

## HOW I TRIED TO WRITE A STORY.

AN EXPERIENCE.

**H**OW I TRIED—yes, I did try; and with what result? you will ask. I will indite my experiences, but whether this truthful record will ever see the light in all the glory of type is a question which I cannot answer. If I am to judge by experience, it *won't*. Still, one should never be debarred from doing a good deed by the shadow of failure—I mean debarred by the shadow of failure from, &c. “Style” again!

I say “style again” because my first editor—no, he

I thought something lively and domestic would have an excellent chance of acceptance. There was a man on our local paper, manager, or “compositor,” or something high up in the house, and he said, “Write by all means—you only want pen and ink and paper, *and ideas*; with these and a little knowledge of style and grammar, there you are!” “Where?” I asked. “Oh, anywhere,” he said, laughing—“Try a story—a good sensation.” So I did!

I wrote quite a sensational tale. I know it had a



“THERE WERE THREE OLD MAIDS” (p. 529).

wasn't *my* editor—he was others' editor—when he returned my first manuscript, said my style wanted cultivating. Cultivating! “How,” I asked myself, “can I cultivate style? Is it a natural production? and can it be improved like a cabbage?” He did not say: he merely suggested “cultivation”—perhaps pruning.

My first attempt at story-writing was very laudable. I had a sick aunt. I was poor, so was she, and as I lived with her, and on her, I thought a few pounds would benefit her. I had tried several other lines by way of assisting my aged and bed-ridden relative—and had noticed with what avidity she read tales and weekly newspapers. Even the pamphlets in which butter was enwrapped were devoured likewise. So I thought—not unnaturally—that if I could please my aunt, and cover myself with glory, as well as get paid for it, a story was the very thing.

The difficulty was what to write about. There were so many incidents in every-day life which are never chronicled—at least, they never appear in print—that

murder in it—I think two murders—for in the end the hero and heroine killed each other, if I recollect rightly. There was a robbery, and the robber was caught by a policeman. This was a touch of genius! Something quite novel, yet not *too* extravagant, I thought. Then the robber confessed that he had a brother in “the force,” and the very policeman who caught him *was* his brother! The heroine was a young lady of ample means, living in Houndsditch, who occupied her leisure moments in disposing of cast-off garments, till she came of age, when she intended—or was intended—to marry a sailor who had not been heard of since his ship had been wrecked off Lundyfoot Island with a cargo of tobacco—more inspiration—snuff and Lundyfoot Island!

The probability was that the sailor was dead, as he had not re-appeared. But he turned up again, and then all the other characters disappeared. The hero and heroine killed each other, and the tale wound up, naturally, because there was no person left in it. This was artistic, *I* thought.

But the editor did not. He refused it!

He thanked me, however, for the opportunity I had afforded him to read the story, and made the little suggestion about improvement in style to which I have already alluded. There was a kind of impression in my mind, after his letter had been weighed, that fiction was scarcely my strong point—I mean perfectly imaginative fiction—so I made up my mind to try a solid foundation in fact for the basis of my next venture.

There were three old maids in our neighbourhood, of whom every one said—"What characters they would make in a novel!" They were rich and eccentric—kept dogs, cats, birds, and even reptiles, as pets. Here was an opportunity not to be neglected. I studied them, called on pretended errands, interviewed them as the emissary from the "Cats' College" or the "Snakes' Home," produced handbills from the "Lost and Starving Dogs," and asked for subscriptions for "Penniless Parrots."

I succeeded! I came, I saw, I studied—I wrote a splendid story, in which those three old ladies were accurately described; their house, tastes, and surroundings all put on paper. No one could mistake them. The neighbourhood would be delighted! Just the thing which everybody had said ought to be done—I had done it—I should be a hero.

My story was posted to another editor, and then I anxiously waited the result of my application. I told him my incidents were plain unvarnished *facts*, well known—that is, reported—in our neighbourhood: that the three maiden ladies, the Misses Jones (I called them *Johns* to conceal their identity, but used their Christian names to fix character), were living models, and the whole story most interesting and laughable.

I waited six days, and not having received any reply to my letter, I called on the editor. To my surprise,



"LOOK HERE!" (p. 530).

and somewhat to my alarm, I was ushered upstairs, and into an inner room, where I was informed that Mr. Boom "would see me in a moment if I wasn't in a hurry."

Hurry, indeed! Was it likely under the circumstances? and after all, only a moment! Why, if I *had* been in a hurry, a minute or two could make no real difference. So I waited.

"Has the clock stopped?" I thought, as, after waiting nearly half an hour, I ventured to descend the stairs and ask for the editor again. "He'll see you in a



"THIS ELDERLY BUTTERFLY FLITTED FROM ONE TO THE OTHER" (p. 530).

moment," said the lad; "I'll tell him agin. What name?"

He came back and ushered me into the room.

"Good day, Mr. ———. You have something for me, I think."

"No, I sent you something a week ago, a story called 'The Three Tabbies,' a very bright—ah—amusing story, I think."

"Oh indeed. 'Three Tabbies'! Let me see—old maids?"

"Yes," I replied, delighted to believe that he had read it—"that's the idea."

"Not quite original, but interesting, no doubt. Well, Mr. ———, I have read your preface and some of the tale, and I candidly tell you that it would make an enormous sensation if all you say is true."

"It is! I can show you the old women, and can vouch for the incidents and surroundings."

"Yes? Well, then, I must return you your MS. I have no wish to be defendant in an action for libel. Why, sir, we should be prosecuted at once. Here is your story; good day."

"But what kind of story do you want?" I asked.

"Oh, there's plenty of choice—pleasing fiction, with plenty of incident."

"May I send you another tale?"

"Certainly, if you wish, on approval."

"Then you don't want tales, I suppose?"—His manner was not encouraging.

"Want tales! My dear sir, we are simply full of them. Look here!"

He opened a press, and showed me a number of compartments, alphabetically labelled, full of dusty rolls and parcels.

"There; all those are tales sent here and never used—unusable—impossible! We can, perhaps, pick out one from that cupboard that will suit at a pinch, yet it's a chance!"

"But you have stories every week, new ones; somebody must write them?"

"Yes; but you must understand that an editor has his men on whom he can depend, who he knows can do what he wants, and to whom he can apply. Ladies and gentlemen, also, whose contributions are suited to the tone of his journal or magazine, upon whom he can depend, give him no trouble. Most outsiders are amateurs, by whom the literary world is being deluged. A new flood is rising."

"But surely some amateurs can write, sir?"

"Yes, and write well. But we do not complain of them. We object to the incompetent, the writers for charity, the unlearned. A young person thinks that pen and ink and paper make the author—and many writers foolishly encourage the taste without any means of knowing the capabilities of their friends. No, sir; study, read, and then, when you have mastered the first principles—spelling, punctuation, style, originality, and freedom—write a story and bring it to me."

"I am certain you are very kind, and sure you are discouraging—but——"

"Well, I have spoken plainly and fairly. Sorry if you are offended. I have told you all this because a friend of mine has mentioned your name. But I don't advise you to write. If you do—take my advice——"

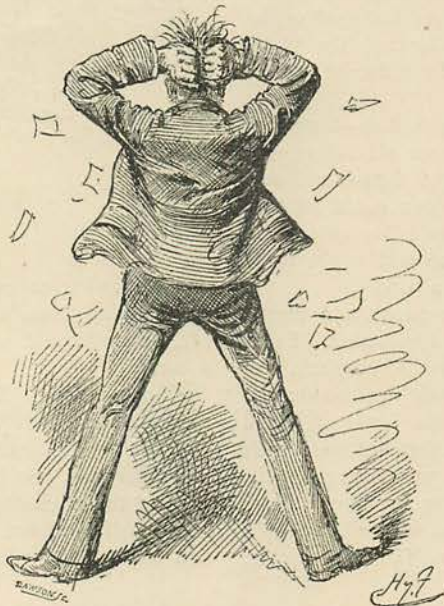
Here my friend, as I may call him, entered into an explanation which I will not give in detail, but will recur to at the end of my experiences.

When I quitted the office of the Journal, I felt rather hopeless. Then I thought of my poor aunt, and of my need for pocket-money. Try again, said Pluck—Try something else, said Prudence. Was the counsel of Prudence ever listened to? Well, not very often. Pluck carried the day. I tried again.

This time I made up my mind to succeed or perish—I mean not literally—yes, I do mean literally—that is, in a literary sense—I would do or die. I did, and I didn't die; at least, not quite. This is how I did it.

You will remember I had attempted Fiction, and Fact. Both had failed. There still remained to me a third source of gain—Compilation! Many people, of whom I had heard, maintained wives and families on Compilation. I would become a "compiler." It is an honest trade, I was sure. "All literary work is honest," said my friend the paper man, already mentioned—"Oh, yes!" I didn't *quite* like his manner when speaking of compilers; but what matter?

My first step in the direction of Compilation was to Bloomsbury. The British Museum Reading Room furnished me with materials *galore*. The difficulty was what to compile. There were so many people apparently copying books and drawings, or chatting, or sleeping. Some ladies seemed utterly unable to do anything unless some grey-haired youngish man sat beside them. There were three of these ladies, each in a different place—and this elderly butterfly flitted from one to the other, retailing amusing anecdotes, and exchanging little confidences with other men as



"I TORE THE LETTER INTO A THOUSAND PIECES" (p. 531).

he passed. One or two ladies, similarly disposed, acted likewise. Some young students chatted audibly beside me about music-halls and "black eyes," and I became more confused than ever. But I did compile something very neatly, concerning "Harmony in Hives."

I knew a little about Bees—a little too much—because our next-door neighbour had hives, and his bees swarmed once on my head. In the twenty-five minutes during which I stood still, I had ample opportunities to study bees; but I am afraid I did not avail myself of them sufficiently. Still, I picked up something—it was not much—only a mass of fifteen dead bees which had stung me, simultaneously, with unanimity deserving of all praise in any other direction. On the whole, I considered the energy of those bees mis-directed. I may be prejudiced, but that is my opinion.

So I compiled "Harmony in Hives" from three different sources, very easily. From one distinguished bee-master I copied five lines, then five from each of the others—corrected for grammar, and, of course, for "style." So in a couple of hours I had a couple of pages about bees, a "Harmony in Hives." I am quite certain not one of the authors would have recognised his own writing; and that, I believe, is the art of Compilation!

I was delighted with my effort. I read and re-read it; wrote another page in the same way; took back my books—my "authorities" I called them—and went home. There I wrote a polite note to a weekly country paper, and sent my "Harmony." In ten days, to my intense delight, I received the "proofs" of my article! Success at last—Wealth—Honour!

I was so delighted with my "Harmony in Hives" in type, that my poor aunt thought I had got a "bee in my bonnet." But it was only the natural joy at the successful results of "honest labour." Compilation for ever! "Throw Fiction to the dogs!" I exclaimed—"let Facts be as stubborn as they please—give me Compilation!"

A month passed—and I thought I would ask for my money, else the Harmony would not be complete, so I

wrote. The editor had not sent me a copy of his paper either, so I sent him a note with a modest demand for payment. I received a reply even more polite than my letter, in which the editor regretted to inform me that he did "not, as a rule, pay for occasional contributions." I dropped the letter in despair.

Not pay! Compilation not pay! I was thunder-struck. What's this "P.T.O."? "I regret further to have to mention that we had to suppress part of our second issue, in consequence of a letter from a 'bee-master,' pointing out manifest and *hardly accidental* similarities in your article to his famous paper on the 'Music of the Apiary'—yet—"

I read no more. Crushed, I tore the letter into a thousand pieces. No, let me be still accurate. I had no time to waste tearing up paper: I tore it across, and again across, and threw it from me. Something caught my eye in the envelope which I had also torn—I picked up the pieces: there was a blue paper, in pieces—a money order for seven and sixpence.

Since then I have had a little success in compiling and in translation. But I cannot say that authorship pays me. It may pay some people who are otherwise independent, and want pocket-money. I never have any. Nevertheless, I have gained some experience; my editor friend is right, and his golden rules already referred to are these—

(1) Submit a short abstract of your story.

(2) Write in a legible hand, and on only one side of your paper.

(3) Avoid sending long explanatory letters to the editor. And my own experience tells me, fourthly—

Do not stay too long in an editor's room if he grant you an interview. Say what you have to say: hear what he has to reply—and go. Don't worry him!

That is the plain statement of the case; and now, after many years, during which I have again dabbled in Fiction, and produced one or two little tales, so-called "successes" by my friends, I am jotting down my experience; whether my Facts will be accepted, I dare not say. If they are, I need hardly add that I shall be delighted, and try Fiction again—for a change! *Verb. sap.*

H. FRITH.

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## GRANDMOTHER'S MISSION.

COME, my darling, sit beside me,  
There are words I wish to say;  
Patient be, and do not chide me  
If my speech should go astray.  
I am old—yes, very old—dear,  
And my days are nearly o'er;  
Come and hear the story told, dear,  
That I've longed to tell before.

'Tis a lesson I would teach you,  
For you now a maiden grow,  
And the tones of love will reach you  
Ere their sense you scarcely know.

Specious words will be outpouring;  
Trust them not in whole or part,  
Till you feel your soul assuring  
That they come from out the heart.

Many are the lives, my dearie,  
Doomed to sorrow and despair;  
Many are the lives full weary,  
Caused by words as false as fair.  
Chide me not; I only tell you  
Altogether for the best;  
Let not wealth to bondage sell you,—  
There! your heart will know the rest.

EDWARD OXENFORD.