

COOK WILLIAM WALLACE

THE FICTION FACTORY

William Cook

The Fiction Factory

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John Milton Edwards

The Fiction Factory

THE WRITER
TO THE READER

It was in 1893 that John Milton Edwards (who sets his hand to this book of experiences and prefers using the third person to overworking the egotistical pronoun) turned wholly to his pen as a means of livelihood. In this connection, of course, the word "pen" is figurative. What he really turned to was his good friend, the Typewriter.

For two years previous to this (to him) momentous event he had hearkened earnestly to the counsel that "literature is a good stick but a poor crutch," and had cleaved to a position as paymaster for a firm of contractors solely because of the pay envelope that insured food and raiment. Spare hours alone were spent in his Fiction Factory. In the summer of 1893, however, when his evening and Sunday work brought returns that dwarfed his salary as paymaster, he had a heart to heart talk with Mrs. John Milton Edwards, and, as a result, the paymaster-crutch was dropped by the wayside. This came to pass not without many fears and anxieties, and later there arrived gray days when the literary pace became unsteady and John Milton turned wistful eyes backward in the direction of his discarded crutch. But he never returned to pick it up.

From then till now John Milton Edwards has worked early and late in his Factory, and his output has supported himself and wife and enabled him to bear a number of other financial responsibilities. There have been fat years and lean – years when plenty invited foolish extravagance and years when poverty compelled painful sacrifices – yet John Milton Edwards can truly say that the work has been its own exceeding great reward.

With never a "best seller" nor a successful play to run up his income, John Milton has, in a score and two years of work, wrested more than \$100,000 from the tills of the publishers. Short stories, novelettes, serials, books, a few moving picture scenarios and a little verse have all contributed to the sum total. Industry was rowelled by necessity, and when a short story must fill the flour barrel, a poem buy a pair of shoes or a serial take up a note at the bank, the muse is provided with an atmosphere at which genius balks. True, Genius has emerged triumphant from many a Grub street attic, but that was in another day when conditions were different from what they are now. In these twentieth century times the writer must give the public what the publisher thinks the public wants. Although the element of quality is a *sine qua non*, it seems not to be incompatible with the element of quantity.

It is hoped that this book will be found of interest to writers, not alone to those who have arrived but also to those who are on the way. Writers with name and fame secure may perhaps be entertained, while writers who are struggling for recognition may discover something helpful here and there throughout John Milton Edwards' twenty-two years of literary endeavor. And is it too fair a hope that the reader of fiction will here find something to his taste? He has an acquaintance with the finished article, and it may chance that he has the curiosity to discover how the raw material was taken, beaten into shape and finally laid before his eyes in his favorite periodical.

John Milton Edwards, in the pages that follow, will spin the slender thread of a story recounting his successes and failures. Extracts of correspondence between him and his publishers will be introduced, and other personal matters will be conjured with, by way of illustrating the theme and giving the text a helpful value. This slender thread of narrative will be broken at intervals to permit of sandwiching in a few chapters not germane to the story but *en rapport* with the work which made the story possible. In other words, while life goes forward within the Factory-walls it will not be amiss to give some attention to the Factory itself, to its equipment and methods, and to anything of possible interest that has to do with its output.

And finally, of course John Milton Edwards is not the author's real name. Shielded by a *nom de plume*, the author's experiences here chronicled may be of the most intimate nature. In point of fact, they will be helpful and entertaining in a direct ratio with their sincerity and frankness.

"A LITTLE GIFT"

A little gift I have of words,
A little talent, Lord, is all,
And yet be mine the faith that girds
An humble heart for duty's call.

Where Genius soars to distant skies,
And plumes herself in proud acclaim,
O Thou, let plodding talent prize
The modest goal, the lesser fame.

Let this suffice, make this my code,
As I go forward day by day,
To cheer one heart upon life's road,
To ease one burden by the way.

I would not scale the mountain-peak,
But I would have the strength of ten
To labor for the poor and weak,
And win my way to hearts of men.

A little gift Thou gavest me,
A little talent, Lord, is all,
Yet humble as my art may be
I hold it waiting for Thy call.

September 20, 1911.

John Milton Edwards.

I

AUT FICTION,
AUT NULLUS.

"Well, my dear," said John Milton Edwards, miserably uncertain and turning to appeal to his wife, "which shall it be – to write or not to write?"

"To write," was the answer, promptly and boldly, "to do nothing else but write."

John Milton wanted her to say that, and yet he did not. Her conviction, orally expressed, had all the ring of true metal; yet her husband, reflecting his own inner perplexities, heard a false note suggesting the base alloy of uncertainty.

"Hadn't we better think it over?" he quibbled.

"You've been thinking it over for two years, John, and this month is the first time your returns from your writing have ever been more than your salary at the office. If you can be so successful when you are obliged to work nights and Sundays – and most of the time with your wits befogged by office routine – what could you not do if you spent ALL your time in your Fiction Factory?"

"It may be," ventured John Milton, "that I could do better work, snatching a few precious moments from those everlasting pay-rolls, than by giving all my time and attention to my private Factory."

"Is that logical?" inquired Mrs. John Milton.

"I don't know, my dear, whether it's logical or not. We're dealing with a psychological mystery that has never been broken to harness. Suppose I have the whole day before me and sit down at my typewriter to write a story. Well and good. But getting squared away with a fresh sheet over the platen isn't the whole of it. The Happy Idea must be evolved. What if the Happy Idea does not come when I am ready for it? Happy Ideas, you know, have a disagreeable habit of hiding out. There's no hard and fast rule, that I am aware, for capturing a Happy Idea at just the moment it may be most in demand. There's lightning in a change of work, the sort of lightning that clears the air with a tonic of inspiration. When I'm paymastering the hardest I seem to be almost swamped with ideas for the story mill. Query: Will the mill grind out as good a grist if it grinds continuously? If I were sure – "

"It stands to reason," Mrs. Edwards maintained stoutly, "that if you can make \$125 a month running the mill nights and Sundays, you ought to be able to make a good deal more than that with all the week days added."

"Provided," John Milton qualified, "my fountain of inspiration will flow as freely when there is nothing to hinder it as it does now when I have it turned off for twelve hours out of the twenty-four."

"Why shouldn't it?"

"I don't know, my dear," John Milton admitted, "unless it transpires that my inspiration isn't strong enough to be drawn on steadily."

"Fudge," exclaimed Mrs. Edwards.

"And then," her husband proceeded, "let us consider another phase of the question. The demand may fall off. The chances are that it WILL fall off the moment the gods become aware of the fact that I am depending on the demand for our bread and butter. Whenever a thing becomes absolutely essential to you, Fate immediately obliterates every trail that leads to it, and you go wandering desperately back and forth, getting more and more discouraged until – "

"Until you drop in your tracks," broke in Mrs. Edwards, "and give up – a quitter."

"Quitter" is a mean word. There's something about it that jostles you, and treads on your toes.

"I don't think I'd prove a quitter," said John Milton, "even if I did get lost in a labyrinth of hard luck. It's the idea of losing you along with me that hurts."

"I'll risk *that*."

"This is a panic year," John Milton went on, "and money is hard to get. It is hardly an auspicious time for tearing loose from a regular pay-day."

John Milton and his wife lived in Chicago, and the firm for which John Milton worked had managed to keep afloat by having an account in two banks. When a note fell due at one bank, the firm borrowed from the other to pay it. Thus, by borrowing from Peter to pay Paul, and from Paul to pay Peter, the contractors juggled with their credit and kept it good. Times were hard enough in all truth, yet they were not so hard in Chicago as in other parts of the country. The World's Columbian Exposition brought a flood of visitors to the city, and a flood of cash.

"Bother the panic!" jeered Mrs. Edwards. "It won't interfere with your work. Pleasant fiction is more soothing than hard facts. People will read all the more just to forget their troubles."

"I'm pretty solid with the firm," said John Milton, veering to another tack. "I'm getting twelve hundred a year, now, with an extra hundred for taking care of the Colonel's books."

"Is there any future to it?"

"There is. I can buy stock in the company, identify myself with it more and more, and in twenty or thirty years, perhaps, move into a brownstone front on Easy street."

"No, you couldn't!" declared Mrs. Edwards.

"Why not?"

"Why, because your heart wouldn't be in your work. Ever since you were old enough to know your own mind you have wanted to be a writer. When you were twelve years old you were publishing a little paper for boys – "

"It was a four-page paper about the size of lady's handkerchief," laughed John Milton, "and it lasted for two issues."

"Well," insisted his wife, "you've been writing stories more or less all your life, and if you are ever a success at anything it will be in the fiction line. You are now twenty-six years old, and if you make your mark as an author it's high time you were about it. Don't you think so? If I'm willing to chance it, John, you surely ought to be."

"All right," was the answer, "it's a 'go.'"

And thus it was that John Milton Edwards reached his momentous decision. Perhaps you, who read these words, have been wrestling soulfully with the same question – vacillating between authorship as a vocation or as an avocation. Edwards made his decision eighteen years ago. At that time conditions were different; and it is doubtful whether, had he faced conditions as they are now, he would have decided to run his Fiction Factory on full time.

"An eye for an eye."

A writer whose stories have been used in the Munsey publications, *Pearson's* and other magazines, writes:

"How is this as an illustration of timeliness, or the personal element in writing? – I went in to see Mr. Matthew White, Jr., one day with a story and he said he couldn't read it because he had a sore eye. I had an eye for that eye as fiction, so I sat down and wrote a story in two hours' time about an editor who couldn't read any stories on account of his bum lamp, whereby he nearly missed the best story for the year. Mr. White was interested in the story mainly because he had a sore eye himself and was in full sympathy with the hero. I took the story down and read it aloud to him, selling it, of course. The story was called, 'When the Editor's Eye Struck.'"

(Talk about making the most of your opportunities!)

The Bookman, somewhere, tells of a lady in the Middle West who caught the fiction fever and wrote in asking what price was paid for stories. To the reply that

"\$10 a thousand was paid for good stories" she made written response: "Why, it takes me a week to write one story, and \$10 for a thousand weeks' work looks so discouraging that I guess I'd better try something else."

Poeta nascitur; non fit. This has been somewhat freely translated by one who should know, as "The poet is born; not paid."

II

AS THE TWIG IS BENT

Edwards' earliest attempt at fiction was a dramatic effort. The play was in three acts, was entitled "Roderigo, the Pirate Chief," and was written at the age of 12. The young playwright was Roderigo, the play was given in the loft of the Edwards barn, and twenty-five pins was the price of admission (thirty if the pins were crooked). The neighborhood suffered a famine in pins for a week after the production of the play. The juvenile element clamored to have the performance repeated, but the patrons' parents blocked the move by bribing the company with a silver dollar. It was cheaper to pay over the dollar than to buy back several thousand pins at monopoly prices.

In 1881 "Simon Girty; or, The Border Boys of the West" was offered. The first performance (which was also the last) was given in Ottawa, Kansas, and the modest fee of admission was 5 cents. The play was very favorably received and might have had an extended run had not the mothers of the "border boys" discovered that they were killing Indians with blank cartridges. Gathering in force, the mothers stormed the barn and added a realistic climax to the fourth act by spanking Simon Girty and disarming his trusty "pards."

Shortly after this, the musty records show that Edwards turned from the drama to narrative fiction, and endeavored successfully to get into print. The following, copied from an engraved certificate, offers evidence of his budding aspirations:

Frank Leslie's

BOYS' AND GIRLS' WEEKLY

Award of Merit

This is to certify that John Milton Edwards,

Ottawa, Kansas, has been awarded Honorable

Mention for excellence in literary composition

New York, Oct. 30, 1882. Frank Leslie

This "honorable mention" from the publisher of a paper, which young Edwards looked forward to from week to week and read and re-read with fascination and delight, must have inoculated him for all time with the fiction virus. Forthwith he began publishing a story paper on a hektograph. Saturday was the day of publication, and the office of publication was the loft of the Edwards' barn. Even at

that early day the author understood the advantage of holding "leave-offs"¹ in serial work. He was altogether too successful with his leave-offs, for his readers, gasping for the rest of the story and unable to wait for the next issue of the paper, mobbed the office and forced him, with a threat of dire things, to tell them the rest of the yarn in advance of publication. After that, of course, publication was unnecessary.

It was a problem with young Edwards, about this time, to secure enough blank paper for his scribbling needs. Two old ledgers, only partly filled with accounts fell into his hands, and he used them for his callow essays at authorship. He has those ledgers now, and derives considerable amusement in looking through them. They prove that he was far from being a prodigy, and reflect credit on him for whipping his slender talents into shape for at least a commercial success in later life. Consider this:

Scene III.

J. B. – We made a pretty good haul that time, Jim.

B. J. – Yes, I'd like to make a haul like that every night. We must have got about \$50,000.

J. B. – Now we will go and get our boots blacked, then go and get us a suit of clothes, and then skip to the West Indies.

Here a \$50,000 robbery had been committed and the thieves were calmly discussing getting their boots blacked and replenishing their wardrobe (one suit of clothes between them seems to have been enough) before taking to flight. Shades of Sherlock, how easily a boy of 12 makes business for the police department!

Or consider this gem from Act II. The aforesaid "J. B." and "B. J." have evidently been "pinched" while getting their boots blacked or while buying their suit of clothes:

J. B. – We're in the jug at last, Jim, and I'm afraid we'll be sentenced to be shot.

B. J. – Don't be discouraged, Bill.

Enter Sleek, the detective.

Sleek. – We've got you at last, eh?

J. B. – You'll never get the money, just the same.

Sleek. – We'll shoot you if you don't tell where it is like a dog.

Then here's something else which seems to prove that young Edwards occasionally fell into rhyme:

Oh, why cut down those forests,
Our forests old and grand?
And oh, why cheat the Indians
Out of all their land?
Enclosed by civilization,
Surrounded they by towns,
Calmly when this life is done
They seek their hunting-grounds!

John Milton Edwards has always had a place in his heart for the red man, and another for his country's vanishing timber. He is to be congratulated on his youthful sentiments if not on the way they were expressed.

¹ "Leave-off" – the place where a serial is broken, and the words "To be continued in our next" appear. Mr. Matthew White, Jr., Editor of the *Argosy*, is supposed to have coined the expression. At any rate, Mr. White has a great deal to do with "leave-offs" and ought to know what to call them.

In 1882 the Edwards family removed to Chicago. There were but three in the family – the father, the mother, and John Milton. The boy was taken from the Ottawa high school and, as soon as they were all comfortably settled in the "Windy City," John Milton made what he has since believed to be the mistake of his career. His father offered him his choice of either a university or a business education. He chose to spend two years in Bryant & Stratton's Business College. His literary career would have been vastly helped had he taken the other road and matriculated at either Harvard or Yale. He had the opportunity and turned his back on it.

He was writing, more or less, all the time he was a student at Bryant & Stratton's. The school grounded him in double-entry bookkeeping, in commercial law, and in shorthand and typewriting.

When he left the business college he found employment with a firm of subscription book publishers, as stenographer. There came a disagreement between the two partners of the firm, and the young stenographer was offered for \$1,500 the retiring partner's interest. The elder Edwards, who would have had to furnish the \$1,500, could not see anything alluring in the sale of books through agents, and the deal fell through. Two years later, while John Milton was working for a railroad company as ticket agent at \$60 a month, his old friend of the subscription book business dropped in on him and showed him a sworn statement prepared for Dun and Bradstreet. *He had cleared \$60,000 in two years!* Had John Milton bought the retiring partner's interest he would have been worth half a million before he had turned thirty.

The fiction bee, however, was continually buzzing in John Milton's brain. He had no desire to succeed at anything except authorship.

Leaving the railroad company, he went to work for a boot and shoe house as bill clerk, at \$12 a week. The death of his father, at this time, came as a heavy blow to young Edwards; not only that, but it brought him heavy responsibilities and led him seriously to question the advisability of ever making authorship – as he had secretly hoped – a vocation. His term as bill clerk was a sort of probation, allowing the young man time, in leisure hours, further to try out his talent for fiction. He was anxious to determine if he could make it a commercial success, and so justify himself in looking forward to it as a life work.

The elder Edwards had been a rugged, self-made man with no patience for anything that was not strictly "business." He measured success by an honorable standard of dollars and cents. For years previous to his death he had been accustomed to see his son industriously scribbling, with not so much as a copper cent realized from all that expenditure of energy. Naturally out of sympathy with what he conceived to be a waste of time and effort, Edwards, Sr., did not hesitate to express himself forcibly. On one occasion he looked into his son's room, saw him feverishly busy at his desk and exclaimed, irascibly, "Damn the verses!"

Young Edwards' mother, on the other hand, was well educated and widely read; indeed, in a limited way, she had been a writer herself, and had contributed in earlier life to *Harper's Magazine*. She could see that perhaps a pre-natal influence was shaping her son's career, and understood how he might be working out his apprenticeship. Thus she became the gentle apologist, excusing the boy's unrewarded labors, on the one hand, and the father's *cui bono* ideas, on the other.

The Chicago Times, in its Sunday edition, used a story by young Edwards. It was not paid for but it was published, and the elder Edwards surreptitiously secured many copies of the paper and sent them to distant friends. Thus, although he would not admit it, he showed his pride in his son's small achievement.

From the boot and shoe house young Edwards went back to the railroad company again; from there, when the railroad company closed its Chicago office, he went to a firm of wholesalers in coke and sewer-pipe; and, later, he engaged as paymaster with the firm of contractors. Between the coke and sewer-pipe and the pay-rolls he wedged in a few days of reporting for *The Chicago Morning News*; and on a certain Friday, the last of February, he got married, and was back at his office desk on the following Monday morning.

The first story for which Edwards received payment was published in *The Detroit Free Press*, Sept. 19, 1889. The payment was \$8.

In April, the same year, the *Free Press* inaugurated a serial story contest. Edwards entered two stories, one under a *nom de plume*. Neither won a prize, but both were bought and published. For the first, published in 1891, he was paid \$75 on Feb. 2, 1890; and for the second, published a year later, he was paid \$100.

With the opening installment of the first serial the *Free Press* published a photograph of the author over a stickful of biography. On another page appeared a paragraph in boldface type announcing the discovery of a new star in the literary heavens.

The spirit of John Milton Edwards swelled within him. He feasted his eyes on his printed picture (the rapid newspaper presses had made a smudge of it), he read and re-read his lean biography (lean because not much had happened to him at that time) and he gloried over the boldface type with its message regarding the new star (he was to learn later that many similar stars are born to blush unseen) and he felt himself a growing power in the world of letters.

Verily, a pat on the back is a thing to conjure with. It is more ennobling, sometimes, than a kingly tap with a swordpoint accompanied by the words, "I dub thee knight." To the fine glow of youthful enthusiasm it opens broad vistas and offers a glimpse of glittering heights. Even though that hand-pat inspires dreams never to be realized, who shall say that a little encouragement, bringing out the best in us, does not result in much good?

And in this place John Milton Edwards would make a request of the reader of fiction. If you are pleased with a story, kindly look twice at the author's name so you may recall it pleasantly if it chances to come again under your eye. If you are a great soul, given to the scattering of benefactions, you might even go a little farther: At the expense of a postage stamp and a little time, address a few words of appreciation to the author in care of his publisher. You wist not, my beloved, what weight of gold your words may carry!

From the summer of '89 to the summer of '93 Edwards wrote many stories and sketches for *The Detroit Free Press*, *Puck*, *Truth*, *The Ladies' World*, *Yankee Blade*, *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, *Chatter*, *Saturday Night*, and other periodicals. In 1890 he was receiving \$10 a month for contributions to a little Chicago weekly called *Figaro*; and, during the same year, he found a market which was to influence profoundly a decade of work and his monetary returns; James Elverson paid him \$75 for a serial to be used in *Saturday Night*.

Undoubtedly it was this serial that pointed Edwards toward the sensational story papers. A second serial, sold to *Saturday Night*, Oct. 21, 1891, brought \$150; while a third, paid for July 20, 1893, netted a like amount. These transactions carried the true ring of commercial success. Apart from myth and fable, there is no more compelling siren song in history than the chink of silver. Edwards, burdened with responsibilities, gave ear to it.

The serial story, published in the *Free Press* in 1891, had made friends for Edwards. Among these friends was Alfred B. Tozer, editor of *The Chicago Ledger*. Through Mr. Tozer, Edwards received commissions for stories covering a period of years. The payment was \$1.50 a thousand words – modest, indeed, but regular and dependable.²

From 1889 to 1893 Edwards was laboring hard – all day long at his clerical duties and then until midnight in his Fiction Factory. The pay derived from his fiction output was small, (*the Ladies' World* gave him \$5 for a 5,000-word story published March 18, 1890, and *The Yankee Blade* sent him \$13 on Jan. 10, 1891, for a story of 8,500 words), but Edwards was prolific, and often two or three sketches a day came through his typewriter.

² In these later times, with other hands than those of Mr. Tozer at the helm, **The Chicago Ledger** seems to have become the Sargasso Sea of the popular fictionist – a final refuge for story derelicts. The craft that grows leaky and water-logged through much straining and wearisome beating about from port to port, has often and often come to anchor in the columns of the **Ledger**.

Early in 1893, however, he saw that he was at the parting of the ways. He could no longer serve two masters, for the office work was suffering. He realized that he was not giving the contracting firm that faithful service and undivided energy which they had the right to expect, and it was up to him to do one line of work and one only.

"Slips and Tips"

One of Mr. White's authors who had never been in Europe set out to write a story of a traveller who determined to get along without tipping. The author described his traveller's horrible plight while being shown around the Paris Bastille – which historic edifice had been razed to the ground some two centuries before the story was written! The author received a tip from Mr. White on his tipping story, a tip never to do it again.

III

METHODS THAT MAKE OR MAR.

Edwards has no patience with those writers who think they are of a finer or different clay from the rest of mankind. Genius, however, may be forgiven many things, and the artistic temperament may be pardoned an occasional lapse from the conventional. This is advertising, albeit of a very indifferent sort, and advertising is a stepping-stone to success. The fact remains that True Genius does not brand with eccentricity the intelligence through which it expresses itself. The time has passed when long hair and a Windsor tie proclaim a man a favorite of the muses.

Edwards knows a young writer who believes himself a genius and who has, indeed, met with some wonderful successes, but he spoils an otherwise fine character by slovenliness of dress and by straining for a so-called Bohemian effect. Bohemia, of course, is merely a state of mind; its superficial area is fanciful and contracted; it is wildly unconventional, not to say immoral; and no right-thinking, right-feeling artist will drink at its sloppy tables or associate with its ribald-tongued habitués. The young writer here mentioned has been doped and shanghaied. As soon as he comes to himself he will escape to more creditable surroundings.

There is another writer of Edwards' acquaintance who, by profane and blasphemous utterance, seeks to convince the public that he has the divine fire. His language, it is true, shows "character," but not of the sort that he imagines.

A writer, to be successful, must humble himself with the lowly or walk pridefully with the great. For purposes of study he may be all things to all men, but let him see to it that he is not warped in his own self-appraisal. Never, unless he wishes to make himself ridiculous, should he build a pedestal, climb to its crest and pose. If he is worthy of a pedestal the public will see that it is properly constructed.

A writer is neither better nor worse than any other man who happens to be in trade. He is a manufacturer. After gathering his raw product, he puts it through the mill of his imagination, retorts from the mass the personal equation, refines it with a sufficient amount of commonsense and runs it into bars – of bullion, let us say. If the product is good it passes at face value and becomes a medium of exchange.

Any merchant or professional man who conducts his business with industry, taste and skill is the honorable and worthy peer of the man who writes and writes well. Every clean, conscientious calling has its artistic side and profits through the application of business principles.

Nowadays, for a writer to scribble his effusions in pale ink with a scratchy pen on both sides of a letter-sheet is not to show genius but ignorance. If he is a good manufacturer he should be proud of his product; and a good idea is doubly good if carefully clothed.

Edwards counts it a high honor that, in half a dozen editorial offices, his copy has been called "copperplate." "I always like to see one of your manuscripts come in," said Mr. White, of *The Argosy*. "Here's another of Edwards' stories," said Mr. Harriman of *The Red Book*,³ "send it to the composing room just as it is." Such a condition of affairs certainly is worth striving for.

As a rule the young writer does not give this matter of neatness of manuscript the proper attention. Is he careful to count the letters and spaces in his story title and figure to place the title in the exact middle of the page? It is not difficult.

When a line is drawn between title, writer's name and the body of the story, it is easy to set the carriage pointer on "35" and touch hyphens until you reach "45." It is easy to number the pages

³ Mr. Harriman is now with **The Ladies' Home Journal**.

of a manuscript in red with a bichrome ribbon, and to put the number in the middle of the sheet. Nor is it very difficult to turn out clean copy – merely a little more industry with a rubber eraser, or perhaps the re-writing of an occasional sheet.

After a manuscript is written, the number of words computed, and a publication selected wherewith to try its fortunes, a record should be made. Very early in his literary career Edwards devised a scheme for keeping track of his manuscripts. He had a thousand slips printed and bound strongly into two books of 500 slips each. Each slip consisted of a stub for the record and a form letter, with perforations so that they could easily be torn apart.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Record of Ms., No. | 411 Blank Street, |
| Title..... | Chicago, Ill.,.....189.. |
| Class..... | Editor..... |
| No. Words..... | |
| Sent to.....Date..... | |
| Returned.....Condition..... | |
| Sent to.....Date..... | Dear Sir: |
| Returned.....Condition..... | |
| Sent to.....Date..... | The inclosed Ms., entitled.. |
| Returned.....Condition..... | |
| Sent to.....Date..... | containing about.....words, |
| Returned.....Condition..... | and signed..... |
| Accepted..... | is offered at your usual rates. |
| Am't paid.....Date..... | If not available please return. |
| Remarks..... | Stamped and addressed envelope |
| | inclosed. |
| | Very truly yours, |
| | John Milton Edwards. |

Every manuscript was numbered and the numbers, running consecutively, were placed in the upper right-hand corners of the stubs. This made it easy to refer to the particular stub which held the record of a returned story.

Edwards used this form of record keeping for years. Even after he came to look upon a form letter with a manuscript as a waste of effort, he continued to use the stubs. About the year 1900 card indexes came into vogue, and now a box of cards is sufficient for keeping track of a thousand manuscripts. It is far and away more convenient than the "stub" system.

Each story has its card, and each card gives the manuscript's life history; title, when written, number of words, amount of postage required for its going and coming through the mail, when and where sent, when returned, when accepted and when paid for, together with brief notes regarding the story's vicissitudes or final good fortune. After a story is sold the card serves as a memorandum, and all these memoranda, totalled at the end of the year, form an accurate report of the writer's income.

In submitting his stories Edwards always sends the serials flat, between neatly-cut covers of tarboard girded with a pair of stout rubber bands. This makes a handy package and brings the long story to the editor's attention in a most convenient form for reading.

With double-spacing Edwards' typewriter will place 400 words on the ordinary 8-1/2 by 11 sheet. Serials of 60,000 words, covering 150 sheets, and even novelettes of half that length, travel more safely and more comfortably by express. Short stories, running up to 15 – or in rare instances, to 20 – pages are folded twice, inclosed in a stamped and self-addressed No. 9, cloth-lined envelope and this in turn slipped into a No. 10 cloth-lined envelope. Both these envelopes open at the end, which does not interfere with the typed superscription.

By always using typewriter paper and envelopes of the same weight, Edwards knows exactly how much postage a story of so many sheets will require.

In wrapping his serial stories for transportation by express, Edwards is equally careful to make them into neat bundles. For 10 cents he can secure enough light, strong wrapping paper for a dozen packages, and 25 cents will procure a ball of upholsterer's twine that will last a year.

Another helpful wrinkle, and one that makes for neatness, is an address label printed on gummed paper. Edwards' name and address appear at the top, following the word "From." Below are blank lines for name and address of the consignee.

In his twenty-two years of work in the fiction field Edwards has made certain of this, that there is not a detail in the preparation or recording or forwarding of a manuscript that can be neglected. Competition is keen. Big names, without big ideas back of them, are not so prone to carry weight. It's the *stuff*, itself, that counts; yet a business-like way of doing things carries a mute appeal to an editor before even a line of the manuscript has been read. It is a powerful appeal, and all on the writer's side.

Is it necessary to dwell upon the importance of a carbon copy of every story offered through the mails, or entrusted to the express companies? Edwards lost the sale of a \$300 serial when an installment of the story went into a railroad wreck at Shoemaker, Kansas, and, blurred and illegible, was delivered in New York one week after another writer had written another installment to take its place. In this case the carbon copy served only as an aid in collecting \$50 from the express company.

At another time, when *The Woman's Home Companion* was publishing a short serial by Edwards, one complete chapter was lost through some accident in the composing room. Upon receipt of a telegram, Edwards dug the carbon copy of the missing chapter out of his files, sent it on to New York, and presently received an extra \$5 with the editor's compliments.

"My brow shall be garnished with bays."

AMERICA

Editorial Rooms, Chicago.

Aug. 16, 1889.

Dear Mr. Edwards: —

In regard to the enclosed verse, we would take pleasure in publishing it, but before doing so we beg to call your attention to the use of the word "garnish" in the last line of the first verse, and the second line of the second. The general idea of "garnish" is to decorate, or embellish. We say that a beefsteak is "garnished" with mushrooms, and so it would hardly be right to use the word in the sense of crowning a poet with a wreath of bays.

You will pardon us for calling attention to this, but you know that the most serious verse can be spoiled by just such a slip, which of course is made without its character occurring to the mind of the writer.

Yours respectfully,

Slason Thompson & Co.

IV

GETTING "HOOKED UP" WITH A BIG HOUSE.

It was during the winter of 1892-3 that Edwards happened to step into the editorial office of a Chicago story paper for which he had been writing. His lucky stars were most auspiciously grouped that morning.

We shall call the editor Amos Jones. That was not his name, but it will serve.

Edwards found Jones in a very exalted frame of mind. Before him, on his desk, lay an open letter and a bundle of newspaper clippings. After greeting Edwards, Jones turned and struck the letter triumphantly with the flat of his hand.

"This," he exclaimed, "means ten thousand a year to Yours Truly!"

He was getting \$50 a week as editor of the story paper, and a sudden jump from \$2,600 to \$10,000 a year was sufficiently unsettling to make his mood excusable. Edwards extended congratulations and was allowed to read the letter.

It was from a firm of publishers in New York City, rated up in the hundreds of thousands by the commercial agencies. These publishers, who are to figure extensively in the pages that follow, will be referred to as Harte & Perkins. They had sent the clippings to Jones, inclosed in the letter, and had requested him to use them in writing stories for a five-cent library.

Jones' enthusiasm communicated itself to Edwards. For four years the latter had been digging away, in his humble Fiction Factory, and his literary labors had brought a return averaging \$25 a month. This was excellent for piecing out the office salary, but in the glow of Jones' exultation Edwards began to dream dreams.

When he left the editor's office Edwards was cogitating deeply. He had attained a little success in writing and believed that if Jones could make ten thousand a year grinding out copy for Harte & Perkins he could.

Edwards did not ask Jones to recommend him to Harte & Perkins. Jones was a good fellow, but writers are notoriously jealous of their prerogatives. After staking out a claim, the writer-man guards warily against having it "jumped." Edwards went about introducing himself to the New York firm in his own way.

At that time he had on hand a fairly well-written, but somewhat peculiar long story entitled, "The Mystery of Martha." He had tried it out again and again with various publishers only to have it returned as "well done but unavailable because of the theme." This story was submitted to Harte & Perkins. It was returned, in due course, with the following letter:

New York, March 23, 1893.

Mr. John Milton Edwards,
Chicago, Ills.
Dear Sir: —

We have your favor of March the 19th together with manuscript of "The Mystery of Martha," which as it is unavailable we return to you to-day by express as you request.

We are overcrowded with material for our story paper, for which we presume you submitted this manuscript, and, indeed, we think "The Mystery of Martha" is more suitable for book publication than in any other shape.

The only field that is open with us is that of our various five and ten cent libraries. You are perhaps familiar with these, and if you have ever done anything

in this line of work, we should be pleased to have you submit the printed copy of same for our examination, and if we find it suitable we think we could use some of your material in this line.

Mr. Jones, whom you refer to in your letter, is one of our regular contributors.

Yours truly,

Harte & Perkins.

Here was the opening! Edwards lost no time in taking advantage of it and sent the following letter:

Chicago, March 25, '93.

Messrs. Harte & Perkins, Publishers,

New York City.

Gentlemen: —

I have your letter of the 23d inst. In reply would state that I have done some writing for Beadle & Adams ("*Banner Weekly*") although I have none of it at hand, at present, to send you. I also am a contributor to "*Saturday Night*," (James Elverson's paper) and have sold them a number of serial stories, receiving from them as much as \$150 for 50,000 words. It is probable that material suitable to the latter periodical would be out of the question with you; still, I can write the kind of stories you desire, all I ask being the opportunity.

Inclosed please find Chapter I of "Jack o' Diamonds; or, The Cache in the Coteaux." Perhaps Western stories are bugbears with you (they are, I know, with most publishers) but there are no Indians in this one. I should like to go ahead, write this story, submit it, and let you see what I can do. I am able to turn out work in short order, if you should desire it, and feel that I can satisfy you. All I wish to know is how long you want the stories, what price is paid for them and whether there is any particular kind that you need. I have an idea that the Thrun case would afford material for a good story. At least, I think I can write you a good one with that as a foundation. Please let me hear from you.

Yours very truly,

John Milton Edwards.

To this Edwards received the following reply, under date of March 30:

We have your favor of March 25th together with small installment of story entitled "Jack o' Diamonds." Our careful reading of the installment leads us to believe that you write easily, and can probably do suitable work for our Ten-Cent Library, though the particular scene described in this installment is one that can be found in almost any of the old time libraries. It is a chestnut. A decided back number.

What we require for our libraries is something written up-to-date, with incidents new and original, with which the daily press is teeming. I inclose herewith a clipping headed, "Thrun Tells it All," which, used without proper names, might suggest a good plot for a story, and you could work in suitable action and incident to make a good tale.

If you will submit us such a story we shall be pleased to examine same, and if found suitable we will have a place for it at once. We pay for stories in this library \$100; they should contain 40,000 words, and when issued appear under our own *nom de plume*.

Installment "Jack o' Diamonds" returned herewith.

Thus it was up to Edwards to go ahead and "make good." Such a climax has a weird effect on some authors. They put forth all their energy securing an order to "go ahead" and then, at the critical moment, experience an attack of stage fright, lose confidence and bolt, leaving the order unfilled.

Years later, in New York, such a case came under Edwards' observation. A young woman had besieged a certain editor for two years for a commission. When the coveted commission arrived, the young woman took to her bed, so self-conscious that she was under a doctor's care for a month. The story was never turned in.

Edwards, in his own case, did not intend to put all his eggs in one basket. He not only set to work writing a ten-cent library story (which he called "Glim Peters on His Mettle") but he also wrote and forwarded a five-cent library story entitled, "Fearless Frank." "Fearless Frank" – galloped home again bearing a request that Edwards make him over into a detective. On April 15 Edwards received the following:

We have your favor of April 13, and note that the insurance story, relating to Thrun, is nearly completed, and will be forwarded on Monday next. I hope you have not made the hero too juvenile, as this would be a serious fault. The stories in the Ten-Cent Library are not read by boys alone but usually by young men, and in no case should the hero be a kid, such as we fear would be your idea of a Chicago newsboy.

We note that you have considered our suggestions, and also that you will fix up the "Fearless Frank" manuscript with a view of making it a detective story.

For your information, therefore, we mail you under separate cover Nos. 2, 11, 15 and 20 of the Five-Cent Library, which will give you an idea of the character of this detective. We hope you will give us what we want in both these stories.

On April 25 Edwards received a long letter that delighted him. He was "making good."

I have carefully read your story, "Glim Peters on His Mettle," and, as I feared, find the same entirely too juvenile for the Ten-Cent Library, though quite suitable for the Five-Cent Library, had it not been double the length required. I first considered the question of asking you to make two stories of it for this library, but finally decided that this would be somewhat difficult and unnecessary, as we shall find a place for it later in the columns of our *Boy's Story Paper*, to be issued under *nom de plume*, and will pay you \$75 for same.

The chief point of merit in the story is the excellent and taking dialogue between Glim Peters, his chum and the detectives. This boy is a strong character, well delineated and natural. The incident covered by clairvoyant visits, the scene at the World's Fair and the Chinese joint experience were all excellent; but the ghost in the old Willett house, and indeed the whole plot, is poor. Judging from this story and the previous one submitted, the plot is your weak point. In future stories make no special effort to produce an unusual plot, but stick closer to the action and incident, taken as much as possible from newspapers, which are teeming with material of this character.

We shall now expect to receive from you at an early date, the detective story, and to follow this we will forward you material, in a few days, for a Ten-Cent Library story. We forward you to-day, under separate cover, several numbers to give you an idea of the class of story that is suitable for the Ten-Cent Library. Such scenes in your last story as where Glim Peters succeeded in buying a mustang and defeated the deacon in so doing, are just the thing for the Ten-Cent Library; the same can also be said of the scene in which Meg, the girl in the bar, stands off the detectives

in a vain attempt to save the villains. That is the sort of thing, and we feel that you will be able to do it when you know what we want.

I forward you, also, a copy of Ten-Cent Library No. 185, which I would like you to read, and let me know whether you could write us a number of stories for this particular series, with the same hero and the same class of incidents. If so, about how long would it take you to write 40,000 words? It is possible I may be able to start you on this series, of which we have already issued a number.

About May 1 Edwards sent the first detective story. On May 10 he received a letter, of which the following is an extract:

We are in a hurry for this series (the series for the Ten-Cent Library) but after you have finished the first one, and during the time that we are reading it, you can go ahead with the second detective story, "The Capture of Keno Clark," which, although we are in no hurry for it, we may be able to use in about six weeks or two months. You did so well with the first detective story that I have no doubt you can make the second a satisfactory one. However, if we find the series for the Ten-Cent Library O. K., we will want you to write these, one after the other as rapidly as possible until we have had enough of them.

As to our method of payment, would say that it is our custom to pay for manuscripts on Thursday following the day of issue, but, agreeably with your request, we mail you a check tomorrow in payment of "Glim Peters on His Mettle," and will always be willing to accomodate you in like manner when you find it necessary to call upon us.

So Edwards made good with the publishing firm of Harte & Perkins, and for eighteen years there have been the pleasantest of business relations between them. Courteous always in their dealings, prompt in their payments to writers, and eager always to send pages and pages of helpful letters, Harte & Perkins have grown to be the most substantial publishers in the country. Is it because of their interest in their writers? Certainly not in spite of it!

For them Edwards has written upwards of five hundred five-cent libraries, a dozen or more serials for their story paper, many serials for their boys' weekly, novelettes for their popular magazines, and a large number of short stories. For these, in the last eighteen years, they have paid him more than \$35,000.

Nor, during this time, was he writing for Harte & Perkins exclusively. He had other publishers and other sources of profit.

As an instance of helpfulness that did not help, Edwards once attempted to come to the assistance of Howard Dwight Smiley. Smiley wrote his first story, and Edwards sent it on to *The Argosy* with a personal letter to Mr. White. Such letters, at best, can do no more than secure for an unknown writer a little more consideration than would otherwise be the case; they will not warp an editor's judgment, no matter how warmly the new writer is recommended. The story came back with a long letter of criticism and with an invitation for Smiley to try again. He tried and tried, perhaps a dozen times, and always the manuscript was returned to the patient Smiley by the no less patient editor. At last Smiley wrote a story about a tramp who became entangled with a cyclone. The "whirler," it seems, had already picked up the loose odds and ends of a farm yard, along with a churnful of butter. In order to escape from the cyclone, Smiley's tramp greased himself with the butter from the churn and slid out of the embrace of the twisting winds. "Chuck it," said Edwards; "I'm surprised at you, Smiley." Smiley did "chuck it" – but into a mail-box, addressed to

Mr. White, and Mr. White "chucked" a check for \$12 right back for it! Whereupon Smiley chuckled inordinately – and came no more to Edwards for advice.

V

NICKEL THRILLS AND DOLLAR SHOCKERS.

The word "sensational" as applied to fiction has been burdened with an opprobrium which does not rightfully belong to it. Ignorance and prejudice and hypocrisy have conspired to defame a very worthy word.

Certain good but misguided people will turn shudderingly from a nickel novel and complacently look for thrills in a "best seller." Often and often the "best seller" is to be had for 95 cents or \$1 at the department stores. Not infrequently it spills more blood than the nickel thriller, but the blood is spilled on finer paper, and along with it are idealized pictures of heroine and hero done by the best artists.

As a matter of course the dollar dreadful is better done. The author probably took six months or a year to do it, and if it is well advertised and proves a success he reaps a modest fortune. On the other hand, the nickel novel is written in three days or a week and brings the author \$50. Why shouldn't the dollar book show a higher grade of craftsmanship? But is it less vicious than the novel that sells for five cents? To draw the matter still finer, is either form of fiction vicious?

If we turn to Webster and seek a definition of "sensational" we find: "Suited or intended to excite temporarily great interest or emotion; melodramatic; emotional."

This does not mean that sensational writing is vicious writing. It is wrong to classify as vicious or degrading the story of swift action and clean ethics, or to compare it with that prurient product of the slums which deals with problems of sex.

The tale that moves breathlessly but logically, that is built incident upon incident to a telling climax with the frankly avowed purpose to entertain, that has no questionable leanings or immoral affiliations – such a tale speeds innocently an idle hour, diverts pleasantly the harrassed mind, freshens our zeal for the duties of life, and occasionally leaves us with higher ideals.

We are all dreamers. We must be dreamers before we are doers. If some of the visions that come to us in secret reverie were flaunted in all their conceit and inconsistency before the world, not one of us but would be the butt of the world's ridicule. And yet, out of these highly tinted imaginings springs the impulse that carries us to higher and nobler things.

A difference in the price of two commodities does not necessarily mark a moral difference in the commodities themselves. *The Century Magazine* sells for 35 cents, while *The Argosy* sells for 10 cents. You will be told that *The Century* is "high class" and with a distinct literary flavor, perhaps that it is more elevating. Even so; yet which of these magazines is doing more to make the world really livable? Ask the newsdealer in your town how many *Centuries* he sells, and how many *Argosies*.

Readers are not made for the popular magazines, but the popular magazines are made for the people. Unless there was a distinct and insistent demand for this sort of entertainment, so many all-story magazines, priced at a dime, could not exist.

Nickel thrillers cater largely to a juvenile clientele. Taking them by and large – there are a few exceptions, of course – they are as worthy of readers as the dime magazines; and many a serial in a dime magazine has been republished in cloth and made into a "best seller."⁴

Why is it that, if a lad in his teens robs a jewelry store and is apprehended, almost invariably the newspaper report has a bundle of nickel libraries found in his pocket? Why a nickel library and not a "yellow" newspaper?

The standard of judgment which places a nickel novel in the heart-side pocket of the young degenerate, harks back to a period when "yellow-back" literature was really vicious; it is a judgment

⁴ "Dan Quixote," for instance published in *The All-Story Magazine*, and republished as "The Brass Bowl."

by tradition, unsupported by present-day facts. The world moves, and as it moves it grows constantly better. Reputable publishers of cheap fiction have elevated the character of their output until now some of the weekly stories they publish are really admirable; in many instances they are classics.

A few years ago, at a convention of Sunday School teachers at Asbury Park, N. J., a minister boldly praised the "Diamond Dick" stories. He declared that while action rattled through the pages of these tales like bullets from a Gatling, he had found nothing immoral in them, nothing suggestive, nothing to deprave. The lawless received their just reward and virtue emerged triumphant. It was his thought that a few "Diamond Dick" stories might, with benefit, take the place, in Sunday School libraries, of the time-honored book in which the boy goes a-fishing on Sunday and falls into the river.

One of the "Frank Merriwell" stories tells of a sensitive, shrinking lad at an academy who was hazed into a case of pneumonia from which he died. The hero breaks the news of the boy's death to his widowed mother and comforts her in her bereavement. From beginning to end the story is told with a sympathy, and such a thorough understanding of boy-nature, that the hold on the juvenile reader is as strong as the theme is uplifting.

This is not "trash." It is literature sold at a price which carries it everywhere, and the result is untold good.

The fact remains, however, that not every publisher of nickel novels has so high a standard. The paternal eye, in overseeing the fiction of the young, must be discriminating. Blood-and-thunder has had its day; but, if the rising generation is not to be a race of mollycoddles, care must be exercised in stopping short of the other extreme.

The life of today sets a pattern for the fiction of to-day. The masses demand rapid-fire action and good red brawn in their reading matter. Their awakened moral sense makes possible the muck-raker; and when they weary of the day's evil and the day's toil, it is their habit to divert themselves with pleasant and exciting reading. And it must be CLEAN.

VI

MAKING GOOD BY HARD WORK.

With the beginning of the year 1894 Edwards was learning the knack of the nickel novel and its ten-cent brother, and making good with his New York publishers. During 1893 the work he turned in was of fair quality, but he was not satisfied with that and labored to improve. Each succeeding story came nearer and nearer the high mark. Believing that whatever is worth doing is worth doing well, he was constantly asking himself, "How can I make my next story better than the one I have just finished?" The publishers helped him. Every manuscript submitted was read personally by Mr. Perkins, and brought a letter dissecting the story and stating which incidents were liked, and why, and which incidents were not liked, and why. Edwards feels that he can never be sufficiently grateful to Mr. Perkins for this coaching in the gentle art of stalking a reader's elusive interest.

Had Edwards remained a paymaster in the employ of the contracting firm, he would have received \$1,200 for his services in 1893. He severed his connection with his paymaster's salary in June, and at the end of the year his Fiction Factory showed these results:

| | | |
|----|---|----------|
| 4 | Five-Cent Library stories at \$50 each | \$ 200. |
| 1 | Juvenile serial | 100. |
| 1 | Juvenile serial | 75. |
| 13 | Ten-Cent Library stories at \$100. each | 1300. |
| 1 | Serial for Saturday Night | 150. |
| — | | |
| | Total | \$ 1825. |

In other words, Edwards had taken out of his Fiction Factory \$625 more than his salary as paymaster would have amounted to for the year. He felt vastly relieved, and his wife laughingly fell back on her woman's prerogative of saying "I told you so." This was a good beginning, and Edwards felt sure that he would be able to do even better during 1894. He was coming along splendidly with the Ten-Cent Library work. On Jan. 30 Mr. Perkins paid this tribute to his growing powers:

"I have just finished reading your story, 'Dalton's Double,' which I find to be as good as anything you have given us. I must compliment you upon the varied incident which you cram into these stories, of a nature that is well suited to them."

It was Edwards' custom to forward a Ten-Cent Library story every two weeks, and there were months in which he wrote three stories, taking ten days for each one. As these stories were 40,000 words in length, three in thirty days were equivalent to 120,000 words.

During 1893 he wrote his stories twice: first a rough draft and then the printer's copy. In 1894 he began making his first copies clean enough for the compositor. Had he not done this he could never have accomplished such a large amount of work.

On April 10, when everything was going swimmingly and he was taking in \$300 a month for the library work, he was brought up short in his career of prosperity. Mr. Perkins wrote him to finish the story upon which he was engaged and then to stop the library work until further orders. It had been decided to use "re-prints" in the series. This could very easily be done as the Library had been published for years and some of the earlier stories could be brought out again without injuring the sale. The letter, which was a profound disappointment to Edwards, closed as follows:

"I regret the necessity of curtailing your work, for I am entirely satisfied with it, and if we did not find it necessary to adopt the measure referred to above, with

a view to decreasing expenses during the summer months and dull season, I should have wished to have you continue right along. I have no doubt that you will be able to find a place for your material in the meantime."

This fell upon Edwards like a bolt from a clear sky. He began to regret his "paymaster crutch" and to imagine dire things. He had been giving his time almost exclusively to Harte & Perkins, and had lost touch with publications for which he had been writing previous to 1893. Where, he asked himself, was he to place his material in the meantime?

There is little sentiment in business. Harte & Perkins, whenever they find a line of work is not paying, will cut it off at an hour's notice, by telegraph if necessary. The man receiving the telegram, of course, can only make the best of it. This is a point which Edwards has always disliked about the work for publishers of this class of fiction: the writer, no matter how prosperous he may be at any given time, is always in a state of glorious uncertainty.

But Edwards fell on his feet. It so happened that he had sent to Harte & Perkins, some time before, copies of *Saturday Night* containing two of his stories. He had done this in the attempt to prove to them that he could write for *The Weekly Guest*, their story paper. This little incident shows how important it is for a writer to get as many anchors to windward as possible.

Eight days after being cut off from the library work, Edwards received a letter from Mr. Harte. Mr. Perkins had left New York on business, but had turned over the printed work in *Saturday Night* for Mr. Harte's inspection before leaving. Mr. Harte wrote, in part:

"I like your work in *Saturday Night*, and think we shall be able to give you a commission for a *Weekly Guest* story, provided you can lend yourself successfully to our suggestions as to style, etc., and give us permission to publish under any of the pen names we use in the office.

We want a story of the Stella Edwards type. We send you to-day one or two samples of the class of work desired, so that you may be able to see just what it is. If you can do the work, we shall be pleased to send you a title and plot, with synopsis. You can then write us two installments for a trial, and, if satisfactory, I have no doubt we could arrange to give you a quantity of work in this line.

I feel, after reading the samples you submitted, that you will be able to meet our requirements in this class of story. The two stories we send you are the work of a masculine pen, and though not so easy to lose one's identity in literary work, this class of story does not seem to present the ordinary difficulties; at least, that is the testimony of our authors who have tried it."

Edwards was booked to attempt a gushing love story, to follow a copy and make it appear as though a woman had done the writing! Quite a jump this, from a rapid-fire Ten-Cent Library story for young men to a bit of sentimental fiction for young women. However, he went at it, and he went at it with a determination to make good. It was either that or go paymastering again.

On April 24 he received title, synopsis and plot of "Bessie, the Beautiful Blind Girl," and began charging himself with superheated sentiment preparatory to beginning his work. The popular young lady authoress, "Stella Edwards," whose portrait in a décolleté gown had been so often flaunted in the eyes of "her" public, was a myth. The "stuff" supposedly written by the charming "Stella Edwards" was ground out by men who were versatile enough to befool women readers, with a feminine style. Edwards, it transpired, was able to do this successfully for a time, but ultimately he failed to round off the rough corners of a style too decidedly masculine for "Miss Edwards." But this is anticipating.

On May 3 he had sent the two trial installments, and from New York came the word:

"We like the two opening installments of 'Bessie, the Beautiful Blind Girl.' The style is good, the action brisk and sensational and of a curiosity-arousing character.

It is our belief that you are capable of presenting a desirable variation from the former Stella Edwards' stories, by introducing romantic incidents of a novel and more exalted character.

In most of the other Stella Edwards' yarns there was little plot and the action was rarely varied. The action comprised the pursuit and capture, the recapture and loss of the heroine, she being constantly whirled, like a shuttle-cock, from the hero to the villain, then to the female villain, then back again to the hero for a few tantalizing moments, and so on to the end.

You can readily improve upon this by introducing scenes a little more fresh, and far more interesting.

It is about time for Stella to improve, and we believe you are just the man to make her do better work.

Go on with the story and force our readers to exclaim, 'Well, that's the best story Stella has written!'"

While Edwards was deep in the sorrows of "Bessie, the Beautiful Blind Girl," he received from his publishers on May 10 orders which hurled him headlong into another "Stella Edwards" yarn.

"Owing to a change in our publishing schedule of Guest stories, it will be necessary to anticipate the issue of 'Bessie, the Beautiful Blind Girl' by another story of the same type, sixteen installments, same as the one you are now working on. The title of this new story will be 'The Bicycle Belle,' and will deal with the bicycle as the matter of central interest in the first installment or two. I send you a synopsis of the story prepared by one of our editors. This will simply give you an idea of one way of developing the theme. It does not, however, suit our plans, and we will ask you to invent something quite different."

Always and ever Harte & Perkins kept their fingers on the pulse of their reading public. The safety bicycle was the fashion, in those days, and Harte & Perkins were usually first to exploit a fashion or a fad in their story columns. Whenever they had a story with a particularly popular and striking theme, it was their habit to flood the country with sample copies of *The Weekly Guest*, breaking off a generous installment of the serial in such a breathless place that the reader was forced to buy succeeding issues of the *Guest* in order to get the rest of the story. So that is what the change in their publishing schedule meant. They wanted to boom the circulation of the *Guest* with a bicycle story.

Edwards shelved Bessie the beautiful at the 7th installment and threw himself into the tears, fears and chivalry of "The Bicycle Belle." This was on May 12. Three days later, on May 15, he forwarded two installments of the bicycle story for Harte & Perkins' inspection. On May 16, before these installments had reached the publishers, Edwards was requested as follows:

"As we shall not be able to begin, in the Guest, your story, 'Bessie, the Beautiful Blind Girl,' until after January the first, next, it will be well to change the scene to a winter setting. This can be very easily done in the two installments that we have on hand, if you will make a note of it and keep it up for the balance of the story. In the first installment we will show the girl leaping into the river with a few cakes of ice floating about, and in the scene where she is expelled from the house there will be plenty of snow. It will make a more effective picture and be more seasonable for the story."

More trouble! Harte & Perkins had two installments, and did not seem to know that Edwards had five more installments on hand, pending the completion of the bicycle yarn. But he was ready to turn summer into winter, or day into night, in order to make good. On May 18 he received a report on the two installments of the bicycle story.

"The two installments of 'The Bicycle Belle' have been read and approved by our editor, who says that the story opens very well, with plenty of animated action, briefly yet graphically pictured. You seem to have caught our idea exactly, and we would be pleased to have you go ahead with the story, finishing it before you again take up 'Bessie, the Beautiful Blind Girl.'"

On June 3 Edwards sent installments three to sixteen of the bicycle story, which was the complete manuscript. Ten days later he was informed:

"'The Bicycle Belle' is crowded with dramatic action and is just what we want. In the next it would be well to have a little more of the female element just to demonstrate that 'Stella Edwards' is up-to-date."

None the less pleasant was this news, contained in a letter dated June 18:

"We have placed to your credit, upon our books, the sum of three hundred dollars in payment for 'The Bicycle Belle,' which will be the figure for all this class of stories from your pen which are accepted for *The Weekly Guest*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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