THE CONFESSIONS OF A FAKE MERCHANT-I

Henry Williamson

I LEFT THE ARMY IN SEPTEMBER, 1919, without the least intention of doing any work for my living, except by writing my own kind of writing. The world was chaotic and horrible, and I reacted violently to nearly all I saw and heard among my fellow men. I was going to create a new world by my writing. Nothing could dispel my confidence; but many people tried to shake it. I had a small pension, and a few hundred pounds in the bank, including the 'blood money' which, all things considered, was a generous gift from the Government: for like myself, most of the young officers I knew in the Army had had a very good time, full of good comradeship and pleasure which was all the more intensified by the evaded thought, and the semi-realisable reality, of action in battle. In the army we had done very little work. We had drunk much, and ragged much; and although we cursed the bloody war, most of us young men were dismayed and made to feel hollow when the Armistice was signed. 'Civvy life' seemed dreary and a waste land. Some of us were, in Remarque's phrase, 'rootless', and we had periods akin to hopelessness - but this was only the reaction to the hectic days of the war, the loss of friendship in mass.

In September. 1919, I was certainly 'rootless and without hope'; but I was drinking far too much for one with a weak stomach, and sleeping insufficiently, 'living on my nerves'. I had been cast-off from a disastrous love-affair, which had begun as a pleasant philander, and ended in a conviction of my own utter sincerity and non-appreciation. Also, I was burning inwardly (or wasting myself nervously?) with a belief that I had discovered mystically, the source of the Mind of Man; and I felt, but never dared to say except in wild outbursts in my father's home, that I had the power to reveal everything through the written word. My father replied, on more than one occasion, that I was making the idea of writing an excuse for loafing for the rest of my life. I was not as sympathetic to the heat of his denunciation as I am now; I merely reacted violently to his attitude to myself and the Huns, etc. I should explain that, by this time, I was entirely unpatriotic, declaring that the War had arisen out of the vast White Sepulchre of Europe - the product of Mass Darkness: which declarations, among other remarks about the Peace Treaty, earned for me the local reputation of being a blasphemous pro-Hun as well as a waster. I seem to remember lying in bed until noon, wasting myself in the vice of rumination, reconstructing mentally the lost sweetness of love, and dreaming of how one day, after my early death, I should shine a bright star like Keats in the poetic firmament. At this time I was writing my novel called 'The Policy of Reconstruction, or, True Resurrection'. The long walks through the woods and over the fields; friendly talk in public bars at night; the semi-drunken midnight returns - remarkably quiet, let me hasten to add, for I knew every creaking stair, every handhold and finger touch in the dark upward creeping to my bedroom. My 'mind-fire' burned only at night; the stars were my companions when the carters and labourers of the public bars had gone home after closing time.

My money went quickly, most of it lent and never returned, for which I am now grateful, for the loss of my money accelerated my advent into Fleet Street; and this inevitable advent hastened my inevitable exit, and consequent migration to my cottage in the West Country, where I rose from the dead past into the sunlight which shines on the living. My advent into Fleet Street came about in this manner.

One day my grandfather who had written me several letters about Bad Companions and the Evil Effect of too much Drink - dear old man - came to me and said he would give me an introduction to a man who knew the proprietor of several newspapers. I went with him to London, and met Sir—, a former Lord Mayor. Armed with his card, I went to see the newspaper proprietor, wearing what I thought was an impressive tie I had just bought. The tie was black, and went round twice or thrice, I forget which, a stiff stand-up collar; it was tied in a semi-loose bow in front. It was an impressive tie, I thought; but I soon ceased to wear it, removing it on impulse one night on the embankment. I believe Mr Hannen Swaffer, the well-known reporter, now wears such a tie.

I got no nearer to the newspaper proprietor than his secretary. I told him, not without hesitation and obscurity, that I combined within myself the virtues of Shelley, Keats, Byron, Jefferies, Shakespeare, Lenin, and many other living and dead poets and writers. After pause, and pencil-play on the blotter before him, the secretary said he would write to me. I went home thinking this most hopeful, and walked under the winter sky (for it was now February, 1920) with Sirius and Orion for company until eleven o'clock, when I went to bed having drunk a glass of cold water with a virtuous glow. Two days passed in walking and the excitation of thinking what a success I should be, writing about the countryside for the great newspaper, controlled by the Proprietor, I was attached to in my imagination. Then came a letter which was short, and to the effect that there did not seem to be any place for me on the editorial side of that paper; but if I would care to apply to Colonel—, of the Advertising Department, he might be able to suggest some employment for me. I went up as soon as possible and saw Colonel—, who, also sitting at a desk and toying with a long pencil, asked me what I could do. Anything, I replied, with assumed confidence. He asked me where I was at school, and when I told him, in a less confident voice he jerked his nose sideways at me (or appeared to) and shot at me the words, "How much?" I told him again, and added that it had been founded in 1562, and was famous for having expelled a Great Empire Builder; he nodded, and stared at his motionless pencil, and said he would write to me. I thanked him and went out. He was pale-faced, and wore pince-nez spectacles and looked remarkably un-soldierlike and youthful. Afterwards I learned that he had been promoted to his high honorary rank for very valuable services on Disposal Boards in England after the Armistice. Very rightly, Colonel — decided that I was quite useless as a force to help increase the advertisements of the great newspaper which was then controlled by Lord —, the aforementioned Proprietor. Colonel — wrote to me after a day's interval, saying that there did not appear to be any place for me in the Advertising Department; but if I cared to apply to Major — of the Class-

fied Avertisement Department, he might, etc. Up I went again, and saw Major —, to whom I took an instant liking. "You have a writer's face," he told me, and hastened to add, probably moved by my pathetic tie, that he would give me a job on probation in the Property Agent's Department. I was overjoyed, and confiding in him, said that I hoped to be a writer like V— G—, the famous novelist "in fifteen years time".

"Well, why shouldn't G— wish to be Williamson in fifteen years time?" Another time, he said, "Richard Jefferies is watching your progress, remember that."

I have not seen Major — for ten years; but the effect of his kindness and sympathy remains.

I began my work on the following Monday, at four pounds per week in expenses. For some months I tramped round the northern and north-western suburbs, and the outlands of the west - Highgate, Hampstead, Hendon, Willesden, Harpenden, Ealing, Hammersmith, Hoxton, Balls Pond, and other places I have forgotten - hopefully carrying slips of paper in my hand or pocket on which were printed, besides the name of the paper, the words:

WITH THE COMPLIMENTS OF THE
ADVERTISING DEPARTMENT

and on which were gummed clippings from other papers, such as *The Telegraph* and *The Morning Post*, clippings of Houses for Sale, etc., for which I was supposed to canvass, or beg, on behalf of my paper, by explaining the great advertising value of my paper. I adopted a humble and almost obsequious manner, creeping into the offices of Estate Agents, and trying to avoid having the junior clerks come towards me as though I were an important client; for to discover, after an advance with rubbing hands and upheld face and bright expression, etc., that the visitor was not an important client, but merely another canvasser was, I knew, most disappointing. Usually I entered with the slips of cutting already prominently held in my left hand, my hat in my right. Always I was treated courteously by the clerks, both juniors and seniors. Perhaps it was the aforesaid double-wound black tie, or my ready agreement at the invariable retort that my distinguished paper was not the best medium for the small properties they had on their books. Occasionally my slinking into an office was met with a hand waving me away, and perhaps emphatic dismissive shake of the head and the words "Don't want you"; but so many things in civilised competitive life wear away the outward geniality of Man that, looking backwards to those days on the verge of Fleet Street, I wonder why I was not sometimes greeted with oaths and kicked out of some of the Estate Agents' offices. Lest any of my readers happen to be Advertising Managers who may, from perusing this account, be inclined to invite me to call on them with a view to a situation, let me state truthfully that I am afraid I brought back few, very few, advertisements to the Estates Room in Printing House Square, where my colleagues were most charming and kind. However, one thing I discovered in the psychology of canvassing might be of interest to any Advertising Managers; but it must not be assumed that my experiences were typical. This was my experience: feeling that my efforts were so unavailing, I avoided the Estate Offices where I was supposed to call, and sat about in the parks

or open spaces that I encountered; Finsbury Park was one such place, and there, on a wooden seat in the sunshine, I wrote some of the papers which later were published in a volume of nature sketches called "The Lone Swallows". Now it is curious, and I cannot explain it, but I found that when I called regularly at the Estate Agents' offices I was always unsuccessful; but when I stayed away, some advertisements would trickle in by post. The more I stayed myself from calling on them, the more came in.

The spring deepened into early summer, and I was writing "The Beautiful Years" in my room at night, with the stars shining above the elm-trees beyond; or rather, "The Beautiful Years" was writing itself, flowing like sap from the roots of my being, the scenes creating themselves. Not in those days the tortured and blackened pages of the later books! I was recreating the spirit of my boyhood, which arose in the sad and radiant air of memory, while my half-tame owl perched on the back of the chair and listened to the luring ground-rustles on the grass beneath the open window.

One afternoon towards the heat of the year, after a holiday in my Devon cottage, the Manager of my Department came up to me and said:

"Do you know anything about light cars?"

"No," I replied; "but I've got a racing motorcycle."

It had taken £100 of my money a year before, this machine, and I was very proud of it. Had not an account of its fine capabilities appeared in *The Evening News* the previous September, describing a road-race near Folkestone in the early morning, when I had won first place at the rate of 72.3 miles an hour, with Sergeant Fairley second, and S. Mercier third? True, the race had never taken place, and the mess-sergeant and I had concocted the details, including S. Mercier, and sent the telegram off for a joke; but I was still proud of my great speed on my Brookland Road Special Norton, with its fixed-gear belt drive, whenever I remembered that race near Folkestone.

"Yes, you have had experience of light cars," said Major——. "I've told the Chief you have. You can do it. I know you can. Go and see the editor of *The Weekly*, and fix the details with him. You'll have to write a column a week. The Chief isn't pleased with the light-car notes of *The Weekly*. He says there's a great future for small cars. Go and write bout them. Tell—— that the Chief sent you."

Already, as I was hastening towards Monks House, where the three papers *The Daily*, *The Evening* and *The Weekly* were produced, my belt-driven motor-cycle had become a four-wheeler; its single air-cooled cylinder a water-cooled twin; its handle-bars a wheel. Of course I knew all about light cars! I fixed its image in my mind, and sent in my name to the Editor of *The Weekly*. Up went the lift. His room was a glass-built cage inside *The Weekly* office on the third floor of Monks House. He was sitting at the desk, toying with a blue pencil. Many typed sheets were scattered on the floor, overflowing from the waste-paper basket.

"So you're from the Chief, are you?" he asked, looking at me doubtfully. "Sit down, won't you?"

I sat down.

"You're going to write a column on Light Car Notes, aren't you? The Chief sent you, didn't he?"

"Yes," I replied. "But I can write about anything."

He looked at me as though reluctantly. I did not realise until later how the Chief's name had the power to affect most of those connected with his newspapers. I pulled from my pocket an essay I had just finished, and had had typed. It was called "The Meadow Grasses", and later appeared in my book "The Lone Swallows".

"Anything for me?" he asked, holding out his hand, and taking the essay. He glanced at it; while I sat and resented the swift and apparently careless way he ran his eye down the first page, lifting a sheet, glancing less than a second, lifting the third sheet, then the fourth, before his interest ceased and he handed it back.

"That's not so bad," he remarked. "I'll give you a try. But you want to tell 'em something. Would you like to come on the staff at seven guineas a week or go on space? The space rates are three guineas a column including tops, and four guineas a column on the article page."

"I think I'd earn more on space," I declared.

"I hope you do," he replied. "What do you want for your Motor Notes?"

"I'll leave it to you," I said. "If they're good, you'll pay more than if they're as bad as they have been."

"I like you," he said. "I believe you will be all right. Only tell 'em something."

After a few more remarks I became a space reporter on *The Weekly*, having unwittingly thrown away my chance of getting good payment for my motor 'notes' by leaving the question of price to the Editor. I got four guineas a week for a column; I might have got ten guineas if I had bounced him. But I have no regrets; and in those days I had no thought for what money I should earn, beyond enough to keep me.