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First Aid to Rising Authors

Many are the motives which drive men into setting foot on the thorny paths of literature; and among these impelling forces may be chiefly noted ambition.

Ambition is a very vague term. Let us get right down to the root of the matter, strip off all foolish fancies and cunning deceits and resolve the word into something more definite. Ambition for what? For fame? For notice? For an audience? For power? For a living? Indeed, for what?

Now, let it be remarked at this juncture that the discussion only appertains to individuals who really enter the arena and burden the mails in quest of a market. We have no concern with the true poet, who sings for the song's sake; who sings because force moves along the line of least resistance; who sings, in short, because he cannot help singing. Such a one does not send his songs between glued flaps to the uttermost ends of the earth, to harrow the souls of countless editors. At the best (or it may be the worst), after due persuasion, he gets out a private edition for gratuitous distribution among his nearest and dearest friends; but he does nothing more. Of course, should the note he strikes be pure and sweet and true, should it have the strong, deft, indefinable eternal touch, he cannot escape a constant increase in the number of his listeners. But it is they that bring him his market; for each warbles his songs to the other, and one to another, till at last all the world is divided "twixt warbling and clamoring for warbles, and wires and cables are hot with offers from anxious eyed publishers. In this case, it is the market which came to him; not he to the market.

But we are engaged in analyzing that ambition which leads men to make commodities of their written thoughts, and to send them forth, like turnips and cabbages, to be bought and sold. When a man does this thing, it is fair to ask why. Does he do it for fame? Let us see. In the first place, the question arises, does a man, solely impelled by a hungering for distinction or glory, ever become distinguished or glorious? It does not seem so. He may achieve notoriety, but never renown. The great men of the world become so because they had work to do in the world, and did it; because they worked busily and mightily, and lost themselves in their work, till they were surprised one day, when honors fell thick upon them, and their names were on all men's lips. And, further, for the one who would sell his thoughts merely for the reward of sitting in the high places, is it not a ridiculous way to chase fame through publishers' offices and editorial sanctums, pestering a thousand busy coat tails, the owners of which he does not even know? Surely, laurels are not for such as he is!

Then, there are other men, ambitious just to see themselves in print. Just to have their friends say, "There's Soandso. Clever fellow, don't you know? Writes for the magazines." Such a man desires to have people speak of him; to sneak for a moment into the shilling gallery, and then walk proudly among those who know him as one who has sat among the writer people; to possess a caste distinction to which he was not born, and which, because of his innate asininity, he never can earn. There are such men—buttonhole the next editor you are introduced to, and ask

him—petty, vain, and foolish creatures; but, while we weep for them, we cannot discuss as ambitious their misbegotten desires. Let us be charitable, lay the blame upon their ancestors, and pass on.

There are many others to be eliminated from the proposition; the specialists, for instance—doctors, lawyers, professors, historians, and scientists. These men write in their professional capacity, as men who have something to say. But their ambitions have been realized in the careers already chosen, and the literary work they do is only a modern phase of their careers. There are also the dabblers—people who are not abubble with some great word for the world, who are not swayed by vanity; who, by luck of birth or circumstance, have been removed from the struggle for existence, and their desire to be doing something; people who write for the same reason that they hunt, fish, travel, or attend the opera.

With all these, ambition, as a distinctive term, plays no part. To whom, then, does it apply? To two classes—those who have, or think they have, a message the world needs or would be glad to hear; and those whose lives have been cast on hard ground and in barren places, striving to make the belly need. The first is the smaller class. They are the heavenly, fire flashing, fire bringing creatures, so made that they must speak though ears be deaf and the heavens fall. History is full of them, and attests that they have spoken, whether on the graven tablets of Mount Sinai, in the warring pamphlets of a later period, or in the screaming Sunday newspaper of today. Their ambition is to teach, to help, to uplift. Self is no determining factor. They were not created primarily for their own good, but for the good of the world. Honor, glory, and power do not attract them. A crust of bread and a beggar's garb meet all their material desires. Existence is an episode; a means to an end. The world's comfort and happiness is their comfort and happiness. And, being helpers and advisers, they do not ask help or advice; nor will they take it if proffered them, for their courses are predestined, like the stars. And when all is said and done, who would have it otherwise?

But there yet remains the second class, and since it is the larger class, composed of clay born creatures like you and me, let us see the part played by ambition in rushing us into print. Ask the editors, the publishers, the booksellers, the reading public, and the answer will be, "Cash." Now, the idealist or the dreamer who has strayed thus far would better return. The question at issue is becoming brutal. Cash? Yes, cash! So put your head back among the clouds, and leave us alone. It's too bad, we know, that we are not to be satisfied with a crust of bread and a beggar's garb; but then, you see, we are only the clay born. Our sins be upon the heads of our progenitors, or whosoever had the shaping of us.

We are the ones who suffer from the belly need. We are joy loving, pleasure seeking, and we are ever hungry for the things which we deem the compensation of living. The world owes us something, and we intend dunning until we get it. True, most of the debts seem bad; wherefore, the more reason that we dun the harder. Some of us do not hold the bills to be very large, and will sign off for the most ridiculous sums. Others are more insistent; while not a few are sure they never can be paid enough for having been born. But we all consider ourselves creditors, and have early learned that we must do our own collecting.

We want good food, and plenty of it; meat as often as we feel inclined—not skirt steaks, but porterhouses; fruits; and, when the call is for cream, cream and not skim milk. We want nice houses, with sanitary plumbing and tight roofs, and we do not want to be cramped or stifled, either. We want high ceilings, big windows, and lots of sunshine; room outside for flowers to grow, and vines, and fig trees, and walks, wherein to wander in the cool of the day. And we want all kinds of nice things inside those houses—books, pictures, pianos, and couches with no end of

cushions. We want good tobacco, and we want plenty of it, so that our friends may come and help us smoke it. And if their lips turn dry, we want to give them something better to drink than the ill tasting liquid for which we are so often mulcted by bloated corporations.

And we want to marry and multiply, and we want our multiplications to be pleasures, not worries. We want them to breathe good air, to eat things which befit an animal which walks upright, to see and hear things which give soul and right understanding. We want them to grow up fat and strong, with big muscles and large lungs and clear eyes. We want them to become men and women, strong of breed and big of heart, with a knowledge of things and a power of doing. We also want for ourselves saddle horses, bicycles, and automobiles; cameras, shot guns, and jointed rods; canoes, catboats, and yawls. We want railway tickets, tents, and camping outfits. We want to climb mountains, to walk barefoot on sandy shores, to plow the salt seas in whatever way most pleases us. We are tired of poring over illustrated atlases and guidebooks, and we want to and see for ourselves. We are sick of weak photographs and worse copies of the masterpieces men have done. We want to see with our own eyes these paintings and sculptures, to hear with our own ears these singers and musicians. When India starves, or the town needs a library, or the poor man in our neighborhood loses his one horse and falls sick, we want to put our hands in our pockets and help. And to do all this, we want cash!

Because we want these things, and because we are going to rush into print to get them, it were perhaps well to know which kind of print to rush into in order to get most of them. We have chosen print because we thought we were better adapted for it; and, further, because we preferred it to pulling teeth, mending broken bones, adding up figures, or working with pick and shovel. Many men, paddling in the same boat with us, took up with literature for precisely similar reasons; but, unfortunately, they did not choose their particular field with due deliberation. So they suffered sore, and only learned of their mistake after the weary travail of years.

Grant Allen, who certainly achieved literary success, had such an experience. Returning from Jamaica to England in 1876, out of work, he decided to make his living with his pen. Prior to this, in spare moments, he had written a hundred or more magazine articles on philosophical and scientific subjects, not one of which had ever brought him in a penny. But he now devoted himself to writing a book. *Physiological Esthetics*, the publication of which cost him six hundred dollars. The reviews were favorable, and so good was it that it won him the friendship of men like Darwin and Spencer, and actually sold to the tune of nearly three hundred copies. When everything was cleaned up, he had lost, plus his time, a paltry hundred and fifty dollars. His next book was *The Color Sense*. This involved between five and six thousand references, required a year and a half to complete, and in the course of ten years netted him something like one hundred and fifty dollars. Does anybody ask why Grant Allen came to write fiction in his latter days?

So deeply did this mistake affect him, that he said, in 1893; "I had a ten years' struggle for bread, into the details of which I don't care to enter. It left me broken in health and spirit, with all the vitality and vivacity crushed out of me. If the object of this paper is to warn off ingenious and aspiring youth from the hardest worked and worst paid of all professions, I should say earnestly: "Brain for brain, in no market can you sell your abilities to such poor advantage. Don't take to literature if you've capital enough to buy a good broom, and energy enough to annex a vacant crossing."*

Whether this be so or not, is not the question at stake. The point is, that in the high tide of success Grant Allen was yet able to speak thus because of what he had suffered and undergone. As he saw it, no success under the sun could atone for the ten years' struggle. No monetary reward, no material comfort, no boundless demand for his wares, none of the satisfactions of life

which were his, could compensate for what he had lost. The fact that a man should feel so when tasting the sweets of Irving, with the struggle all behind him, serves to show the bitterness of that struggle; and, further, to illustrate the enormity of the mistake.

So it were well that we, moved towards literature by belly need, should judiciously decide what part of us is the best to put on paper. Frankly, which pays the best—fiction, poetry, essay, history, philosophy, or science? The circulating library is an artery where one may feel the pulse of the market. That which is most read is most in demand, and was there ever a circulating library which did not put forth more fiction than all other forms of printed thought combined? The bookseller will tell the same story; likewise the publisher. Many an editor has advised a contributor to turn from the more serious fields to fiction; but rarely has the opposite advice been given. And why so? Surely not because the contributor was unfitted for the other and more serious fields. There are no end of fiction writers who could turn their hands to such, and turn them well. But they do not.

Dr. Weir Mitchell is undoubtedly capable of most important and well constructed medical tomes; but he prefers to write *The Adventures of Francois*. John Uri Lloyd was guilty of various works on chemistry; but now we are all reading his *Stringtown on the Pike*. Mr. Kipling could discourse profoundly on mechanical engineering and other technical subjects: yet we are pleasuring in *Captains Courageous* and *Stalky and Company*. And Grant Allen, aforementioned, who wrote the *Color Sense*, later wrote *The Tents of Shem* and *The Woman Who Did*. Not that we would infer that these gentlemen, and a myriad others, are sufferers from the belly need. No, no; no doubt it is simply inclination and temperament which lead them into paths where the primroses are more thickly sprinkled.

Let us, however, seek more concrete evidence, taking, for instance, the case of Herbert Spencer. Mr. Spencer's contribution to the world's knowledge is so great that we cannot really appreciate it. We lack perspective. Only future centuries may measure his work for what it is; and when a thousand generations of fiction writers have been laid away, one upon another, and forgotten, Spencer will be even better known than in this day. Yet he was forced to publish his philosophy at his own expense. By 1865, because of this, he owed fifty-five hundred dollars, and was driven into making the announcement that he would discontinue issuing his work. In America, Youmans raised seven thousand dollars, and in England, Huxley and Lubbock attempted to increase artificially the list of subscribers, by inducing people to take the work—not because they intended reading it, but in order to help support it. But the death of his father so increased Spencer's income that he declined to advantage by the kindness of his friends, and went on as before, bearing the loss himself.

A glance at the other side is quite apropos. Alphonse Daudet is said to have received two hundred thousand dollars for his *Sappho*. The *Pall Mall Gazette* paid Kipling seven hundred and fifty dollars for each of his "Barrack Room Ballads." For his short stories, he has received as high as a dollar per word. What scientist or philosopher ever achieved the like? Anthony Hope reserves the copyright, and receives four hundred and fifty dollars for a magazine article. Frank R. Stockton sells the shortest of his tales for something like five hundred dollars. The Harpers are said to have paid General Lew Wallace a hundred thousand dollars for his *Prince of India*. They also bought the American rights of *Trilby* for ten thousand dollars; but they afterwards, out of the largeness of their hearts, voluntarily sent Du Maurier forty thousand dollars more.

But, though fiction does pay best, it should go without saying that the same is not true of all fiction. The poorer class periodicals pay for stories anywhere from forty cents to a dollar per thousand words, and even then they sometimes pay under protest. Not infrequently, the major

portion of such pittance is spent for stamps and stationery wherewith to dun for the remainder. There are publishers who never pay. And, so black is iniquity, some periodicals force the writer to subscribe ere they will publish his work without pay. But we who want the good things of the world will not be unwise enough to put our hands to this kind of work—unless we are incapable of better.

Then, again, there is another class of fiction to avoid, especially perilous to those of us who titubate between Grub Street and a country house flung about with twenty woodland acres. This consists of the inanely vapid sort which amuses the commonplace souls of the commonplace public, and the melodramatic messes which tickle the palates of the sensation mongers, who otherwise spend their time neurotically wandering through the yellow journals. Witness Charlotte M. Braeme and Laura Jean Libbey on the one hand, and Albert Ross and Archibald Clavering Gunter on the other. Of course it pays; but because we happen to be mercenarily inclined, there is no reason why we should lose our self respect. A man material enough of soul to work for his living is not, in consequence, so utterly bad as to be incapable of exercising choice. If scavenging be not to his liking, the more honor when he becomes a wood chopper. So with us. Though the dreamers and idealists scorn us because of our close contact with the earth, no disgrace need attach to that contact. The flesh may sit heavily upon us, yet may we stand erect and look one another in the eyes.

And in this connection we may well take a lesson from those same dreamers and idealists. Let us be fire bringers in a humble way. Let us have an eye to the ills of the world and its needs; and if we find messages, let us deliver them. Ah, pardon me, purely for materialistic reasons. We will weave about with our fictions, and make them beautiful, and sell them for goodly sums.

Of course there is a danger in this. It is liable to be catching. We may become possessed by our ideas, and be whisked away into the clouds. But we won't inoculate. Honor bright, we won't inoculate. And in the meantime, let us add to the list a few more of the good things we want.