"O. HENRY" (SIDNEY PORTER) AS HIS INTIMATES KNEW HIM

Quiet, Modest, Reserved, He Avoided the Limelight and Found Happiness in Odd Corners of New York That Furnished Types and Plots for His Delightful Stories.

WHEN the writer whom the American public in the brief space of a half dozen years had come to know and love under the pen-name of O. Henry, died last Sunday all the newspapers of the following morning had column-long stories of his life.

But one very interesting fact about these "obits" escaped the notice of the average newspaper reader who peruses only his favorite "daily"—all the stories were alike, fact-for-fact, some of them word-for-word.

The reason was simple. The "boneyards," whither a reporter goes for clippings when a celebrity dies, marries, or otherwise comes under the newspaper limelight, contained but a single account of O. Henry's life. This was an interview published a year ago in THE SUNDAY TIMES, the first and last interview O. Henry ever gave, the only time he could be induced to talk about himself for publication.

THE TIMES reporter well remembers the difficulty of getting that interview. After being assigned to the "story," it took him six weeks to corner O. Henry, and this in spite of the fact that the pursued author's publishers were accomplices before the fact in the cornering process.

Success was only attained through subterfuge. Peyton Steger of Doubleday, Page & Co., who during the last few years of the author's life acted as his bookkeeper, banker, and general financial guardian, learned one afternoon that O. Henry was in his rooms at the Caledonia.

He led the reporter thither, pointed out the door, and revealed the countersign, one loud knock followed by two quick taps. This was the author's appointed signal that Desirables were without his door.

Even with O. Henry backed into his easy chair the interviewer's task was like the cross-examination of an unwilling witness. The author didn't want to talk about himself; he was much more interested in asking the reporter about the things he had seen and the people he had met.

And here a little incident may be told which shows the kind of character that interested the author.

"Did you ever meet Fred, the Great and Only Fred?" asked the reporter.

"No."

"Well, Fred is a bartender in a little place just off Park Row. Bartending is a profession with him. He knows liquors as a doctor knows his drugs, and his patrons regard him in the same light. They go in and say: 'Fred, I'm all in this morning. Give me a bracer.' Then Fred begins—a dash from this bottle, a squirt from another—and finally the most wonderful new-life beverage is standing on the buffet bar.

"But Fred himself has never swallowed a drop of liquor in his life. In the evenings he goes regularly to the opera, and on Sundays, after his six days of bartending, he sings in a church choir."

"I'd like to meet Fred," said the author, who has spent much time during the last few years inventing excuses and devising stratagems by which he could dodge invitations to meet or to dine with society lion-chasers.

For when success, sudden and big, came upon O. Henry, he was showered with invitations. People wanted to meet the man who had introduced them so intimately to the under-dog layer of society. But O. Henry would never consent to be lionized.

Gilman Hall, one of the editors of Everybody's magazine, was one of the author's few intimate friends in New York. Mr. Hall tells the story that once, by taking O. Henry at short notice, he surprised him into going to his home to dinner and meeting some people who walked in conventional paths.

O. Henry was a bohemian by instinct, and—unlike most of that vagabond sect, even those great prototypes of bohemianism, Marcel and Rodolphe—he remained a bohemian after artistic and financial success had been achieved.

To find another like him, one must leave these times when Pegasus works in harness and, like a hack horse, has his prescribed hours of labor, his prescribed amount of daily toil. One must go back to old Grub Street. Oliver Goldsmith was perhaps his nearest kin temperamentally: irresponsible, careless of time and money, loving the man and woman who are at the bottom of the social heap.

Carelessness with money was one of the great handicaps of O. Henry's life. It slipped through his pockets as though they were sieves. One of the best paid of America's short story writers, receiving $700 and $800 a story, he was always hard up, always getting advances from editors and publishers, always writing against an empty purse.

One of his friends who refused to be quoted said: "Any one who looked like an under-dog could always 'touch' O. Henry. He couldn't bear to see any one who seemed to be in want. Why I've seen him give a five-dollar bill to a hungry-eyed sandwich-board man. Has-beens appealed just as strongly to his sympathy. Down-at-the-heel actors, writers, and artists could always get 'a loan,' as he insisted upon calling it."

Just down the street from where he used to live in the Caledonia was a quiet little bar that he used to patronize. It was presided over by two bartenders whom he christened, because of certain ear-marks, Robert Lorraine and John Drew.

It was "John Drew" who talked to the reporter the other morning.

"He use to drop in pretty regularly about 10 o'clock every morning. Sazerac cocktail was his favorite drink. Some days the telephone bell would ring and he would tell me to send over to his rooms a bottle of Scotch. Then I knew that he was writing. But I never saw him drink Scotch at the bar.

"He was always very quiet; I never heard him make a joke or a funny crack. He was distant with strangers. With the exception of a few friends who occasionally came in with him, I never saw him get into conversation with any one. But he was always listening and watching.

"He had a heart like that" (indicating with his hands the size of a big pumpkin.) "If he had $10 he'd give it to you, and then perhaps come over and borrow a half-dollar from me. He was always helping some of the boys out, and never a come-back. I've heard that from lots of people."

Before we leave this barroom a scrap of conversation should be told which, of course whimsically, reveals O. Henry's opinion on The Great Question.

The author and Peyton Steger were standing there one midnight when the latter asked:

"What do you think about the hereafter?"

Said O. Henry:

"I had a little dog,
And his name was Rover.
And when he died
He died all over."

Then he changed the subject.

He was a man who was never fooled about himself. Last September there came one of those periods when neither the idea nor the words would come. Mr. Steger thought a change of air and scene might be beneficial.

"Why don't you run down to Asheville, N. C., to finish this story?" he asked.

"That wouldn't do any good."

"Why not?"

"It would be like the man who said he was going to win the broad jump because he was going to take a three-mile running start."

Some months ago he disappeared from his rooms in the Caledonia. A few days later Mr. Steger was called to the telephone. O. Henry was at the other end of the wire.

"Hello, hello. That you Cul'nel. Say, I've got to have $58.14 at 11:20 to-morrow morning."

The exactness of the amount and of the time did not surprise the hearer; specifying sums to the penny (usually 14) and the hour of need to the minute were two habits of O. Henry.

"Well, I'll see if I can't fix it for you. But where in thunder are you?"

"I've taken quarters in the Chelsea. Come and see me."

A work table, a chair, a bed, and O. Henry were discovered occupying a six-room apartment in the Chelsea. The author was in a blue dressing gown.

"Excuse my negligée. My clothes are out being pressed."

"But what are you doing here?"

"Why I owed them so much at the Caledonia that it got on my mind and I couldn't work there. So I've taken these rooms."

"Of course you've given up your rooms at the Caledonia?"

"Oh no. I've got these, too. I just wanted to temporarily get out of the atmosphere of indebtedness. As soon as I get a little ahead I'll square up and move back."

One day he surprised Mr. Steger by saying:

"You've absolutely crippled me. I can't write any more."

"Why, how's that?"

"I can't use any words beginning with M. You borrowed the M volume of my encyclopedia and haven't returned it."

It was perhaps because of this lesson that, loaning a book another time, he kept a pair of the borrower's shoes as hostage. Some time later he said to the borrower:

"That was a nice pair of shoes of yours. But there was one that I couldn't get on. I finally discovered that there was a sock in the toe. You may keep the book now."

"O. HENRY."

One of his few intimates was Will Irwin. One evening he went with Will Irwin and Gelett Burgess to a chafing-dish supper in an artist's studio.

"You remember," said Mr. Irwin, in telling the story, "Burgess's Lines to a Purple Cow. They became famous throughout the country, and Burgess, much to his disgust, was always pointed out and spoken of as the author of A Purple Cow. It was not until he wrote his Bromidiom Theory that this hoodoo was lifted.

"Burgess got to hate those lines, and I only saw him laugh once at any reference to them. It happened on the evening I'm telling you of.

"O. Henry had been put to work beating eggs. For ten minutes he beat, patient, silently. Then he began:

"I never beat a rotten egg,
I never hope to beat one.
But I can tell you anyhow,
I'd rather beat than eat one."

"It is a bromidiom to say of a big man that you would never perceive it from meeting him," said Mr. Irwin. "Superficially, that was true of O. Henry. For on the surface he was a silent, a shy man. His favorite diversion, he used to say, was to sit around a table where three or four pleasant people were gathered together, and be free from any worry about food and drink and just listen. He had the faculty of sitting perfectly silent and yet of stimulating the talk rather than deadening it. And about once in ten minutes he would throw in a remark, delivered in his low, apologetic Southern voice, which went straight to the heart of the thing.

"It was then, I suppose, that a clever stranger would have recognized a big man in this suppressed, middle-aged person who sat so quietly in the corner and was yet the head of every table where he sat.

"He was one of the three or four in this generation—no more—who generate stories spontaneously, who see the life about them in story form. When the mood was on him he would look through a café window at a cab—and flash! would come a story. But composition was with him a fearful labor—a proof that easy writing is very hard reading.

"As an editor, I was waiting for a story which he was under contract to deliver. On the last possible day I went down to his workshop to get it. He was still at work on a pad of ruled yellow copy paper. I waited all the morning, reading a newspaper in a corner, while he finished it.

"The story seemed to come at the rate of about one short sentence in a quarter of an hour. He would run his hands through his hair, gaze at the ceiling, bite his pencil, put down three words, sit like a rock gazing at the wall, put down three words more.

"I grew tired from sympathy as I watched him over my newspaper.

"People have told me that Porter was lazy. Judging from the amount of stuff he published and the rate at which he turned it out, I should call him one of the most industrious literary workers of his time. Every man to his tools. Porter's conception was a flashing sabre, his execution a delving spade."

Robert H. Davis, known to newspaper men and writers as "Bob" Davis of the Munsey Company, was one of O. Henry's closest friends. Mr. Davis was working on The World when he first met the author. In 1903 F. H. L. Noble was Sunday editor of The World. A few of O. Henry's stories had then appeared in magazines, particularly in Ainslee's, which was then edited by Gilman Hall.

This was the assignment that Mr. Davis received from his Sunday editor:

"Go out and locate this man O. Henry. He's got a breezy, snappy style that I like. I want to get him to write introductions to our Sunday stories. Offer him $40 a week. If that doesn't catch, jump to $50. The limit is $60.

Mr. Davis looked all over the city and finally heard that the author was living in a lodging or boarding house in West Twenty-fourth Street. Mr. Davis went from house to house, and finally at an obscure hotel, the Hotel Marty, got on a warm trail. The waiter, an Italian, whom he interviewed, didn't know O. Henry, but he thought there was a man who wrote living somewhere upstairs. So Mr. Davis started upstairs on a room-to-room canvass.

He began on the top floor. The first door he knocked on was opened by a short, stocky man in his shirt-sleeves.

"The moment I saw that big, splendidly shaped head and those clear, keen eyes," said Mr. Davis, "I knew I had at last found O. Henry. He asked me to come in, apologizing for the room, for his shirt-sleeves. I told him my mission.

"'Oh, thank you,' answered O. Henry. 'But I don't think I can do it. I can't write except to please myself, and to attempt newspaper work—so many stories that must be delivered on time—no, I know I can't do it. As for this other work, it often comes slowly, seldom the way I want it to. You know I'm always afraid that I'll get hungry in the middle of a story.'

"The picture of that gifted man sitting there," continued Mr. Davis, "afraid of going hungry in the middle of a story! Well, anyhow, I cut out the forty and the fifty-dollar proposals and offered him $60 a week. I said:

"'I know this writing game here in New York. Now, take my advice: It doesn't do to look hungry or seedy or anxious; this $60 will be sure, ready money. It won't take you long to write the introductions, and the rest of the time you can give with an easy mind to your story writing.'

"'O. Henry took the advice. But after he had been writing for us a few months there was a change in editorial management. The new editor said: 'These O. Henry introductions are no good. Fire him!' And so he was fired.

"But in less than a year O. Henry's name began to achieve prominence in the magazine field. His stories were talked about. And the editor said: 'Who is this man O. Henry?' 'Why,' I replied, 'he's the man you fired a few months ago.' 'Get him. I want him to write a short story of New York life each week for us.' And so O. Henry was got—this time at the rate of $100 for a thousand-word story. These stories, turned out by the week, were the stories afterward collected under the book title of 'The Four Million.'"

A few years later as an editor of the Munsey publications Mr. Davis again secured O. Henry as a contributor. He signed a five-year contract to have first choice of all his magazine contributions.

The letters, addressed to Mr. Davis; which follow, tell their own story of the friendship between the two men, and reveal the whimsical, happy-go-lucky, improvident spirit of the author.

Thursday.

Dear Old Bill: At last I have dove anchor at — Waverley Place, and have an address to give you. I am in Gilman Hall's apartment, and can now continue to turn out the old blown-in-the bottle brand of fiction.

I am a man of damn few words. I want $125 (don't read that a dollar and a quarter.) That in addition to the $150 that I screwed out of Merwin during your absence will make a total of $275, which will be more than covered by the moral and entertaining tale that I hereby agree to have finished and delivered to you all by 10:30 A. M. Monday, Aug. 27, or perhaps earlier.

Pursue the liberal policy, and get the best stuff.

Personally and officially I greet you and make obeisance.

Consistently,
BILL THE BEDOUIN.

P. S.—I want the dough, not a check, (but a check will do,) by the bearer, or else a few well-chosen words of refusal.

Thursday.

Dear Bill: Will you be nice enough to let me go over the proofs of all my stories before they are published? The printer, with his usual hellfiredness, seems to always butcher the meaning by setting up words that do not appear in the MS. Also please kill your profreader.

Hoping, &c., yours,
O. H.

Dear Bill: Here she are. I reckon you or some intelligent person in the offfice can tell where the patches fit. If you don't like the new title say so. There are others.

Fulsomely,
WILLIE.

Mon Cher Bill: Can you raise the immediate goods for this, and once more rescue litule Ruby from certain death?

The big story will be handed in Monday for you to try on the piano. From next week on I'll show you a story every week. I'm going to make some of the best samples of 2,000 and 2,500 word stuff that's possible. That's the length that counts.

I'm feeling fine, and hope these few lines will—say, don't forget to send the $25.

Don't do it if you refuse to do it.

Yours ever,
O. H.

Saturday.

Hello, Mr. Bill:

Say—a fool and his money, &c.

Is there anything doing for about $49.98 to-day for the purpose of purchasing things offered for sale in the marts? I had to send most of all that stuff abroad that you gimme the other day.

Don't press the matter if it seems out of order. I'll be even and ahead of the game pretty soon. There will come to you on Monday the new story.

Greetings and undying veneration in either case.
O. H.

Monday.

Dear Bill: Herewith submitted one MS. Have another one ready to typewrite, which you can read to-morrow.

Give the full speed ahead signal and whoop 'em through, pro or con. Great business. The mill is grinding at the old gait. Yours,
BILL 2D.

Monday.

Dear Mister: Would you put a tall on this kite for me again? She will fly on the date advertised. Please send the cash if you've got it on hand.

Say—the story will be brought to you by me on WEDNESDAY. It will be an all right one.

Hoping, &c., and yours truly,
O. H.

These rollicking, tomfoolery letters hardly prepare one for the confession that O. Henry once made to Mr. Davis.

"When he was at the height of his success, he said to me: 'I'm a failure. I always have the feeling that I want to get back somewhere, but I don't know just where it is.

"'My stories? No, they don't satisfy me. I see them in print and I wonder why people like them. I wait till they come out in book form, hoping that they may look better to me then. But they don't. It depresses me to have people point me out or introduce me as "a celebrated author." It seems such a big label for such picayune goods.

"'Sometimes I feel that I'd like to get into some business; perhaps some clerkship; some place where I could see that I was doing something tangible, something worth while.'"

This was the man that Gilman Hall sums up in this way:

"The keynote of Mr. O. Henry's career, to my mind, was his essential democracy. Born in North Carolina, he was a descendant through his mother's side from two Governors of the State. From his father he came from a stock much more closely allied to the people—nearer to Abraham Lincoln's common people. A number of times he told me that he was part cavalier and part common folks. His early recollections were Southern.

"At eighteen he went to Texas, and there on the ranch of Lee Hall he learned the real democracy of America—the democracy of the pioneer and of the open air. Before he ever wrote a story, he had had more experiences and had more mature judgments upon people than come to many of us through a whole lifetime. All these experiences of his earlier life enabled him to read various types of people in later life with understanding.

"The result has been a work which is so essentially American and so democratic that we shall find it hard to supply the peculiar quality which he gave to American literature."

His First Outing

HAD Robert been ill for any great length of time?" asked a distant relative as the funeral procession made its way to the cemetery.

"Yes, indeed," responded one of the mourners. "Why, he hasn't been out of the house for six months until to-day."

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