Modern Short Story*) all learned that they could only gain admittance to a popular magazine when they happened to deal with a theme of wide interest in a way which would not offend anybody, or when their reputation stood so high that the editors decided to be up to date and put their names on the cover. The writers were, of course, creators, not caterers. They refused to falsify their view of life or to construct their stories to formula. A foolish decision for professional writers? Many told them so, but their careers and reputations do not support this view.

Lest anybody conclude that there may be a touch of sour

grapes about this account of the matter, I may say that, after my first struggles, I sold a great many stories to the editors of popular magazines, here and in America, without any falsification of my own methods or technique. I have always been interested in sheer story-telling, in narrative as such, and so, once I had a little experience, they could not keep me out. But, apart from two or three, I owe them no sort of thanks. They accepted, after I had become known, the very stories they had turned down before. One editor refused a story, and then, after it had appeared in a volume and been praised in a Sunday paper, wrote and asked if he might print it.

With few exceptions, the editors of popular magazines between 1915 and 1939 were the short story's worst enemies.

3

What are the prospects today? They are fluid, and full of possibilities.

First of all, there are very few of the old magazines left, and these have partly abandoned the old policy. Many are importing from America the streamlined, efficient products which, though most of them are catering jobs (what H. G. Wells calls 'trade goods'), are the result of so much careful work and expert schooling that they far excel the British commercial products, and push them out deservedly.

The safest and most practical thing for the beginner is to concentrate on the essentials of the short story, write his own stuff as best he can, and see what happens.

These essentials are (a) unity; (b) completeness; (c) proportion; (d) timing.

4

(a) *Unity*. Like an article, a short story should have one subject, or one target, one main character, and should be

told from one point of view. It *must* have a strong unifying principle, however this is provided.

This rule is more easily deduced from failures than from successes. A story in which the interest is split, in which one's attention is focused first on one character, then on another, a story of which it is hard to find the centre, a story in which the author seems unable to make up his mind, will fail to satisfy the reader. You have a very short space in which to make your effect. Be clear what it is, and make it single-mindedly.

This will be a good rule, whether you want to sell your story or not. My practice has always been to write my story, and then let it sell if it will. If an editor likes it, grand. If not, it is just too bad. But, whatever policy he adopt, a clear and simple plan of construction is the greatest help a beginner can have. So, aim at unity.

Either tell your story from the point of view of one character, or, if you have to change over from one to another, take care that you keep unity of interest in some other way. Jack London, in one of his longest and most elaborate short stories, *The House of Mapuhi*—which we shall look at in detail presently—changes from character to character, but keeps the whole story together by the theme of the House, the ultimate welfare of which is the motive for all the old woman Nauri's amazing feats of endurance after the hurricane. If it were not for this, the story would fall to pieces.

You may of course stand right outside your story, and write as God, so to speak; you may focus on a dozen characters, but you must take all the greater care that the interest is evenly spaced out between them; and I don't recommend this method until you have a good deal of experience.

The safest rule—particularly if you want to sell your work—is: ONE problem; ONE main character; ONE line of development; ONE point of view.

5

(b) *Completeness*. This is the sense of satisfaction which the reader must have at the end, if the story is to be a story. I don't mean that the story must end happily, or in the way he would like; but he must somehow be made to feel, 'That's that'.

Completeness is best described in concrete instances. If your story sets a problem (love, detection, adventure) the solution should be complete. If it studies a character, the reader should feel that he knows the character thoroughly. If it explores a situation, the reader should feel that he understands the situation, and that the behaviour of the characters is typical, i.e. reveals them. If your story is a study of place or atmosphere, it should leave the reader feeling saturated in it. If it is a tale of action, it should end decisively.

To every rule given for the short story you will be able to find exceptions, or apparent exceptions; yet each in its way will be found to give the reader a sense of completeness. Each will begin, progress, and end (rather than just stop).

For example, Tchekov's story, *The Head of the Family*, describes very briefly how a man comes down to dinner in a bad temper and terrorises his family. There is no plot, no formal structure. The completeness is psychological; we know all about that family, and can guess what will happen to them.

A story of Liam O'Flaherty describes the genesis, growth, breaking, and disintegration of an Atlantic wave. No plot; no character; total absence of everything the editors would call a story; and it remains one of the most complete and satisfying things I have ever read.

V. S. Pritchett has a story, *Fishy*, a dialogue between two men at an oyster bar. No plot, nothing but talk; but a small masterpiece.

These, and scores of others I could name, answer to no test except the vital test of *completeness*.

To test your own story for completeness is not always easy. The best thing is to ask yourself a series of questions. What is it about? What is its title? (If you cannot think of a title, watch out. There is very probably no centre to your story.) What does it try to do? Has it done it?

If you cannot find decisive answers, the reader may not be able to find them either.

6

(c) *Proportion*. (d) *Timing*. These are best taken together. More of the beginners' stories which I see break down over this rule than over any of the others.

By proportion I mean the way in which the different parts of the story are spaced out, and their relationship to one another. Almost every story has some passages of movement, and some of description. Static sentences set the scene, describe a character, mark a lapse of time, and so forth. To judge the best length for these, and where to put them, is one of the hardest lessons the beginner has to learn. He tends to overweight the beginning of the story with description; to check its movement with a heavy, static chunk of information, so that it has to start all over again; to tell when he should show; to begin in the middle, and then have to use a flashback in order to explain who's who and what's what; to save up all his movement till the last page or two—the equivalent of dawdling and then having to rush; all of them errors in proportion and timing.

I would advise anyone in doubt about the proportions of his story to map them out on paper, drawing rectangles or circles to match the size of the different parts, white for static and shaded for movement and dialogue (all dialogue is movement, or should be; it carries the story on, and reveals

character); and then see if they make a symmetrical whole. Many MSS. would be saved hopeless journeys to and fro if this rule were followed.

Let me give you an example from a beginner's story that was shown to me the other day:

Girl is irritated by mannerisms of possessive and too affectionate girl-friend with whom she lives. Long, detailed account of mannerisms, girl's reactions to them, descriptions of house, etc. Flashback telling how girl came to be living with girl-friend. Girl is married, but husband does not appreciate her; is silent, inarticulate, dull.

Girl-friend grows more and more irksome and possessive. Girl wishes marriage could have gone better. If only husband had needed her! Husband walks up to front door, looking pale and thin. Girl-friend tries to keep him out, saying that girl doesn't want to see him. Girl, indignant, tells girl-friend to mind her own business. Husband says he needs girl like billy-oh. Girl goes back.

Now—make a map of this, and you will see at once that the proportions are all wrong. A great undigested gobblet of information precedes and overweights a very small piece of action. This is because the story begins in the wrong place, and the writer has not learned that to show is far more effective than to tell.

The remedy—or one remedy—is to begin with a scene between girl and unappreciative husband. Girl-friend, meeting girl for tea, sees there is something wrong, and gets the story, plus a bit more which the reader needs to know. (This is far better than overloading the first scene. Dialogue is one of the best ways of giving information to the reader; but the dialogue must be natural, and the information given on a necessary occasion within the story's framework, never for the sake of the reader only. Remember that amateur's one-act play in which an elderly husband and wife told each other how long they had lived in the same

house and how many children they had and what had happened to them, without being given any natural stimulus to so dotty and improbable a performance.)

Then, when girl goes back, husband gives her the excuse she needs to make a scene, and walk out on him. She is lovingly welcomed by girl-friend . . . and the rest of the story can follow as before.

I am not saying a word as to the merits of the story: but it stands a far better chance if handled like this. The reader is able to keep pace with its development, and see it unfold. It is better proportioned, and better timed.

7

To learn where to start a story needs some practice, but a sound rule is, start at the beginning. If at all possible, avoid flashbacks. A short paragraph to explain who a character is, a sentence in past time to account for the present situation, yes; but nothing to delay the story's movement, and nothing related at second-hand which the reader would like to watch happening before his eyes.

I say 'start at the beginning' as a first rule only, because it will save the unpractised hand so many mistakes, and because more of the stories which I see break down over this than over anything else. Spread your events out in a row in order of their occurrence, and start with the first. Once you have learned to do this, and to space the events according to their importance to the story, you can begin to play about with other ways of starting.

Get a collected volume of O. Henry's stories, and study the beginnings. Don't take him as a model all the way; he is often facile and sentimental: but study the way he unfolds a story. Study the technique of his narrative, in which he is a master.

Read all the good short stories you can, and analyse them.

Believe me, you will learn more from making a *précis* of each of a dozen first-class short stories—a *précis* which keeps the *proportions* of the original—and noting exactly how the story is told; where dialogue is used, and for what purpose; how much space is given to description, and why, and where; how the story is timed, how it moves, where the pace accelerates, and how the writer leads up to his climax; you will learn more from this than from twenty textbooks and a year of unaided endeavour. Only, the stories must be good, and of different kinds, and by different authors. This will safeguard you against imitating any one style or method.

I recommend any of the late E. J. O'Brien's annual short-story anthologies, or any representative collection of modern short stories, such as those published in the *Penguin* library.

You cannot read too many short stories of good quality.

8

Can we pick out anything which all these stories had in common, any rule which we can deduce from them, anything which we can affirm about all short stories, if they are to deserve the title? Starting from H. G. Wells's definition, that it shall not take more than half an hour to read, I repeat that, to be a short story, each piece of short prose fiction should give the reader a sense of completed experience, and that it can best do this by rigid economy and undeviating progress in one direction towards its climax. No admission except on business: that is the warning that must be given to every character, every property, every idea, every sentence. Failure to be ruthless in this respect spoils nine out of ten of the more intelligent short stories: a fault into which the commercial short-story writer, with his rigidly prescribed aim, falls far less often.

I know no other rules, and I am glad. If there were more, the art of the short story would be in danger of being

standardised. A young form, still in process of growth, having passed from a lusty infancy to a troubled adolescence, it needs all the freedom it can get. The most we can require is that each short piece of prose fiction should have an aim worthy of an artist, should concentrate on hitting it, and should succeed.

But aphorisms are less satisfying in practice than on paper. Who is to pronounce on the worth of the aim and the accuracy or inaccuracy of the shot? What principles are to guide us? Sturge Moore used to say that there were no general rules for judging a work of art. More recently, Lord David Cecil has warned us that 'What we call laws are tentative generalisations drawn from the contemplation of particular works of art'. There must always be a strong subjective element in our judgment of any work of art. Let me therefore draw on my own memory, and look quickly at a few short stories that come to the top when I give the pot of my mind a stir. There are the stories I remember complete—atmosphere, feeling, persons, detail: Flaubert's three; Tchekov's *The Black Monk*; *Boule de Suif*; Coppard's most sad and lovely tale, *The Higglers*; Collier's *Green Thoughts*; Dunsany's *Ebb and Flow*. That is the first handful. To me, all those, with a qualification for the two last, which are fantasies, belong to that small class which increase our imaginative knowledge of life as a whole. The Collier and Dunsany stories force their way to the top of my mind because, although I do not think I could claim so much for them, they haunt my memory in their entirety.

A great many other stories rise to the surface, but I put most of them in a less urgent category, because, while they add to my knowledge of life, the addition is more particular, more specialised. They tell me how persons of a special type behave in special circumstances. Somerset Maugham's *Hairless Mexican*, and, even better, *The Traitor*, are in this class: magnificent short stories, in my

judgment, but of local, rather than universal truth. With them I would put Jack London's *A Piece of Steak*, which tells us how an old boxer felt and behaved in the last fight of his career, but does not rise above that local truth to those heights from which we can see the whole tragedy of age in perspective.

Then come the many stories of which I recall a single episode or detail, a moment, a line of dialogue, but not the whole. At least, the whole has to be reconstituted by an effort, built up laboriously as background to the one brilliant memory. Such are De Maupassant's *Miss Harriet* and *L'Héritage*; Coppard's *Dusky Ruth*—though here I remember the atmosphere of the story as well—and *Silver Circus*; *The Mountain Tavern*, by Liam O'Flaherty, and *Tickets, Please*, by D. H. Lawrence; Daniel Corkery's *The Child Saint*; V. S. Pritchett's *Fishy* (here again I have the atmosphere) and *The Sailor*; and a good many more. Into this same large class I put those stories of which I remember only the general atmosphere; for example, Lord Dunsany's *Idle Days on the Yann*, Aldous Huxley's *Bank Holiday*, Sherwood Anderson's *I'm a Fool*, Romer Wilson's *As I Was Going to St. Neots*, and two or three stories by H. A. Manhood; and the far larger number of which I remember only the *dénouement*. Somerset Maugham's *Rain*, Wilbur Daniel Steele's *Thirst*, and Anatole France's *The Procurator of Judaea* are typical of this class. These are only a handful, the first to emerge from the stirred pot. Already the names of a host of others are rising to the surface, jostling indignantly, complaining of favouritism and injustice.

When I set to work in my mind upon many of these partially remembered stories and reconstruct them, an interesting fact emerges. Although what caught my memory in many of them was a detail only, they are all good stories. From this I infer that the detail impressed itself

upon my imagination because the rest of the story had first stimulated it to an unusual degree of receptiveness. The detail was, so to speak, the story's epitome. Each of those stories gave me a complete experience to which the remembered detail was the clue. I should not have remembered the single detail from *Dusky Ruth* if the whole story had not touched and kindled my imagination. The shock at the end of *Rain* is a shock only in relation to what has gone before. One remembers what has gone before, in order to account for the shock; but, to me at any rate, the *dénouement* returns first, and the explanation afterwards. What sticks is the climax: but a climax has to be a climax to something, or it has no context, it is meaningless, like a rude word chalked on a wall.

Every story which I have mentioned gives me that sense of completed experience which I postulated at the start. Each concentrated upon a single imaginative truth and deals with it from a single point of view, in a form exactly proportioned to what has to be said. There are no deviations, and every cut would be a loss. In short, each story has an aim worthy of an artist, and has succeeded in hitting it.

One further quality these stories share: narrative energy. Each, while it calls to the highly developed critical sense, has the energy which will carry an unsophisticated reader along and make him want to know what happened next. Each presents its material skilfully and persuasively. The same technical devices pop up again and again—devices which so many high-level stories have left to the magazines.

It will seem to many readers blasphemous to suggest that, for instance, Tchekov could use the same devices as Jack London. I will not assert that he did. I will simply say that each had narrative energy, and that Tchekov used devices of presentation far more than his academic admirers realise or admit. Perhaps it will not be out of place to examine in

detail a story by each of these writers. To avoid prejudice, let us take them in alphabetical order—L before T—and choose a longish story from each.

9

Jack London wrote often hurriedly for money, and the careless generosity of his life is reflected in his writing. He was often too lazy to wait for the right word, or to care greatly how he got a paragraph down as long as he passed on to the next one. As a result, he is sadly underrated by a generation which prefers care to vigour, and sets mannerisms above inspiration. His best stories, while they are immediately palatable to the magazine public, are the work of a born story-teller with a wonderful eye and a sure sense of form. They afford, without apparent effort or contrivance, a natural opportunity for describing the events, the scenes and characters through which the story runs.

Mapuhi, a South Sea pearl diver, has found a marvellous pearl. He will exchange it to Raoul, the young inexperienced trader, for a house, complete with verandah, kitchen, and octagon drop clock. The trader laughs at him, and offers cash. Fortified by his wife, daughter, and mother, Mapuhi refuses.

News of the pearl spreads. A bigger trader, to whom Mapuhi owes for goods, comes along, sees the pearl, and pockets it, telling Mapuhi that his debts are cleared, and he will be given additional credit. In sorrow Mapuhi bears the reproaches of his family as the vision of the lovely house fades from their sight.

The day, which has been overcast, turns stormy. Raoul puts back, despite the weather, to close with Mapuhi about the house. He is relieved to hear that the matter is out of his hands, for he is only agent for another, but less pleased to hear that the pearl has been sold to Levy, a third and greater dealer, for \$25,000.

The weather becomes more and more terrifying. Heavy seas roll in and shake the little atoll. The two big dealers put hurriedly to sea and run before the storm. Raoul is too late; he stays.

Then there is a hurricane, and of this I can only say that a reader familiar with Conrad's *Typhoon* is under no temptation to forget Jack London's hurricane. It is a magnificent bit of natural and unself-conscious narrative. In the morning there is not a tree or a house on the island, and over two-thirds of the people have perished. Mapuhi, his wife, and daughter are safe—so is Raoul; and it is typical of London's skill that he shows us the hurricane through the perceptions of the sophisticated Raoul, who could be consciously and articulately aware of all that was to be described. A veteran, Captain Lynch, who has lived on the island for years, is the measure of the threat to the islanders. He has never, he tells Raoul before the storm parts them, seen the barometer sink so low.

The interest of the story now shifts to Mapuhi's old mother. She has been carried away to an uninhabited island fifteen miles distant. Lying there, awaiting death, tired of pushing away the corpses with which the sea festoons her little beach, she notices in her stupor that one of the most persistent of them has red hair. It is Levy, the big pearl dealer. She drags herself down to the water, searches the body, and finds the pearl. Inspired with the will to live, she explores, collects coconuts, and discovers finally a case of tinned salmon. By dint of collecting all the junk she can find, she gets materials for a clumsy kind of boat. For a paddle she uses a bit of the salmon case, cutting off her hair with a piece of broken glass to make the lashings, and gnawing wedges with her teeth to fix them.

After eighteen days she sets sail for home. She is weak and emaciated. She has to stop every hour and bale. When she gets within three miles of the shore a current sets

westward, and she is obliged to swim. She meets a shark, who, being lazy and full-fed, plays with her before attacking. Waiting till he comes close, she pretends to attack him, and he flees. When she does reach home—when she does find the new improvised shelter in which Mapuhi is living—she is taken for a ghost. But at last all are convinced, the story returns to its first subject, and we leave them once more discussing the house of Mapuhi, with the verandah, the kitchen, and the octagon drop clock.

The ease and natural manner of this story may well blind us to the skill with which it is written. The title theme and the pearl are introduced at the start. They are the string on which the beads are strung. We get a glimpse of the string again when the old woman finds the pearl, and return to it in triumph at the end. We meet Mapuhi at first only through the trader Raoul, who is the central character till the end of the hurricane. This unnoticed emphasis guards London against the dangers attendant upon a change of interest, and enables him without any break to cross over to a character who has hitherto been only a super. There are a hideous number of pitfalls in this story, and every one is avoided with perfect ease. There is no apparent 'plot', in the magazine sense of the word. Nothing is distorted, nothing faked. A little more care in the actual writing, and the story would be a masterpiece; a masterpiece, that is to say, in sheer narrative, extraverted, without profundity; a superb yarn.

10

From Tchekov let us examine *The Black Monk*. It goes far deeper into life and demands closer inspection. I quote the opening paragraph in full.

Andrey Vassilitch Kovrin, who held a Master's degree at the university, had exhausted himself, and had upset his nerves. He

did not send for a doctor, but casually, over a bottle of wine, he spoke to a friend who was a doctor, and the latter advised him to spend the spring and summer in the country.

Kovrin decides to accept an invitation from his guardian and his young daughter, but before going to them he spends three weeks alone at his home. His guardian, Yegor Semyonitch, keeps a large garden with orchards and all kinds of fruit trees, and is in a perpetual state of agitation over the carelessness of the labourers. There is a frost just after Kovrin arrives. Fires are lit, and the orchards are filled with clouds of smoke. Tanya, his guardian's daughter, explains that these clouds keep away the frost.

In the soft country air, Kovrin relaxes. He thinks how pleasant it would be if he could fall in love with Tanya. One day, when Kovrin is sitting reading on the balcony, he hears Tanya practising a piece of music with two neighbours, another girl singing contralto, and a violinist. The song is Braga's *Serenata*.

A maiden, full of sick fancies, heard one night in her garden mysterious sounds, so strange and lovely that she was obliged to recognise them as a holy harmony which is unintelligible to us mortals, and so flies back to heaven.

As soon as the singing is over, Kovrin tells Tanya that he has been thinking all day about a legend of a black monk, who lived a thousand years ago, and wandered in the desert. His figure set up a mirage, a second black monk, seen by a fisherman moving over the surface of a lake.

'Now,' says Kovrin, 'forget all the laws of optics, which the legend does not recognise, and listen to the rest.'

From that mirage there was cast another mirage, until all over the world phantoms of the black monk floated and were seen. Then he passed out of the atmosphere of the earth; but at any moment now he was due to return.

Kovrin cannot remember where he heard the legend.

He takes a walk by the river, and sees a breeze making

waves across a field of rye. A cloud, like a whirlwind or a waterspout, rises up and rushes towards Kovrin. It turns into the figure of the monk. He floats past Kovrin with a friendly but sly smile. Kovrin does not tell anyone what he has seen; but somehow the image of the monk leaves him in great high spirits.

Soon afterwards, Yegor Semyonitch tells Kovrin he is greatly worried about Tanya's future, and the future of the garden. Suppose she married the wrong man!

'I will speak plainly,' he says. 'You are the only man to whom I should not be afraid to marry my daughter. You are a clever man with a good heart, and would not let my beloved work go to ruin, and the chief reason is that I love you as a son and that I am proud of you.'

As yet, Kovrin does nothing about what his guardian has told him. One day there is a quarrel between Tanya and Yegor Semyonitch, as a result of which Tanya shuts herself up in her room all day, until both are distraught. Kovrin reconciles them, goes for another walk, and again sees the monk, who tells him that he appears because Kovrin is one of the chosen of God, dedicated to the service of eternal truth. The monk seems to Kovrin quite objective. He tells him things he did not know, but had half-guessed at. The two dispute together, until the vision fades, leaving Kovrin ecstatic. Tanya appears, and he proposes to her.

Tanya and Kovrin are married, and for a time all is well. Then one night Kovrin wakes up to find the black monk sitting in a chair by his bedside. They have a long talk, in the middle of which Tanya wakes up, terrified, and asks Kovrin who he is talking to. Thoughtlessly he points to the monk. Tanya exclaims that there is no one there: and Kovrin realises with sudden clarity that he is mad.

A doctor prescribes rest, milk, and bromides. The cure works, but Kovrin becomes savage and bad-tempered. He

is continually finding fault with his wife and her father. 'How fortunate Buddha, Mohammed, and Shakespeare were, that their kind relations and doctors did not cure them of their ecstasy and their inspiration,' he exclaims bitterly, and reproaches them for having destroyed his happiness and reduced him to mediocrity.

Things go from bad to worse. One day he tells Tanya that their marriage is her father's doing. Yegor Semyonitch overhears this, and is reduced to inarticulate bellowing.

Kovrin is awarded a professorship at a university, but cannot give his inaugural lecture because of a haemorrhage from the throat. The doctors say there is no danger as long as he takes things quietly.

He leaves Tanya and goes off with a mistress, who looks after him well; but he is still bored and dissatisfied. One evening, in a hotel, when a party is going on in the room below, Kovrin receives a letter from Tanya, saying that her father is dead, the garden ruined, that she hates him, and hopes he will die. Perturbed by the letter, he sits down to work, and his nerves grow calm. Suddenly in the room below two women begin to sing. The song tells how

A maiden, full of sick fancies, heard one night in her garden mysterious sounds, so strange and lovely that she was obliged to recognise them as a holy harmony which is unintelligible to us mortals, and so flies back to heaven.

Kovrin feels an exquisite sadness. At the far side of the bay a tall black column forms, like a whirlwind or a water-spout, and rushes towards him. It is the black monk. The monk reproaches Kovrin affectionately for not believing him, and therefore being plunged in gloom.

Blood is flowing from Kovrin's mouth over his chest. He tries to call his mistress, who is asleep behind a screen, but he falls to the floor, the only word he can utter is 'Tanya'. Kovrin is unspeakably happy. Below, under the balcony, they are playing the serenade, and the black monk whispers

to him that he is a genius, and that he is dying only because his frail human body can no longer house his genius. His mistress wakes and finds him dead with a happy smile on his face.

This story is an object lesson for anyone who imagines that Tchekov did not concern himself intensely with narrative technique. This story, the values and artistic integrity of which will stand up to any scrutiny, is deployed with all the artfulness of Jack London or O. Henry or Somerset Maugham. Notice the first sentence of all, which gives you in nineteen words Kovrin's academic background and the cardinal fact that he had exhausted himself and upset his nerves. The next sentence, saying that he did not see a doctor, but casually over a bottle of wine consulted a friend who happened to be a doctor, throws a further sharp light on the character of this man, whose character is the centre of the story. The first paragraph also introduces Tanya.

Yegor, the former guardian, is not introduced till the second paragraph, and then only by his surname. This second paragraph also tells us that Kovrin, before availing himself of the invitation to visit his guardian, spends three solitary weeks at home: a further light upon his character.

When he arrives at the country house, the very first incident provides an image of what is to come. A frost threatens the fruit. The life in this country house, with its buds in the season of May, the happiness of the young girl Tanya, are precarious. The fruit is protected by clouds of smoke—and when presently the black monk first appears, it is as a rushing cloud which, dwindling and concentrating, becomes the apparition.

Notice, too, that it is his happiness after an interview with the monk which makes Kovrin yield to his first vague impulse, an impulse made more concrete and definite by his guardian's suggestion, and propose to Tanya.

The first appearance of the monk is made terribly con-

vincing to Kovrin—and to the reader—because it seems to function quite independently of him. Its behaviour and its remarks surprise him, and yet the surprise is one for which, in an odd way, he is half-prepared. The monk 'tells him who he is': tells him, as it were, from an outside source, that his most secret ambitions, the beliefs about himself which he has hardly dared to admit, are true. The whole episode is a brilliant example of those fantasies thrown up by the unconscious mind; and we should notice that Tchekov, with his experience of these matters, makes the two crucial appearances, the first and the last, arise from the stimulus of music, the singing of a song about a human being lured from mortal living by a truth beyond it.

A fact we have to be prepared for, a fact not covered by Kovrin's mental instability, is his death from consumption. The germ of this is planted early in the story by Tchekov with consummate skill, when he makes Yegor Semyonitch remember, in a casual aside, that Kovrin's mother died of consumption.

Tchekov has landed himself in one difficulty at the end of the story. Kovrin's mistress appears very late, so late as to seem a mistake in proportion and in perspective. This defect, if it is a defect, is made necessary in order that Kovrin shall receive Tanya's last letter, in which she curses him. Tanya's own instability, and indeed the instability of her father, are firmly emphasised throughout the story; but in every conversation with Kovrin, the unhappy girl tries to comfort him and take his side, although she cannot dissemble her conviction that he is mad. It would have been extraordinarily difficult, in the compass of a short story, to prepare the reader for so drastic a change unless the pair had been separated, and Tanya left with an additional grievance. The garden is destroyed too. The calamity symbolised by the threat of frost has come to pass.

And how does Kovrin die? The man who, we are told at

the beginning of the story, had exhausted himself with overwork, once more turns to work. When he has calmed his nerves, he once more hears the fatal *Serenata*, the image rushes towards him across the water (the first time the monk appeared in the legend, it was on water) and exhaustion and emotion between them bring on the fatal seizure and the release from mediocrity.

II

Whatever their style or method, you will find that these stories have one thing in common. Every sentence, every line of dialogue, every incident is essential and points towards the climax of the story.

Apply that test to your own work. Leave nothing in because it is fun, or powerful, or because you are proud of it. Does it pull its weight? Is it a necessary part of the story? If not, it should go.

Look at those O. Henry openings. How swift they are, how economical. How unerringly they sweep one into the current of the story. With them in mind, try to tell your story in the fewest possible words. Half the stories I see are too long for what they contain.

Make a short précis of your story before you write it. If the précis is flimsy and inconclusive, think very carefully before you go any further. In all probability, you have not found the centre of your story, and the emphasis is wrongly distributed. Perhaps you haven't got a story at all.

In an earlier book, *English for Pleasure*, I showed how two of my own short stories developed from the experiences which gave rise to them, and I have had scores of letters from people who found this chapter of practical help to them. Accordingly I am giving here notes on one or two others.

I take first the story which gives its title to a book of short stories which won a literary prize. This story, *Travellers*,

was sold here and in America, and has appeared in a number of anthologies. It is too long for present day requirements, but the history of its slow and clumsy growth may encourage other slow starters.

Travellers gave me a great deal of trouble, suffered many rewritings and changes of title, and is not altogether satisfactory to me now.

First of all, the foundations of the story, which were in my own experience. They were as follows:

(1) A journey taken through the south of Ireland in 1912 with my father—not a cousin, as in the story. We left the train at Thomastown, and drove some fifteen miles in what, outside Ireland, is called a jaunting-car, to the little town of Graigue-na-Managh. The driver pointed out the cross on the hillside, as in the story, and told us a deal besides. In the hotel where we booked was a stuffed fox with a doormat across it—but no maid, no coffee-room with unseemly decorations, and no commercial traveller.

In the town, which I explored afterwards, were posters announcing the impending arrival of a little travelling opera company.

(2) A performance, a year or so earlier, at Dun Laoghaire, of *Faust*, by the same opera company, but without any singer in any way resembling Murtagh McCaragh.

(3) Hearing from my father that he had heard, in one of these little opera companies, a baritone of remarkable quality, who had sung in big opera companies, and who was said to have sunk to his present position through drink.

(4) On another occasion, walking at night in a pine-wood.

(5) When a child, going back to England after our lovely Irish summer holiday, looking suddenly out of the railway carriage window, seeing a huge ripe moon rise over the fields, and wondering if my grandparents, whom we had left a few hours earlier, could see it too.

These were the raw materials which coalesced into the idea of the story. My first versions were too long, too clumsy, and much too close to the actual experiences which constituted the raw material. Into them I put, for instance, all that the driver had told us on the way to the town. It was picturesque and vivid, but it had nothing to do with the central idea, which was struggling slowly to birth from all the detail which my emotions had collected around it.

The second or third version, entitled *A Baritone Air*, went to several magazines, and came back. I put it away at last, and for about a year it lay in my desk. Then, one summer up in the West Highlands—in 1928, to be exact—I got it out, and looked at it again. Immediately I began shearing great bits off it. In the interval, a lot had happened. The image of my singer—he was, remember, an imaginary figure: I had never seen his original—had become clear. The figure of the old woman emerged clearly too. I saw her have her fit, so necessary to the story, as an event which, to anyone but the narrator and his friend who had the clue to it, was simply a meaningless accident.

I rewrote the story, reversing the title to *Air for Baritone*, and sent it off to Miss Marianne Moore, who was then editing the ever-to-be-lamented *Dial*. Miss Moore accepted it, and sent it back with a few pencilled suggestions. All of them cuts, they revealed the real framework of the story: and her suggestion of a new title, *Travellers*, revealed its purpose and significance. Hers was the skilled and sympathetic hand that finally brought the thing to birth: and I rejoice in this opportunity to thank her publicly, for that and much more help and encouragement to a writer struggling to learn his job.

The story might now, I think, be analysed on these lines:

The talk of the driver, as he points out the cross, serves to prepare the reader for the atmosphere in which things can happen 'that have no sense to them'. At once it is fol-

lowed by the strange scene between the big man and the little old woman. In the hotel, the traveller, set in his typical background, repeats (a little too obviously, I now think) the same motif.

The boy who tells the story—this is of primary importance throughout—is just beginning to feel his feet. Sensitive and impressionable, he is given, in this story, an experience of crucial importance: an intimation of manhood, of the wonder of life, of the strange world of adult behaviour, and of our kinship, as, together, we travel towards an unknown end.

Then we have the old woman's fit, the performance of the opera, and McCaragh's apparent recovery of his old power. *Why should he recover it?* The scene witnessed earlier in the day, and the scene the boy finally witnesses from his window, suggest an explanation. An unworthy explanation? Should an event which on the surface might seem sordid, a catastrophe for which he should feel sorrow, release a man's soul so that his gift reaches its summit? We do not know. None of us is competent to fathom the mysteries of human feeling and conduct. It is not the story-teller's business to give an answer. He can only record what happened, in the world of his imagination.

For—and this is really important—this story was not *thought out*. The incidents were not invented to support a theory. *They came first*. They were seen, before they were understood. Gradually, handicapped by my unpractised technique, there emerged from the story the idea which had in the first place brought the incidents, witnessed years before, from memory, and huddled them together. Why had they come together? It was my business to find out. And, after long struggles, helped at the end by Miss Moore, I did find out.

12

The second story *was* thought up. I give it as an example because it shows that the building of an incident into a story really depends on the author asking himself the right questions.

This was the germ of the story, as told me by a friend:

A man was given by a chance acquaintance a letter of introduction to a friend of his. He was unable to present the letter for several years. When he went to the address, the woman told him she would take him to the place where the addressee now was. She took him to a graveyard.

Before I could make a story of this, I had to ask myself a number of questions. The first that struck me was, how was it that so long a time elapsed between the receipt of the letter and the attempt to present it? What intervened?

An obvious answer to this was, the war. I decided, for reasons of my own, that the letter should be presented in Dublin. There was somehow in the original anecdote a suggestion that the address was unsuitable. That, and the fact that a woman volunteered to take the inquirer to the right place, suggested (this may be due entirely to the obliquity of my mind) a brothel. Unsuitable; to whom would such a place be most unsuitable? Clearly, to someone respectable—perhaps a parson. All right. Now, in order to show up as vividly as possible the atmosphere of Dublin, let us make the stranger a foreigner. To avoid language difficulties, let him be an American. Shall he be a parson? This will present difficulties. Ah! Here's a solution which avoids these difficulties and helps to account for the gap in time. The stranger is not a parson, but a parson's son. It was to his father that the letter of introduction was given. How? Where? On a trip to Europe,

before the war. The parson has since died, and now his son comes to present the letter.

Next, the letter itself, and the person who gave it. Why and how should anyone give a parson a letter of introduction to someone who lives in a brothel? If the letter was to a man, then the odds were that he did not live in the brothel, but merely visited it; if, that is to say, there was anything genuine at all about the address.

What sort of person would give such a letter to an American minister of religion travelling in Europe? It could only have been a hoax or, if it were given in good faith, then the giver must have been in no fit state to know what he was doing.

This consideration at once called to my mind something else, which had been hanging about uselessly there for a good while. Now I had my story. In outline, it ran as follows:

An American visitor to Dublin asks the hotel porter the way to a certain terrace. The porter tells him it is a complicated way, and there is something about his manner which adds to the slight misgiving the American already feels about this letter of introduction which he has inherited from his father.

He takes a taxi, asking only for the terrace, and not giving the number. This time he is certain, from the taxi driver's manner, that there is something fishy about the place. Sure enough, when he alights and pays off the taxi, the driver hangs about with obvious curiosity to see where he goes.

Waiting till the taxi drives away, the American goes to the number and waits, wondering whether or not to knock. The terrace is an old Georgian one, now rather down at heel. This particular house is in better repair than its neighbours. Only the memory of his father's insistence that he should present the letter, and of the deep impression

which these two strange Irishmen from whom he got it seem to have made upon the usually dour, severe, and uncommunicative minister, keep his son from giving up the whole thing as a wild goose chase.

Summoning his resolution, he knocks at the door. There is no sound but that of a coal cart coming up the street. The American tells himself that he will wait till the coal cart passes, and then, if there is no answer, go away.

Before the coal cart draws level, a window is thrown up and a rather cracked woman's voice tells him she will be down in a moment. The door opens, he is let in and shown upstairs to a parlour which strengthens his misgivings. His guide proves to be a funny, blowsy, elderly creature. He shows her the letter, which seems to amaze her into silence. She says she will fetch Madam.

The American waits for a while, trying to concentrate on a magazine. Then Madam enters, with a second, even blowsier old creature than the first. She looks at the letter, and asks where it comes from. The American tells his story. Madam seems embarrassed. The American misunderstands her embarrassment, thinking that she feels a delicacy about giving a client's address. Then her companion, introduced as Miss Costello, says that she will take him where the General is. Madam seems relieved and withdraws.

Miss Costello does not take long to get herself ready. She conducts the American to a neighbouring bus stop, and after a twopenny ride they get out by a church. She leads him down a little laneway into a graveyard, and points to a tombstone. 'That's where he is,' she says. The American rallies quickly from the first shock, and then discovers that he is suffering from a second. He does not like to think of the cruel trick played upon a harmless, if taciturn minister.

Miss Costello assures him that the two men who gave him the letter must have been on one of their annual benders,

fantastic excursions on the Continent, in the course of which they would be so drunk as not to know what they were really doing. But his father detested drunks, the American cries. Oh, he would never have known they were drunk. Nobody would. They appeared always as solemn as judges. The General was their greatest friend, and they wanted their new friend to meet him.

But they didn't have to give him that address, the American protests. Miss Costello tells him it was probably the only one they could remember at the time. Anyway, the General came there a great deal. He is not to worry. The gentlemen meant no unkindness to his father. Obviously they took a liking to him, and gave him a letter of introduction to the best friend they had in the world. She goes her way, plus tip, and the American is left to ponder over what has happened.

Well, that was the story—but it was not complete; it didn't add up to anything; it needed what writers and stage people call the pay-off, the final touch that would clinch it and knit it together.

So, in a final paragraph, the American, who hitherto has lived in awe of his domineering father, even after that father was dead, suddenly feels a rush of belated affection for him. The old man needed his worldly, travelled, sophisticated son to rescue him from uncomprehended encounters and save him from their embarrassing results.

This final touch rounds off the story, and gives a positive human ending to what otherwise might merely seem the account of a practical joke.

In this summary I have tried only to give useful rules for the would-be short-story writer. The art is not easy,

unless one has an eye for the significant incident and gesture and can draw in bold, decisive line. Many excellent writers of fiction cannot manage short stories at all.

But, if you can be happy in the compass of 1,000–3,000 words; if you can make your effects quickly, and are born with or can acquire a sense of form, you will find the writing of short stories both fascinating and profitable.

The road to success with editors is through brevity, human sympathy, clear development, and a story to tell. Write your story in your own way. Then see what you can do with it. And be ruthless. If it fails to sell at its original length, then, as soon as you have exhausted the periodicals that will accommodate that length, cut it down for the next lot. I have failed with many a story at 5,000 words, only to sell it at 3,000, or even 2,000. And, almost always, it was a better story after being cut. It had failed because there was too much writing and not enough story.

Rates of payment vary enormously. Two or three guineas a thousand words is very fair for the beginner. In America, prices are far higher, but competition and a preference for local colour tell heavily against the English product.

If you have the germ in you, and keep to these rules (for a time at any rate), you will soon receive encouragement to go on working at one of the most delightful and repaying forms a writer can tackle.

CHAPTER X

LECTURING

LECTURING is not commonly regarded as a branch of writing, but writers are often called upon to lecture, and it can be a very valuable addition to their work and income. I advise all writers and would-be writers to take any opportunity of lecturing which they can get. A writer will often be asked to speak in public, and here is an excellent chance to learn.

I once heard Hugh Walpole lecture. At the end of it I understood the statement that his career was built up on lecturing. It was a first-class performance, skilled, warm-hearted, sincere, and, in the sense that it was consciously put over, histrionic. Walpole was a model in this respect, as he was in industry and enthusiasm. He had learned the craft of lecturing by addressing all manner of audiences gratis in his early days. I have learned something of it in the same way, and I recommend any writer to do the same. Over and above its usefulness to the writer, it brings him into direct contact with many of his readers, it gives an interest and an excitement to life, and it can often be a real inspiration.

2

It is one of the paradoxes of our time that the spoken word is everywhere gaining in importance. This is a regain, rather than a gain, but we have to look a long way back to the time when the spoken word began to give way to the written; so far back, that the present development seems

entirely new. The paradox lies in the fact that a civilisation of apparatus has so aggrandised and speeded up the distribution of the written word, that mere speech, except as a means of communication between individuals, has seemed at a discount.

It is still true that even the spoken word depends mostly on mechanical means for its distribution. For every direct contact between speaker and audience, there are thousands of indirect contacts, in which the speaking voice is relayed by means of radio, talking films, television, or gramophone record, reaching audiences out of all proportion to any which the original voice could reach. Yet the effect of all this thousandfold, millionfold mechanical diffusion—and rediffusion, since these mechanical contacts can be many times repeated—has been to rekindle interest in the speaking voice, and increase the demand for direct contact between audience and speaker. From audiences brought up on films, a minority have developed a hunger for the flesh-and-blood theatre. Listeners to radio have travelled miles to see and hear in the flesh speakers whose voices they have come to admire. More and more, in the world of entertainment, stress is being laid upon the voice and the way in which it is used. Film producers are demanding that stars shall please not only the eye but the ear.

If these two sentences sound mere generalities, I can adduce evidence, not only from stage schools, but from casting conferences which I have attended, both for plays and films. Indeed, the first questions asked nowadays by one leading producer-director, with thirty years' experience of films, are 'What's her voice like? Can she speak?'

All this amounts to the discovery that, after all, the most direct and satisfying means of communication between human beings is the voice. Nothing else gives the same sense of character. From no other medium do we get as clear a picture of the person to whom we are listening.

'Thy speech bewrayeth thee': and proclaimeth thee too. We must never forget that—for instance—the handful of radio personalities who have won places in the affections of listeners all over the country have depended even more on their voices than on their scripts.

3

One result of this growing interest in the spoken word is a revival of what is oddly termed 'Lecturing'. Societies and groups up and down Britain show a growing desire to be addressed by speakers to whom they have often been introduced by radio. A speaker with a reasonable voice, who is sincere and has something to say, will find no lack of audiences ready to hear him and pay for the pleasure. But—it must *be* a pleasure. And they must be able to hear.

That sounds the flattest of platitudes, but we should never be afraid of the obvious; and, on this point, the obvious calls for remark. Naturally, many of the people who are invited to 'lecture' (forbidding word) are writers. Their books have been read and liked, and societies feel that it would be interesting to make a more direct and personal contact with the mind which has attracted them. They therefore invite Mr. Blank, the well-known novelist, to come and address them. Mr. Blank, whose time is valuable, and who lives a couple of hundred miles away, asks a substantial fee. Such, however, is their desire to make his acquaintance that the society pays it, and Mr. Blank duly appears. Unfortunately, he has rather exalted notions of his own importance, and in any case regards speaking in public as a side-line, and the fee as a perquisite, a tribute to his fame. He does not speak particularly well, he refers constantly to his notes, he drops his voice at the end of sentences, and is clearly audible only to those sitting within twenty-five feet of him.

Now it cannot be too strongly insisted that talking to an audience is an art in itself. It needs just as careful study and preparation as does writing. Anyone who offers himself in the lecture market under the delusion that it is a subsidiary medium of expression needs to think again, and think drastically.

First of all, there is the question of commercial honesty. Too many writers still imagine that, if they are seen and more or less heard, they have earned their money. I would contend that anyone who accepts a fee for appearing before an audience without taking pains to qualify himself is accepting money under false pretences. He is, to say the least of it, unintentionally dishonest.

Speaking to an audience is an art. It has three main requisites. The first and most elementary is that every syllable uttered by the speaker shall be heard by every member of his audience. For anyone whose speech is not defective, this is not too difficult an aim. If the speaker cannot project his voice, and make it carry, he must have lessons until he can. Otherwise he will not be earning his money.

The second requisite is that the matter of the talk shall make sense, have a shape, and be worth listening to. This again should not be difficult, since, unless the speaker knows his subject and can talk about it attractively, he has no business to talk about it in public. Only practice can teach him the best and the most compelling way of presenting his material; but, if he is any good at all, he will be learning all the time, and will never stop learning till he dies.

The third requisite is that the talk shall be entertaining. We must never forget that lecturing is a branch of the entertainment business. No matter how informative the lecturer wishes to be, no matter how avid of knowledge the audience is, people learn most when they are most interested, and when the information is conveyed to them in the most

graphic and attractive form. No lecturer can ever succeed, at any rate in the commercial branches of the art, without some degree of histrionics. This does *not* mean insincerity of any sort whatever. It means the power to project his material to the audience in such a way that they share it with him.

4

Success in public speaking demands an exact—with experienced speakers an instinctive—calculation of the distance between the speaker and his hearers. The same lecture, given to two different audiences in two different halls, one a large place holding two thousand, and the other crowded out with a hundred and fifty, will be entirely different in presentation. What is more, if the big audience is in a city, and the small audience in a village, it will be a different lecture. For the experienced speaker, no two lectures are ever the same. His function is to make contact with and entertain the audience in front of him, his first duty to get the feel of them, to learn what sort of people they are, to enter into their mood, so that he can go out to meet them, and find the way of best saying to them the things he believes and wants to say. If he does this, then they will want to hear him, and many will end by believing him.

Once this real contact between speaker and audience is made, it is a joy and a strength to both. The speaker, arriving perhaps tired after an all-day journey, will be invigorated and warmed by the current of sympathy from his audience; and the audience will go away happy and satisfied, with the feeling that they have got what they came for, that they have made a real contact with a real flesh-and-blood person. It is too often supposed that contact between a speaker and his audience must be one-sided, and that he must impose his personality upon his audience. This is a

grave mistake. The speaker who is relaxed, and who knows and believes in what he has to say strongly enough to be able to adapt it to his listeners, will share with them a most satisfying human experience. Let me say once more that adapting does not mean changing in substance or truth. It does not imply any form of insincerity. In conversation with an individual, one adapts what one has to say to his personality and his power to understand it. Exactly the same is true when one is in front of an audience. Remember, the speaker is taking their money: in exchange he must give them, not necessarily what they want, but what he has to say, presented in such a form that they will want it. He is an entertainer—a teacher if you like, a giver of information, an educator—but still an entertainer; and he will educate and teach successfully in so far as he entertains.

CHAPTER XI

RADIO

RADIO of all kinds offers excellent chances to the new writer. In many ways, the new writer starts with an advantage. Having no deep-rooted prejudice in favour of one way of telling a story, he finds radio easier to learn. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he finds it easier because he has less to unlearn.

The requirements of radio are simple; common sense, sincerity, economy, speed, and the power of telling a story rather than writing it.

Like all people with some experience of writing for radio, I am continually beset by writers asking for tips about radio technique. They ask for the low-down, the gen, the special short cuts that will enable them to sit down and write an acceptable script. When I reply that I know hardly any such tips, tricks, etc., they are sometimes affronted, and suspect me of holding out on them. When I tell them, further, that all they need do is make a common-sense study of the medium itself, they very often don't believe me. Yet it is the preliminary approach, the common-sense effort to grasp what is implied by listening to the radio, that governs all work for this interesting and exciting new medium. Common sense will tell you that everything has to be conveyed through the ear. This is a platitude, a grossly obvious point, yet it can slip one's mind, as every broadcaster knows. I have been broadcasting for twenty years, but I still put things in scripts which are for the eye rather than for the ear; sentences which, clear enough when you see them, sound ambiguous; sound effects which are

ineffective; points which need an extra medium to convey them.

Once, when I was judging a radio play competition organised by a festival, I came across a script which contained the direction, *She nods her head*. I wonder how the producer was expected to get that one over the air. Absurd though it is, this incident is worth mentioning because it shows the fundamental laziness which stops people from coming to grips with the medium they are trying to write for.

Sincerity is essential because everything is spoken by the living voice. What is more, the lips of the speaker are so close to the microphone, closer than they are normally to the listener's ear in daily conversation, that every characteristic, every inflection, every trick is magnified. The voice is all; the voice divorced from look and gesture, disembodied, filtered through a box. On it is concentrated the whole of the listener's attention. (Listening implies attention; I am not speaking of casual hearing, or of background radio.) The broadcaster is talking intimately to a friend by his fire-side, a fact which should make insincerity or patronage impossible. At such close quarters, at a distance of a foot or eighteen inches, the gap between the speaker's lips and the microphone, any insincerity, any dishonesty, of intention is at once made manifest in the falsity of the tone. On the air, insincerity is fatal. The microphone hears more than the average human ear, and has nothing to distract it. When we are talking to a friend, our attention is not concentrated exclusively on the quality of the sounds issuing from our friend's lips. We see the expression in his face, we have thoughts at the back of our own mind, we can hear the traffic in the road outside, etc., etc. But the microphone, that hypersensitive instrument, has nothing at all to distract it. It gives a close-up of the speaker's voice, a close-up which he can do nothing to mitigate or disguise.

2

Economy and speed go together. The tempo of radio is considerably faster than that of the printed page or the stage play.

Test this for yourself. Take out your watch, wait till the second hand reaches the half-minute or minute, then read silently, to yourself, at your normal private reading speed, the page which follows this one. Note carefully in minutes or seconds how long the reading takes you. Now, still timing yourself, read the page aloud. In practice, few things vary more than the speeds at which people read silently to themselves. (You will have evidence of this if you have ever shared a book or a magazine with another person. One always gets to the end of the page first, and waits with ill-concealed impatience for the other). I have done this experiment publicly on many occasions, with different victims, and have found that it takes anything from twice to six times LONGER to read the passage aloud than to read it silently.

You, if you have done this test, will have reached your own conclusion. Unless you are an exceptionally slow silent reader, or have gabbled the page aloud, you will have found that the reading aloud has taken you substantially longer than the silent reading.

This vital difference of pace must be allowed for in all radio writing.

In a story, all descriptions of atmosphere and background must be cut to a minimum. The listener wants movement. Remember, you have to hold his attention *all the time*. It is no use having the most magnificent climax in the world to your story, if the listener stops listening before you reach it. The reader who is bored can skip. The listener cannot skip. All he can do is stop listening to you.

It follows that the radio story must be interesting all the way along. Every inch, every few seconds must hold the listener. For this reason the radio story is more independent of plot than any other kind of story. What it needs is for something to be going on all the time. There is no formula, no ideal kind of story. Anything which one person can *tell* another, and hold his attention all the time, is good radio.

The easiest way to fulfil these requirements is to have a dominant idea, a few easily recognised characters, and to keep the story all the time on the move. The danger of having too many characters is that, unless they are very carefully chosen, it will be difficult for the reader to give each a distinct and immediately identifiable personality. This is even truer for the type of reader who does not dramatise the characters by attempting to give each a different voice and tempo.

I have written and broadcast well over a hundred radio stories, and they have no common denominator except these few requirements. Since I read them myself, I write for characters whom I can dramatise, and who do not go beyond my vocal resources. But this limitation need not weigh on other writers, and I draw no moral from it.

If you study the various anthologies of broadcast stories which have been published, notably those by Messrs. Faber and Faber, and the shorter collections edited by Mr. Hilton Brown, you will see that the range is exceedingly wide, and that the spoken short story can also read well on the printed page.

3

One technical hint is worth notice, I think. As your listener has to visualise what is going on, you must be careful to present it to him in chronological order. Do not therefore write, for the air, 'Straightening up, and glancing

swiftly from side to side, Mr. Fortescue moved to the sideboard'. Throw out present participles, and give the listener the main verbs he longs for. 'Mr. Fortescue straightened up. He glanced nervously from side to side; then moved to the sideboard.'

The former method has the extra disadvantage that, until you reach the name Fortescue, the listener may not know who you are talking about.

A short story of W. W. Jacobs, written long before broadcasting was thought of, is so perfectly constructed that only in one place does it need adaptation for broadcasting. The story is *A Change of Treatment*, and the one adaptation needed is at the point where the mate comes below with the skipper to try out his new medicine on the malingerers.

The original runs like this:

'Let poor old Dan try it fust, sir,' said 'Arry, starting up and sniffing as the mate took the cork out. 'He's been dreadful bad since you was away.'

This won't do on the air, for two reasons. The actions are not in chronological order, and, as Harry hasn't spoken for some minutes, there is danger that the listener will have forgotten which voice belongs to him. Therefore, when I was broadcasting the story, I rewrote this passage as follows:

The mate takes the cork out. 'Arry starts up and sniffs. 'Let poor old Dan try it fust, sir,' he says, etc., etc.

If you remember this point, you will save yourself and your producer a deal of trouble in rehearsal.

4

The timing of the radio play needs if anything to be faster. I can show you why very easily.

Let us imagine a brief scene from an Edwardian drama.

The heavy father is standing in front of the study fireplace, hands behind his back, eyeing the door with a baleful look which bodes ill for the person whom he is expecting. There is a knock on the door.

FATHER (*grimly*): Come in.

Enter son, apparently debonair and jaunty, but really ill at ease.

SON: You wanted to see me, Father?

FATHER: Yes, I did. Hand over that letter.

SON (*with affected innocence*): Letter, Father?

FATHER: Yes, 'letter, Father'. Come on. I know she's been writing to you.

SON (*on his dignity*): It is a private letter, Father. It is not intended for anyone but me.

FATHER (*swaying to and fro on his heels*): I didn't bring you here to argue with you, sir. Give me that letter. Do you hear?

SON (*a last attempt*): I would very much rather not.

FATHER: Ha! I daresay. (*Stretching out his hand.*) Hand it over.

SON (*with quivering lips*): Must I?

FATHER (*barking*): Yes.

Slowly, reluctantly, the boy puts his hand in his breast pocket, produces the letter and tremblingly hands it over. Father snatches it from his grasp, opens it, begins to read, and stares transfixed.

FATHER: *What!* Does she dare write to you like this?

If you can envisage that being played before you on a stage, or, better still, can get someone to read it over with you, each going through the movements described, you will form a good idea of how long it would take to play.

Imagine, however, what you would think if the words came to you at that pace, and with those intervals of silence between them, from the loudspeaker of your radio set. You would think either that something had gone wrong with the set, or that the players were suffering from creeping paralysis. Strike out all the stage directions, except those that give guidance for tone of voice, and you will get some idea of the radio pace.

Have you ever asked yourself how it is that a West End

success which in the theatre plays for two and a half to three hours can be presented on the air in Saturday Night Theatre in sometimes as little as an hour and a half? Cuts? Yes, of visual business; but most of the time is gained through the far greater speed necessitated when there is nothing to look at, when the whole story has to be told through the ear.

Now for some of the ways in which the listener's imagination can be reached, and necessary information can be given to him.

5

Let us begin with something completely obvious. I began a script on the Royal Borough of Kensington something like this:

Traffic noises. Sound of a bus pulling up.

CONDUCTOR: Let 'em orf first, please. Now then, both sides on.

VOICE (*off*): Chelsea?

CONDUCTOR: No. This is a number nine. Kensington-'Ammer-smith.

OLD LADY: Is this the Kensington bus?

CONDUCTOR: Yus, lady.

OLD LADY (*who has not heard*): Does this bus go to Kensington?

CONDUCTOR: Yus, lady. (*To himself*) 'Ow many more times 'ave I got to say it? Kensington and 'Ammersmith. (*Rings bell.*)

Only when I had put that down did I realise that I had not said where we were! I laughed ruefully, and added to the conductor's opening sentence, 'Yde Park Corner'.

6

The play of *The Director* opened in the village pub. It was necessary at the start to establish the fact that an admirer of the inn-keeper's niece was always hanging round after her. He appears, tries to steal a kiss, is rebuffed, then

says he had only come to warn her uncle that strangers were in the village asking for him; adding maliciously that they look to him like government inspectors. The girl hastily dismisses him, calls her uncle, and the frenzy into which this intelligence throws him shows that he has a good deal to conceal.

Then there come in the film director and two of his retinue, explaining what they want to do.

A number of these effects are visual. The radio play had to start in a different way. Here is the opening sequence, which will make clear the necessary differences better than any explanation:

(i) *Outdoor sounds. A dog barks in the distance. Seagulls call.*

PAUL: Well, that's grand! It's even better than John described it.

Light, scenery—everything perfect. Eh, Votty?

VOTTY: Uh-uh.

PAUL: Just look at that little village street! Those white cottages with the thatch, against the dark of that mountain! Boy, we're going to make the finest picture ever. Perfect setting for that opening sequence. Long shot—truck up close——

VOTTY: Could be.

PAUL: Don't sound so enthusiastic—you'll strain something.

Where's this hotel they talk about? I'll ask that guy in the garden. Hey! Good morning.

BRENNAN (*off mike*): Good morning.

PAUL: Can you please direct us to the hotel?

BRENNAN (*coming nearer*): Is it Girvan's you want?

PAUL: There's only the one hotel, isn't there?

BRENNAN (*closer*): Aye. Girvan's. I'll show you.

PAUL: Oh, that's very good of you. I didn't mean to take you from your work.

BRENNAN: A pleasure. (*On mike with the others.*) Let you follow this road straight for a matter of three hundred yards. Then there's a turn to the left. Don't take that one, but the next after it. That'll bring you straight to the door.

PAUL: Thanks very much.

BRENNAN: Not at all. A pleasure.

(ii) *The sound of empty bottles being dumped in a crate.* JUDY GIRVAN's voice humming to herself.

BRENNAN (*in a breathless whisper*): Judy! Judy!

JUDY: Ach! John Brennan, how often have I told you not to come creeping round here after me?

BRENNAN (*panting between words*): You've no call to be snapping at me, and I trying to do you a good turn.

JUDY: A *good* turn, is it? What sort of a turn would *you* give a girl, creeping and panting and puffing?

BRENNAN: Haven't I a good right to pant and puff, and I running across three fields to warn you? There's two gentlemen below, asking after your uncle. By the cut of them, I'm thinking it's government inspectors they are.

JUDY: Inspectors! (*Calling off*) Uncle! Uncle!

GIRVAN (*off mike*): Yis?

JUDY: Uncle. Come here quick. (*Sounds of her going to meet him.*)

GIRVAN: What ails ye?

JUDY: John Brennan here says there's government inspectors asking for you.

GIRVAN: Holy Mother! Come here quick, you, Brennan, and give me a hand. Them cases of whisky. We'll put them below under the trapdoor.

BRENNAN: They'll be three or four minutes yet. I told them the long way round.

GIRVAN: You've got sense—sometimes. Come in with me, now. Judy, do you show them into the coffee-room, and hold them in play till I come.

(iii) *Footsteps.*

PAUL: Well, well! Not quite the last word in modernity, but I guess we'll be able to make ourselves comfortable. Ring the bell, Votty.

VOTTY: It's broken.

PAUL: Knock on the door, then. (*VOTTY knocks.*) I guess it'll be big enough for what we want. If the food's bad, we'll lay in a store. Ah! here we are.

JUDY: Were you wanting anything, sir?

PAUL: Good morning, my dear. Could we see the proprietor—
Mr. Girvan?

JUDY: I think he's busy some place. Will I go and see?

PAUL (*all charm*): That'll be most kind of you. We'll be greatly obliged. It's important business, tell Mr. Girvan.

JUDY: I will. (*Sound of door shutting.*)

PAUL: Good-looking piece. We might do worse.

VOTTY: Too old. Too hard.

PAUL: I didn't mean for Oona. I was thinking of one of those fisher girls. Particularly the tough one.

Fade

(iv) *Noise of slithering boxes: grunting: then the shutting of a trap-door.*

GIRVAN: 'There. Now they're welcome to search any place they like. Go and peep at them through the spyhole, while I dust myself down.

BRENNAN: Is it the spyhole in the door?

GIRVAN: Yerra, man, where else? I'll be ready in two minutes now.

(v) *Bring up clink of glasses.*

PAUL: Well, Mr. Girvan, what do you say?

GIRVAN: Faith, mister, me mind's in a whirl. Sure, I was afraid you were inspectors from the government.

PAUL (*laughing*): No, Mr. Girvan, we're here to do you nothing but good. We want to make a real Irish picture here in the west of Ireland, and with Irish actors. As far as possible we want to use local players. We want to take your hotel for a period of eight weeks, with an option of four more in case the weather holds us up.

GIRVAN: That'd take up the whole season.

PAUL: You will be suitably recompensed for any loss of custom, and you will have all your rooms full whatever the weather. What's more, when it is known that we are making a film of a famous book that was written about this very place, all kinds of people will be coming down to have a look, and you'll do a roaring trade.

GIRVAN: I might have to be paying compensation to the visitors I'd have to put off.

PAUL: We'll see to all that. What do you take in a week, in the season?

GIRVAN: Eighty pounds, when we're full.

PAUL: I'll give you a hundred and twenty for every week that we're here, with a guarantee of eight weeks. Cheque for the first month right now. Is it a deal?

GIRVAN: Very well.

PAUL: Good. You will find this one of the best day's work you've ever done, Mr. Girvan. (*As he writes*) I shall want transport, automobiles, labour, extras. If you can arrange all that, so much the better. There's your cheque, Mr. Girvan. You can give me a receipt later.

GIRVAN: Thank ye. When do you wish to start?

PAUL: Right away. The full company won't be here immediately, but we'll move in right now.

GIRVAN: Did you say you wanted the people here to be taking parts in your picture?

7

Now for something a little more imaginative and complex. I wished to end a play about the playwright Ben Jonson with the old man's lonely death in an attic bedroom. The problem arose of the best way to get this across to the listener. On the stage, no such problem would exist. One would see the attic, and the dying old man. I did not want something direct and obvious; I wanted something which would give the listener a shiver up his spine. One circumstance in Ben Jonson's career enabled me to secure this effect.

Ben Jonson was the producer of a company of boy actors, the Children of the King's Chapel. One of these, a boy called Salathiel Pavy, died at the height of his fame, and the poet wrote an elegy upon him.

Early in the play, I put the following scene. Ben Jonson is taking a rehearsal.

(*Music, 'His golden locks Time hath to silver turned'*)

JONSON. A YOUNG PLAYER

BEN: Now—is the roll complete? If we are all here, I will give out the parts. (*Rustle of papers.*) This time I have the grandest part—the most marvellous part—for little Pavy. He shall play it to admiration. It shall set the seal upon his fame. Pavy—step up here. Why—where is he?

YOUNG PLAYER: So please you, Master Jonson, he is sick.

BEN: Sick! Pah. He has eaten too much. Give him a purge, and let him come quickly.

YOUNG PLAYER: He is very sick, Master Jonson. He lies at home. He cannot get up from his bed.

BEN: Has the apothecary seen him?

YOUNG PLAYER: I do not know. His poor mother is in great grief and distress.

BEN: I will go, when we are done rehearsing, and see how he does. I must have Pavy. The play will founder else. Now—come close all. The play is entitled *Cynthia's Revels*, and it treats of . . .

Fade out.

JONSON. YOUNG PLAYER. MISTRESS PAVY

BEN: This is a very noisome place.

YOUNG PLAYER: It is not much farther, Master Jonson. We turn the corner. Now—past this doorway, in here—and up the stair.

BEN (*to himself*): So this is where the child lives. I must see to this.

YOUNG PLAYER: Can you find your way now, Master Jonson?

BEN: Yes. Run away now. I'll see you tomorrow.

He knocks on the door, muttering to himself. Shuffling steps are heard.

BEN: Mistress Pavy? Why, woman, what is the matter! A little sickness is no hurt. All children get it. They eat too much. They have not learned the measure of their own stomachs. He seems so wise, he plays so well the part of a grown man, we forget he is but a child. Come, lead me to him. I'll soon put him on his feet.

MISTRESS PAVY (*weeping*): Alas, sir.

BEN: What? Why—what is this? No harm is intended to him, woman.

MISTRESS PAVY: Oh, sir—he is dead.

BEN: Dead!

MISTRESS PAVY: Yes, sir. Oh—what shall I do, what shall I do!

BEN: Little Pavy—*dead!* (*Pause.*) Take me to him.

MISTRESS PAVY: The stair is narrow, sir. And dark. Have a care where you put your foot. The board is broken. (*Opens a door.*) There, sir.

BEN: Little Pavy. When did this happen, mistress?

MISTRESS PAVY: This morning, sir. He is gone only two hours.

BEN: He was so bright, so quick. Death and he—they do not go together. Ah, Mistress Pavy. He played old men so well, Death was deceived, and took him even before his beard was grown.

Music. Fade out. Fade in.

BEN JONSON

BEN: I cannot work for thinking of little Pavy. His face rises up before me, as he lay upon the bed. So still, so wise. With all the serenity of all knowledge on his brows. I loved him living, and I revere him dead. I will write him an elegy, and appease his ghost.

A VOICE: Weep with me, all you that read
This little story
And know, for whom a tear you shed
Death's self is sorry.
'Twas a child that so did thrive
In grace and feature,
As Heaven and Nature seemed to strive
Which owned the creature.
Years he numbered scarce thirteen
When Fates turned cruel,
Yet three filled zodiacs had he been
The stage's jewel;
And did act (what now we moan)
Old men so duly,
As sooth the Parcae thought him one,

He played so truly.
 So, by error, to his fate
 They all consented,
 But, viewing him since, alas, too late!
 They have repented,
 And have sought to give new birth,
 In baths to steep him,
 But, being so much too good for earth,
 Heaven vows to keep him.

This, as I said, occurs quite early in the play. At the play's end, when the old man lies upon his bed, the ghost of the child actor appears to him; and the listeners realise at once that this is the end.

JONSON. *The ghost of SALATHIEL PAVY.*

When the ghost speaks, it is a boy's voice, remote and sweet.

BEN (*gasping*): Ha! Who is there? Eh?

S. PAVY: It is me, Master Jonson.

BEN: It's dark. I cannot see. Come nearer. Ah! It's little Pavy!

S. PAVY: How do you, Master Jonson?

BEN: Poorly, lad. Poorly. This dropsical old body betrays me.

But I'll better it. I'll get up. I'll silence them all. I'll teach them old Ben still has life in him.

S. PAVY: Be easy, Master Jonson.

BEN: Listen, little Pavy. 'They have plotted against me. They have put me from the court. 'They have hissed my play from the boards. But I'm not done yet.

A violin begins softly to play 'Have you seen but a white lily grow?'

BEN: I'll be revenged on them. I will put them down.

S. PAVY: Lie down, Master Jonson. Lie down and rest.

BEN: Aye. I'll rest now. 'Then I'll be stronger, little Pavy. Then I'll show them.

S. PAVY: Endeavour yourself to sleep.

BEN: I'll sleep. I'll shut my eyes awhile. And open them——

S. PAVY: And open them on Paradise.

BEN: What should an old sinner like me do in Paradise? No, little Pavy. I'll open them on London.

S. PAVY: Close them now.

BEN (*his voice fainter*): If poverty could take me to Paradise, I am poor enough. If affliction, I am sorely afflicted. Ah, when I think what they have done to me.

S. PAVY: Do not think of it. Think upon sleep.

BEN (*drowsily*): Thou art in the right, little Pavy. I'll sleep. And when I wake . . .

S. PAVY: And when you wake . . .

BEN (*in a whisper*): And when I wake . . .

Violin plays louder.

S. PAVY: Sleep well, Master Jonson. Sleep well.

Violin rises to a crescendo.

A VOICE: O rare Ben Jonson!

Fade out on music

'This final scene proved effective on the air.

8

One more example, to show the extraordinary freedom which radio drama allows the dramatist. The fact that no scenery of any kind is required, that the appeal to the imagination comes entirely through the ear, enabled me to start my play *The Silver Tongue*, a life of the playwright Sheridan, with the following miniature day of judgment.

A flourish of trumpets. Voices, speaking singly, at first far away, then coming nearer, call "Richard Brinsley Sheridan". They overlap one another, then die away. Before they have quite died away the deep voice of the Assessor calls loudly:

ASSESSOR: Richard Brinsley Sheridan—take your stand at the bar of Posterity, and await judgment. (*Trumpets.*) Who accuses this man?

A gong sounds three times.

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: I am the Devil's advocate. I accuse him. I accuse him of idleness, of drunkenness, of place-hunting, of profligacy, of—

ASSESSOR: You shall have time to make your charges good. Who defends this man?

ELIZABETH: I defend him.

ASSESSOR: Who are you?

ELIZABETH: I am Elizabeth, his first wife. I praise his generous care of me, his genius, his goodness of heart.

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: Fool! He was false to you.

ELIZABETH: Alas, sir, we lived in an age that thought little of gallantries. But he was always my support and stay. His tenderness guided my youth, his loving care sweetened my death-bed. His worst failings were but folly. I will speak for him.

ASSESSOR: Will any other speak for Richard Brinsley Sheridan?

ESTHER: I will speak for him.

ASSESSOR: Who are you?

ESTHER: I am Esther, his second wife. I was but a child when he married me, but I loved him always. I nursed him in his last sickness, and died soon after him. I will speak for him.

MOORE: I will speak for him. I am 'Tom Moore the poet; I wrote his life. He was——

GEORGE IV: Get aside, Tom. Don't push your vay before your betters, isn't it? *I* vill speak for him. I am George the Fourt', King of Englandt. He vas my goot frient and counsellor, ven I am Prince Regent, and ven I am King. He tell me the trut', ven oder men flatter me. I vill speak for him.

HASTINGS: I will speak for him. My name is Warren Hastings. He did me wrong, accusing me in the Commons with such eloquence that all my cause was in jeopardy. But he believed in what he said. He was an honest man. I will speak for him.

PITT: I will speak for him. I am William Pitt, Prime Minister of England. He opposed me always, but he was a great orator and a man of principle. I will speak for him.

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: All these are nothing to what I shall adduce against him.

VOICE: What says Sheridan himself? Richard—stand forth. What do you say?

SHERIDAN: I have nothing to say.

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: You see? He is proud and stubborn, as always.

A TUMULT OF VOICES: No. No. No. No.

ASSESSOR: Who are you all? Have you no respect for the court, that you come in fancy dress?

THE VOICES: { I am Sir Anthony Absolute.
My name is Bob Acres.
I am Sir Peter Teazle.
They call me Whiskerandos.
And me the Duenna.
Sir Lucius O'Trigger—at your service.
Let me insinuate myself—Mrs. Malaprop—ready
to abut all charges.
Captain Absolute shall speak for us.

JACK ABSOLUTE: We are his creations. He gave us life, and, as long as we live, we shall speak for him.

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: Enough of this. Stand aside all. Let the facts speak.

ASSESSOR: Behold—the story of Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

9

The essentials of radio work are intimacy, sincerity, and the quality of the living voice, speech rather than writing. If your medium is a play, then remember that the play will be performed close to your listener's ear. If your medium is a story, remember that you are telling it to a friend sitting near you by the fireside. If you are writing a talk, remember that you are talking to your friend, once more at very close quarters.

Radio work offers excellent opportunities to the new writer, and no age is too old to begin it. Eden Phillpotts made a new career for himself, at an age when most writers have packed up altogether, by mastering this new medium.

But the medium must be studied. I was invited not long ago to speak at a Writers' Congress on radio work. Many of the writers present said they had found my talk helpful, and proceeded to send me the radio plays and stories which they had written as a result of it. Alas, in hardly a single

instance had they got down to the job of imagining a play or a story received only through the ear. They had proceeded to write in the ordinary way, simply casting it into what they felt to be radio form.

The rules are simple, but they have to be learned.

10

On television I do not yet feel qualified to speak. My experience at the time of writing is limited to two full-length plays, the writing of incidental dialogue, and a few personal appearances.

For obvious reasons, the technique is closer to films than to sound radio; but the medium has the difficulty of continuous action, as on the stage, plus a difficulty of its own, arising from the need for a character to move physically from one point in space to another.

This sounds stupid. Let me explain what I mean. Imagine that one of your shots ends with a character saying, 'I don't believe a word you say. I shall go straight to George and ask him to tell me the truth.'

Naturally, one would expect the next shot to show the character bursting into George's study and putting the question to him point blank. That is all right, provided that the set representing George's study is adjacent to the set where the lines I have just quoted were spoken. The character can then rush out of one door, away from camera number one, and be immediately shown coming in the other door, within range of camera number two.

If, however, the set representing George's study is in another studio altogether, and the actor has to hurry twenty yards down the corridor and get into position, the dramatist is obliged to provide material which will occupy the screen during ten, twenty, thirty or more seconds, which the actor will physically require for his journey.

I can imagine literary students of a future age poring over these scripts, written in the dawn of television, and commenting on so-and-so's masterly avoidance of the obvious, and brilliant use of suspense, as instanced by the insertion of forty seconds of dialogue between two dramatic moments which, in the hands of a less subtle dramatist, would have followed immediately one upon the other. Like many of their kind before them, they will fail to realise that the dramatist is conditioned always by the physical limitations of space and time—space in his case being the dimensions of the set in which he has to work.

I have found film experience a great help in the little television work I have done, and I believe that generally a writer with film experience will feel less at sea than one without it; but, as with all other media, the only real way to learn is to work at the medium itself.

CHAPTER XII

SERIALS: BOOKS FOR THE YOUNG READER

THE writing of serials used to be a regular industry, and may revive; but of recent years it has greatly dwindled, the place of the specially constructed serial being taken by the novel broken up into suitable lengths.

I need say little about the serial as such. It is or was a story of an agreed length, as a rule from 30,000–60,000 words, constructed in episodes of, say, 3,000 words, each of which ended on an exciting curtain designed to make the reader eager for the next instalment. Its construction was therefore highly artificial; it resembled a series of short stories, with the important difference that each instalment was not complete, but arose from the one before, and all led up to some sort of general climax at the end.

The manufacture of these things was a profitable business, and writers of high repute, when the serial rights of their novels were brought by magazines, often rewrote the story so as to fit the compartments into which three or six or even twelve instalments divided it.

If you feel that you could tackle a serial, send the editor of your choice a first instalment and a synopsis of the rest. This will save you the trouble of writing the whole story in a form which might need revision before you could offer it to a publisher as a novel.

I have had several books serialised, and on three occasions have myself adapted them to the shorter length and the equal instalments required. I have never constructed one

from zero, and so have no advice to offer; but, given a fluid, episodic type of story, this should not be difficult.

2

'Long complete' stories, as their name implies, are long-short stories or short novels. Their length in this country varies from 7,000–30,000 words.

On the whole, they are best regarded as short novels, and the beginner is advised not to attempt one unless an editor or, less probably, a publisher shows interest in a synopsis. (This is, of course, if you want to sell the result. If you have an urge to write a story, then let it be what length it will, and don't think about selling it till it is done. It will sell if it is good enough.)

Publishers as a rule do not like the *conte*, as they call it, because it is too short to sell at the price of a novel, and the public is shy of any new work of fiction that sells at less than the price of a novel, believing that it is not so good.

Those editors who want 'long complete' stories advertise their wishes in writers' handbooks; and to them I refer anyone who contemplates this form, or who discovers that the story he has written comes within it.

3

Books for young readers—the trade term is horrible, 'juveniles'—are a good side-line, or even main line. I will pass over those for very young children, which are exceedingly short and need pictures; yet, specialised though this line is, I have known beginners do very well at it. Anyone who can draw, or collaborates with somebody who can; who really knows and understands young children; and who can personally get fun from what they like, is qualified to attempt this sort of work.

Caution Number One: Ninety-five per cent of the so-called children's books sent to a publisher's office are drivel, with drawings that would shame a ten-year-old.

Caution Number Two: If you contemplate coloured illustrations, don't use more than three colours at most; or, even if the publisher likes your book, you may have to do the pictures all over again.

The type of book likely to interest the average writer is designed for boys and girls of ten and over. This offers no special difficulty, but

- (1) You must know something about boys and girls.
- (2) You must respect and like them.
- (3) You must in no circumstances patronise or write down to them.

The best method is to write with full adult seriousness, remembering that young readers prefer action to analysis, and leaving out purely adult concerns. Put on blinkers that shut out things of interest only to adults, and look all the more sharply at what is left.

Remember that young readers want detailed descriptions of how things work, are deeply interested in food (describe any meal which is important enough to be mentioned, and don't mention any which isn't), and love above all things to be able to put themselves confidently in the place of the character who undergoes and achieves what you describe. Their senses are acute; yours must be no blunter.

All my experience—and I have been in and out of schools ever since I was at school myself—points to the conclusion that there is no difference in kind between a good young and a good adult story. The best books for young readers are grown-up books. When I was a school librarian, the three favourite fiction writers were all writers for adults. The leading writer for boys came fifth on the list. Nowadays, the genius of our best writer for children, Arthur Ransome, has probably altered the list; but a number of

librarians at the Book Weeks arranged by the National Book Council tell me that the first favourite is still a writer for grown-ups.

Many parents will not believe this, and, when invited to lecture on Children's Books, I have often met with incredulous smiles. But I repeat, there is no radical difference. Two of my books for young readers I adapted as serials for a national daily newspaper with no change except compression and the addition of five years to the age of the chief characters. Laugh that off, if you can.

The length of a story of this kind varies from 40,000 to 70,000 words, with 50,000 as a fair average. Some publishers still try to buy such books outright for a sum varying between twenty-five and fifty pounds.

Don't let them buy yours. Sell on a royalty basis only.

Any reputable publisher, if he wants your book, will buy it on terms which give both parties an interest in its success. The outright sale may be immediately attractive to a hard-up author, but, if the book catches on, the publisher scores, and the author does not get an extra penny.

Unless, then, you are exceedingly prolific, and can turn the things out one a month, or violently need the immediate cash, refuse all offers to buy your work outright. Take an advance on account of royalties. The advance may be less than the outright purchase price, but, if your book does well, you share in the proceeds.

For instance, my first book for boys appeared in 1933, and has sold ever since. Its earnings average close on fifty pounds a year, and its best year to date earned over eighty.

A second, published in 1936, earned £185, seemed dead, then revived eight years later and fetched another £50. It still sells.

I have had an advance as high as £250 for one boys' book, and a guarantee of £300 on another, but these figures would call a pitying smile from any successful professional writer

of books for young readers. With me, such books are a side-line only; and as such I commend them to any writer who likes children. The rates, though generally lower than for grown-up books, can be very good. I obtained an advance of £50 for a beginner who had never written a word of fiction, and the book earned more than twice as much. But it was an unusually good book, interesting, honest, amusing, and enriched by technical knowledge of the life and background it described.

Children are serious, intelligent, and deserve as much respect as adults. *Maxime debetur reverentia pueris*: which is, being freely interpreted, don't write down.

And, although a few publishers will still try it on, and tell you it is the custom—don't sell outright.

CHAPTER XIII

NOVELS

I DO not see how anything can usefully be said about novel-writing in general. Novels are of every kind, and the same rules do not apply to all of them. Admirable text-books exist, by masters such as Henry James and E. M. Forster, by critics such as Percy Lubbock; yet I doubt if anyone learned to write a novel by their aid.

Although fewer novels are published than short stories, and although greater labour and endurance are required, I believe that it is easier for most people to write a passable novel than a passable short story. The novel form is looser, and publishers will often take a shapeless, one-damn-thing-after-another novel, whereas no editor will take a shapeless short story. The public will not be bothered by lack of form in a novel provided something is going on all the time. More than half the so-called short stories written by beginners are fragments of novels.

All I can say here will go into a couple of paragraphs. For one thing, although I have written more than a dozen novels, I know precious little about the novel form. Three of mine are real novels, that is to say, they progress and develop steadily from the first page to the last. The rest are episodic, and the largest circulation has gone to the one where I capitalised my defect, and deliberately wrote an episodic story. Still, novels bring me the greater part of my livelihood; and one cannot work at so many, and scrap four more, without learning something.

First, then, the same advice holds good as in the short

story, to plan the outline and map out the proportions. I know that some novelists go straight ahead without a plan, but this is an unwise method for the beginner. The rule to show rather than relate applies also. A first novel by a writer highly successful in other fields opened with a character going to a landmark and then recollecting a quarrel with another character. This took pages to explain, and, coming at second-hand, was far less dramatic than the simpler method of opening with the quarrel, establishing both characters by the things they said to each other, and then sending No. 1 off to the landmark, where reflection, natural and necessary after a storm, could fill in the rest of the picture.

Dialogue, as Hugh Walpole pointed out, is the easiest way of telling a story, and one can have too much of it. Once we have made it our rule to tell the story in the swiftest and most economical way, it will be natural to go from dialogue to narrative, from narrative to dialogue, according to the needs of the story. Dialogue which does nothing but convey information must be suspect. It should always add character or colour, movement or variety, and preferably all four.

The time rules of the short story do not apply at all. The novel obviously allows time to turn aside and follow by-paths. It is altogether more leisurely; and the flashback is often useful and sometimes necessary. What is more, there is no need to concentrate on a single character or point of view—though it is almost always a mistake to concentrate for most of the time on one and then go briefly to another. Either keep changing, or stick to one. Either see with one character's eyes all the time, or move freely from character to character. Otherwise your reader, having settled down with one, will resent the readjustment demanded by a short excursion to another.

The best length for a novel is from 80,000 to 100,000

words, with a preference for the smaller figure. Novels may be far longer, but it is correspondingly harder to get them published.

2

The genesis of a novel, the way it grew from an idea into the finished shape, is far harder to describe than the genesis of a short story. Where the short story is often born from the fusion of two incidents or ideas, a novel may bring together fifty, and grow from their fusion and fertilising influence on one another. It may be the accretion of years of experience, kindled and set moving by a single impulse, such as were, in my own experience, *Dewer Rides* and *The Brothers*. It may spring full-fledged into the mind, as did nine-tenths of *The Unpractised Heart*, which came as I was waiting in Berkeley Square, while a friend was interviewed in one of the war-time Ministries. This story, which played in front of me like a talking film, ran straight to a certain point and stopped dead. Nothing further happened for three weeks, when it resumed as suddenly as it had started, and reached its conclusion.

Dewer Rides, my first published novel, grew slowly into shape as it is, and was written in spare moments over eighteen months. *The Brothers* was written at white heat during a West Highlands holiday, and finished inside five weeks. *Trevannion*, interrupted by two film scripts, took most of a year from beginning to end. Thus in my own experience there is no rule, no general truth about the process.

One novel of mine, however, is worth a brief account, if only to show how an apparent set-back can turn into a benefit. This is *The Director*. One summer in the middle thirties, I went up to a certain spot in the West Highlands, with a film director and cameraman. The director wished to film *The Brothers*, and we travelled up so that I could

show him locations for the various incidents and shots. We stayed in the local hotel, and, wishing to establish friendly relations in the village, the director called upon the minister and the parish priest. The latter was away, and so the director left a letter. To this letter he very soon received a sharp and peremptory reply, saying that the priest disapproved of the entire project, and that we were to look for no help or encouragement whatever from him or any of his parishioners.

The project came to nothing, anyway, since the director was unable to raise the requisite capital, and the film was finally made at another place a few miles away. The incident stayed in my mind. At one time I considered making a short story of it, in which the director, finding another place where his plans were eagerly welcomed for the sake of the money they would bring, etc., etc., went away, followed by the priest's maledictions—each side convinced that it had won a victory. Later on, when I had planned *Trevannion*, but realised that it would be some time, perhaps several years, before I understood the theme deeply enough to write the novel, I cast about in my mind for a theme to deal with in the interval, and suddenly saw that I had a novel ready to my hand.

I set the action in Ireland, imagined an avaricious inn-keeper and his neighbours, bemused by the idea of the money which the film company and the resultant notoriety would bring to the district. I made the director commit the tactical error of calling upon the Protestant minister before he saw the priest; I let the priest write the identical letter, and, as did my model, denounce the project from the pulpit. By making the director employ local talent, in order to secure verisimilitude for his film, I gave the priest greater power to interfere than he would have had in ordinary circumstances.

Thus I had the primary conflict, Hollywood, money,

greed, and the quite legitimate ambition of innocent people, against the traditional power and authority of the Church. What I knew of the types of people concerned told the story for me, and carried it to a conclusion disastrous for the local people. The innocent girl who was playing the lead drowned herself, the local speculators were ruined, and though the priest was left victorious, it was a barren victory, which did nothing to endear him to his flock. The film people, suffering no more than a temporary inconvenience, shrugged their shoulders, and went off to make the film in Cornwall.

H. A. Vachell wrote of the character of the film director that he must have been drawn from life. In fact, he was not. Touches from many men, in films and otherwise, went to make him. He came to independent life on the first page, and took charge of the book completely, leaving me with nothing to do but to report all that he said and did. To my certain knowledge six different originals have been claimed for him among living film directors. With my hand on my heart, I swear that he is a portrait of none of them. Incidentally, five of these so-called originals I have never even met.

3

The novel was successful in its original edition, selling more before publication than any other novel of mine had sold at the full price. It was reprinted several times, and a large paper-backed edition was issued as well.

This was not the end of the involuntary good turn done to me by that parish priest. One day Norman Marshall suggested that I should make the novel into a play. I did, and he accepted it for production at the Arts Theatre, but was prevented from putting it on by circumstances outside his control. The play was finally put on at the Gate Theatre,

Dublin, produced by Hilton Edwards, with Micheal McLiammoir in the chief rôle.

Before the play was produced, however, the B.B.C. asked me to write a television version of the story. This I did, and it was produced by Ian Atkins, with Antony Eustrel as the director, and my old friend Fred O'Donovan, my ideal choice for the part, as the priest.

The next morning came the news that a film producer was interested, and within the week the rights were sold to Victor Saville, who further engaged me to collaborate with him on the screen-play.

In addition to all this, a Sunday newspaper commissioned me to prepare a serial version of the story, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation commissioned it as a radio play.

Seldom can an attempt to put a spoke in a writer's wheel have done him so much good.

4

The detective novel requires a careful and elaborate structure, since plot is very important to it. The usual difficulties of narrative are removed by the fact that the detective needs to ask questions; hence dialogue forms a large proportion of most detective stories.

The technical standard is high, and characterisation, once stereotyped, is becoming far more subtle and elaborate. If your gift inclines you towards detection, you will find no lack of models. The first thing is to decide whether you are stronger in plot and mechanics or in character; then go all out for your strong point. You will not stand a chance if you attempt a story which needs the type of work at which you do not excel.

The humbler ranks of detective work—no affront intended to Sexton Blake and Co.—though the rate of pay-

ment does not exceed a guinea or thirty shillings a thousand words, are less exacting as regards structure, requiring only action and adherence to stock characters. I have met a writer of great facility in this sort of work who was able to turn out from 30,000 to 50,000 words a week!

With a few exceptions, the ceiling for the detective novel is about seven thousand copies. So, while it would not tempt the really successful novelist, except as a hobby or a sideline, detective work at all levels offers a very good chance to the ingenious and especially to the quick worker.

I have no real talent for detective stories. My first was a fluke. I had scrapped a novel, and once a year or thereabouts would fish my idiot child out of a drawer and sadly wonder if anything could be done with it. At last I saw that, if I put the last chapter first and wrote a little introductory matter, it would make a new kind of crime story.

The changeling was accepted and became a Crime Club choice; and I received a contract for three more. They were also published in America, and three of them have appeared in translations on the Continent. I mention this only to show that the medium lies wide open to any reasonably intelligent writer who can hide his limitations and write entertainingly.

CHAPTER XIV

POETRY

POETRY does not normally come within the scope of writing for a living, nor can advice be given about it. Those who are poets and wish to sell their work must examine the journals which print verse, and decide where to offer it. The rates paid are not high. At the time of writing these lines, I know hardly any publisher who dare issue a book of serious verse. Very few poets make an appreciable income from their published volumes.

That this is so may be blamed, if you like, on our country and our civilisation; but poetry is not an art that is followed in order to make money, nor do writers take to it by an act of will. A poet writes because he has to. Now and then a book of poems sells enormously, but no one can predict or plan for such a sale. Poetry is not a subject for consideration here.

CHAPTER XV

ODDS AND ENDS

Now for a few questions that are constantly asked about the disposal of one's work.

AGENTS

A literary agent's function is to look after writers' business for them. He does not become necessary until there is some business for him to look after. If you have finished a novel, a biography, any sort of full-length book, or a play, consult a good agent by all means, but not before.

Short work you should handle yourself, to start with at any rate. You cannot expect an agent to be enthusiastic about it. His commission is only 10 per cent on what he sells, and a few shillings here and there will barely pay his postage, let alone his time and trouble. Besides, many editors still prefer to make their own discoveries.

Once you are launched, an agent will be valuable in making fresh connections for you, getting commissions, etc. He will, or he should, also see that your contracts are in order. But don't imagine that he has any magic power to sell MSS. where you have failed. His job is rather to get you better prices for what you are selling already.

I have had an agent for a long time now, and could not do without him, but he did not become really useful till I had a nucleus of work for him to handle. Then he saved me time and greatly increased my earnings.

One final and very important point: if any so-called agent attempts to charge you a fee for reading your work, or on

any pretext whatever, walk out at once. Literary agents work for commission on sales made through their efforts, and you do not owe any agent a halfpenny until he has made a sale for you and drawn the money.

To the modest beginner, it often seems reasonable that an agent should be paid for reading his work. But suppose A and B go into partnership, call themselves agents, advertise for MSS., and charge even a small fee for reading them; they have made sure of their money without doing anything further. Are they going to spend postage on MSS. which they know perfectly well haven't a chance? May they not rather be tempted to keep the MSS. on their shelves till they look as if they had been travelling, and then regretfully report lack of success? So—have no truck with anyone who asks you for money before he has made a sale.

I have seen both publishers and editors throw out, without looking at them, MSS. bearing the label of one or other of these so-called agents. They know from experience that no good thing comes from such a source.

The firms or individuals who offer to doctor your MS. or make it saleable may have a little more to be said for them—perhaps—but I am not going to say it. First of all, it is your business to put your own stuff to rights. No one else can do it in your way. Second, what skilled writer is going to spend in tinkering at beginners' MSS. the hours he could spend so much more profitably in writing stories or articles himself? The people who could really help you are too busy doing their own work.

This leads to:

CORRESPONDENCE COURSES

I promised at the beginning to say something about the schools which offer to teach the craft of writing by correspondence.

Let me say at once that there can be no objection to any

of these, provided (*a*) that it is honest in stating the limits of what it can do for each pupil, (*b*) that it neither encourages nor accepts those who have no talent, and who are only likely to break their hearts if they persist, and (*c*) that the tutors give close attention and care to the correction of each pupil's exercises. It is, I think, a pity that some of these schools, in their natural eagerness to obtain pupils, promise more than they can reasonably be expected to perform. Look at it this way: They tell us, some of these establishments, in their advertisements, that editors are longing for short stories, articles, etc., and are only waiting to shower lavish cheques upon those who can supply them. It is only a matter of a little skill and tuition, and, provided we do a bit of work, the cheques will come our way. Even if this is not stated in so many words, there is a strong suggestion of it.

Well, now: is it likely that these institutions are staffed entirely by philanthropists? If these tutors are so well-versed in the secret of earning all these guineas, why don't they earn them? How is it that, instead of earning them, they prefer to correct beginners' exercises at a few shillings a time?

I did know the proprietor of one school who was something of a genius as a teacher, and certainly did enable numbers of students to sell their work. He was a born teacher in the sense that he preferred teaching to doing anything else. But it is not reasonable to suppose that all the tutors of all these schools are of his type. If they knew how to earn those guineas, they would be earning them.

I do not think that this is an unduly cynical conclusion. It does not mean, and is not for a moment intended to mean, that these schools have no useful part to play, and do not play it.

They are of immense use to people who want to write but have no notion how to set about it. They are of immense

use to people whose minds are untidy and who are unaccustomed to sorting out their ideas on paper. They are of immense use to people who have not learned, at school or elsewhere, the rudiments of grammar and composition. Every year I receive through the post more than a hundred manuscripts from total strangers. Many of these correspondents I advise to take a course at one of these schools, because I see that they will benefit from it in one way or another. Even if it does not help them to sell a single article or story, they will know much more about the work than they did before they took the course; and it will often benefit them in other ways.

For instance, a doctor friend of mine used to write bad novels and short stories. I sent him to one of these schools, where he took a course in fiction. He emerged at the other end, still writing bad novels and short stories; but presently he wrote a book on a medical subject which was immensely successful, and which he could never have written if he had not worked at the course, and accepted and learned from the criticisms handed out to him.

Having read thus far in the book, you will, I hope, believe me when I say that I would not recommend anyone to take any course unless I thought he would benefit from it, or in order to save myself the trouble of coping with him, if I could.

2

There is, however, one type of writer whom I do everything in my power to dissuade from taking one of these courses. This is the writer of genuine talent, especially if he has a streak of originality.

The reason is that the primary object of these courses is to enable you to sell your work to editors. This means in nineteen cases out of twenty, or possibly in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, learning what editors want at the

time, and endeavouring to supply it. If you have no decided bent, no way of looking on the world which belongs to you personally and to no one else, if you are not, in terms I have used previously, a creator, you may, without much damage to your gift, learn to go through the appropriate hoops and perform the approved tricks. *But they will be tricks.* You will be taught to conform to the fashions of the time.

I have really said all that need be said on this subject in the chapter on creating versus catering. These schools primarily teach people to cater. The best of them give a good deal of solid instruction besides, on writing as writing. If you embark on a course at one of them, do not see it as an avenue towards success with editors, but as a discipline which will help you to write to whatever purpose you may choose.

3

Some years ago, in the course of severe comments on the claims then made by certain of these schools, St. John Ervine challenged them to give the names of any really well-known writer whom they had trained.

The challenge was not taken up.

HANDBOOKS

The best handbook for writers was that sponsored by the Society of Authors, Artists and Composers, which had to be suspended during the war. Its special advantage is that the advertisements in it are checked and censored by the Society, removing all risk of the bogus agent or publisher.

Every writer should join the Society of Authors. The subscription is modest, and the Society takes the place of a trade union, not only negotiating collectively with publishers, the B.B.C., etc., but also scrutinising contracts for individual members, advising them, looking after their legal

interests, and, in approved instances, fighting legal cases for them at its own expense.

PUBLISHERS

Except in the case of technical work of limited appeal, memorial editions, and certain other books outside the normal run of trade, reputable publishers publish books at their own expense.

If any publisher or so-called publisher asks you to contribute to the cost of publishing your novel, biography, book of short stories, or any other book in the normal run of trade, have nothing further to do with him.

There exist firms whose practice it is to acclaim rapturously the quality of the MS. sent to them, but ask the author to contribute to the expense of publishing it. They then print as cheaply as possible a small edition of a book which, as often as not, is quite unsaleable; send out review copies which, after one glance at the publisher's name, are thrown into the wastepaper-basket; sell a handful of copies ordered by the author's friends; and pocket a tidy profit on a transaction which unfortunately does not in law amount to fraud. I have been told pitiable stories of simple people induced to part with sums they could not afford—a cook who drew out all her savings, a retired general who parted with several hundred pounds; a housekeeper whose old parents sold their little shop to finance what anyone who knew the first thing about books could have told her was hopelessly below publication standard.

If your work is any good, sooner or later a publisher will print it at his own expense. Do not let a desire to get into print persuade you to try these apparent short cuts, which, I assure you, get nobody anywhere. I have known one instance, and one only, where an author who used one of these firms got what she wanted. She happened to be in a public position which enabled her to secure a modest but

steady sale for her book. But, even so, the local printer would have done it for her at half the price.

CONTRACTS

Before signing any agreement with a publisher, have it vetted by someone who really understands the business. (The ordinary solicitor as a rule knows next to nothing about publishers' agreements. He understands the legal side, of course, but he seldom knows what the author is fairly entitled to.) The beginning author is so happy at the idea of getting into print that he will sign anything.

I have seen a contract in which the publisher wanted fifty per cent of any sums earned by an American edition of the book (an agent's fee for placing the book in America would be ten per cent); one in which the publisher claimed fifty per cent of the film rights (of which he is not entitled to a farthing); contracts which gave the publisher everything, which left the author no redress if the publisher failed to carry out his obligations, etc., etc. All of these had been signed, or were about to be signed, by innocent beginners.

Publishers are not sharks, but they often leave scope for bargaining, and expect the author or his agent to adjust what is not acceptable. So—*always* have your contract vetted by someone who knows. The Society of Authors is invaluable here.

TAILPIECE

When I had just cut loose and started as a writer, I was greeted by J. B. Priestley at a party. He was most sympathetic and helpful; and gave me a most valuable piece of advice. It was always to deliver MSS punctually to the minute.

I pass the advice on, with my blessing.

