THE CONFESSIONS OF A FAKE MERCHANT – II

Henry Williamson

In the first part of this article, which appeared in the previous issue of the Journal, *Henry describes how he began work in the newspaper world of Fleet Street. He has trudged the streets of London seeking advertising copy, writing* The Beautiful Years *in his room at night; and now he has been offered a weekly column of Light Car Notes, becoming 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'.*

WITHOUT THE LEAST SENSE of what is called false modesty, I must say that I began well. I got a scoop the first day of my new work. Parkin, the Lancashire bowler, was at the moment the cause of some attention in the papers owing to his rumoured transference from one club to another. I went to Lord's to interview him. I hated the idea of pestering him, and observing how he, during the interval, spun a ball with nervous restlessness between the third finger and thumb of his bowling hand, I asked him for hints on "How to Bowl". I noticed a long yellow core of hard skin or corn down his third finger; he spun the ball from that core. He was always practising. The rest was easy.

PARKIN ON BOWLING

appeared on the contents bills of the Northern circulation on the next Sunday morning. "I believe you're going to be a a good man, said the Editor, and what feelings of hollow uselessness I had were gone for a while. Until the following Tuesday, in fact, when the paper started to get ready for the following Sunday.

I went to Nottingham to interview an old woman aged 103 who had been flying an aeroplane. Then to Lincolnshire to interview a schoolmaster who had appeared, the day before, in *The Daily*, with fierce Kaiser moustaches, condemning the clothing of modern girls. Especially the 'V blouse'. I found a mild, clean-shaven old gentleman who offered me eggs and bacon, and showed me round his school, an ancient building where small boys sat on one side of the room, and small girls on the other, quietly, but not too quietly. The Headmaster explained that some months before he had suggested to the girls, on the breaking up of the Easter Term, that as the weather was cold, they should be more warmly clad. The local representative of *The Daily* had got hold of the story half a term later; and, said the Headmaster, had got his photograph from a volume of 'Lincolnshire Worthies', and possibly had touched up a slight moustache he had worn long ago.

"Please correct the stupid impression," he said, in his sweet voice; "I see other papers are repeating it. This morning I had a 200 word prepaid telegram from *The Picture Paper* asking for my opinion on the "Scanalous tendencies of Modern Women's Dress". Of course I don't hold such silly opinions. If it is easier and healthier for women to wear skirts half-way between ankle and knee, why shouldn't they? Won't you stay to lunch."

I thanked him, and went away, promising that he would read of *The Daily* exposure in next Sunday's *Weekly*. I wrote a long and scornful interview in the train. I rushed back to Monks House, and was received with the usual question from the editor, whose face, with its suggestiveness of a jackdaw, peered round his glass office, "What have ye got?"

"Wait!" I cried, fumbling in my pocket. He glanced at sheet after sheet, then dropped them, and dejected his head as he shuffled away into his cage. "You can't write against *The Daily*," his voice said plaintively. "Don't you know the Chief owns *The Daily*?"

"But this is true," I protested.

"What else have you got?" he said, shuffling out of his cage.

"Old Woman Flies," I said.

He glanced at it. "That's better. Send it upstairs to the News Editor."

Left alone, I looked at my 'V blouse' copy. All wasted. No money for it. Later I saw that, by taking out the words 'blouse' and 'dress' and putting in a few negatives I could turn it into an attack on Flighty Mothers. What had the old fellow said about Flighty Mothers? Surely I remembered something. Ah, I had told him of a Flighty Mother I had known and the unhappiness in the house caused by the flightiness with other men. He had agreed with me! There was my interview.

Even now, ten years afterwards, I am filled with shame at the thought of that dear old man, reading his *Weekly*, seeing himself with Kaiser moustaches, denouncing 'Flighty Mothers'! I got thirty shillings for the article .

No sooner had we ended one paper, when another began. Last week's scoop was as dead as Alfred Austin's verse. More 'stories', and then more 'stories'. The News Editor sent us three space-reporters after them. He read all the papers, scissor-snipping what he thought would make good 'stories' for the leisurely Sunday reading of *The Weekly* readers. Often we went out, got our stories, only to find they were 'dead' because one or other of the daily papers had 'got'the story first.

We weren't a newspaper, in the correct sense, until Sunday morning, when we moved out of our small room and occupied *The Daily's* news and 'subbing' rooms; and from ten o'clock in the morning until about mid-

night the editor was moving about the building with nerve-strain making his face haggard in the electric light, while the writhing worms of paper fell from the tape-machines and the building was periodically filled with the basement roar of the rotary printing machines, and damp proofs were trodden flatter and scattered further around the feet of the sub-editors sitting in shirt-sleeves around the 'subbing'table, and the reporters grew drabber and more mutinous.

Sometimes the rumour would go round that The Chief was in the building: the effect on the editor was immediate. "Find out who says so," he would say, the lines deepening on his brow, and his eyes showing their apprehension. "Well, Williamson, what have ye got? Well, why not? That's what ye're here for, to get a story when ye're sent out on one. Here, send Gates; Williamson's fallen down on his story."

"I've got a much better story than that mouldy thing about her Ladyship's stolen pearls," I cried. Had I not missed tea, dinner and supper owing to this rubbishy story which I knew would only be two 'sticks' long when, and if, it was printed?

"Well, what have ye got?"

"The pigeons of St Paul's have been raided by a very fierce and rare hawk, called the peregrine falcon," I replied, inventing the story as I went on; "I saw it myself as I came from the Communists' Meeting in Cannon Street Hotel. I saw the falcon first; it swished down at about a hundred miles an hour - I've dived in a Sopwith Camel and know what speed is - and zooming up on its back, struck a pigeon on the breast with its talons. The falcon was on its back at the moment of impact. The other pigeons scattered like paper shot from a cannon. Crowds were watching."

"It's a good story!" cried editor, one crease unfolding on his brow. "Here, Newell, put it on page one. Make it a Top. Write it just as you told me, Williamson."

The editor sauntered away, after glancing at half a dozen proofs and dropping them on the floor.

These harmless stories were easy to do. I invented a dog under the girders of Ludgate Circus bridge, and its rescue by a man on another man's shoulders standing on the top of a bus. A porpoise also came up the Thames while I was a space-reporter on *The Weekly*; it came again the next Sunday, too, its adventures being chronicled in other papers. The falcon must have appeared again, too, for I saw accounts of its raids on the Pauline pigeons in various daily papers; and I hadn't written them.

One of my friends discovered a Honeymoon Colony in Sussex; a colony of tents owing to the house shortage. It was a 'good story', said the editor, but why had the photographer of *The Picture Paper*, following up the story, been unable to locate it? And *The Daily* man, too, had reported that he had tramped all over the downs, and made many inquiries, but came back with nothing. "Anyway, it was a good story," said the editor, sauntering away with his hand in his pocket jingling his money. He did this,

I noticed, whenever he was pleased.

I disliked the work I was set to do, more and more. I could not keep it outside myself; I resented it, and allowed it to make me ill. The repeated cry, "What have ye got?" sometimes drove me to a frenzy. We looked on the editor, as the hours drew on to Saturday midnight, as a slave-driver. Perhaps a rival paper, procured in an early edition by some secret agent, revealed that one of us had missed a story. The Chief, who read all his papers like a hawk watching for movement below it, might ask, "Why hadn't *The Weekly* got that story?" Everyone was worried and strained. It was known that the Chief had 'got a down' on the editor. The Chief was a big-headed man of immense vitality, who had strong likes and dislikes. I remember once that *The Weekly* Golf correspondent, describing a match, used the sentence, "He drove the ball four hundred feet, putting it out of bounds!" The Chief read the word 'putting' as the specialised stroke; whereas it was explained to him as having been used in the meaning of "placing the ball out of bounds". Nevertheless, for weeks his Daily Bulletins referred to the 'mistake', deprecating the editor who could not retort. "Well, the Chief's like that," we used to say; and felt sorry for the editor.

The Editor had a sense of humour, and was really a kind man who helped people in various ways, always unobtrusively. He was a Jew from Manchester. His trousers and coat, like my own (for I had cast away my foppish double-tie and stiff collars), hung with the ease of dark sacks upon him. One Saturday afternoon he said to me, "Go and get Father Bernard Vaughan to say something about Present Day Laxity of Morals. Are ye a Roman Catholic?"

"No," I said.

"Well, 'Confidence for Confidence,'" he blandly replied, "nor am I. Go and see Father Vaughan. Say I sent ye. Pump the stuff into him -" The editor made the motion of filling a syringe at a pail, and then discharging it into the consciousness of an imaginary listener. "And he'll say 'Yes, Yes,' to all ye say, then you say humbly, 'Thank you very much, Father,' and ask him if he will put his name to it. Then he'll read the paper between meat and Mass and think what a fine article he has written."

That was the method. Four guineas per column pro rata. It was not all so pleasant and easy. One Saturday the News Editor said to me, "The Doncaster police have just rung up and said that a man living at Hoxton tried to cut his throat after being caught opening a mail bag after the races. He was a bookie, who had lost all his dough. Go and see his wife at this address and get a story."

I went to the address. The people were obviously very poor in the neighbourhood. After inquiring at three doors I found the tenement. Conscious of the gathering of neighbours outside, peering and wiping hands on sack aprons, I asked to be allowed to enter. I began questioning a very apprehensive woman. Her face was pale, her eyes frightened.

Children looked at me solemnly from behind her skirts. I faltered in my questions; I dared not tell her what had happened. "What do you want to know for?" she asked, again and again. I said her husband had met with a slight accident. There was no story in it for me. An ex-soldier trying to keep a family together by making a book; obviously an amateur, cutting open a mailbag lying under all eyes on the station. But that aspect was not 'news'. I recalled, as I went away through the peering neighbours, the remarks made to me by a stranger in a lift at the office, a Scotsman who had been knighted, one of the business lieutenants of the Chief. This important gentleman, meeting me in the lift, glanced at a book I happened to be carrying in my hand.

"What's that stuff? Keats' Poems! That sort of stuff won't get you on here, my lad!" he growled.

Such remarks in those days, had the effect on me of a short-circuit on a charged accumulator. For me, they epitomised the Old Adam - the direct cause of crucifixions, wars, and all deathly things. With the editor things were less uneasy; but I was unsophisticated. I find the following in my Diary, which I kept at the time. I transcribe it exactly as written.

July 27, 1920

The remarks of the editor are amusing. He isn't such a bad fellow; he is saved by a sense of humour. That is the link between us. Also he has told me that "I have the makings of a good man". The following conversation was to be heard the other day. The journalist, fresh from an interview with Cass Gilbert, the American architect, who told him about "Poor broken France". Journalist, rushing upstairs, after a taxi-ride (it is Thursday; the paper went to press on Saturday!), bursts into the editor's room. Editor, looking up from proof of "Should girls be Chaperoned at the Seaside", by Lady D— M—.

Me: "I've got a GREAT STORY. I can do it! The Battlefields of..."

Editor: "Aw, sob stoof. Let's hear it, then."

Me: "I can't tell you - I've got to write it. It's mentally composed. Tremendous story!" (Thinking, 'My chance at last!")

Editor: "Pough, the stoof about the airy zephyrs and sobbing breezes is all right, but we don't want it. Now, if you could get Cass Gilbert to speak about London, if he thinks the Ritz is an incinerator, or the Piccadilly a doll's house, well and good. Then you've got something to tell 'em. But the battlefields, pooh, my dear boy, pooh. The War's over."

Me: "Damnation, you don't know good copy when you see it. Cass Gilbert! He's a great man. It will make the beastly paper!"

Editor: "Now, now. Enthusiasm's all right, young fellow, but you've got off the rails. This paper isn't the Monastery Record or the Airy

Zephyrs Review. Good story! Because an American has at last realised what the War meant!"

Me: "Very well. I'm on space. I'll take it to *The Observer*."

Editor (complacently puffing cigar): Better take it to the waste-paper basket. Put it on the spike. It's punk, my dear boy."

I don't care, for Austin Harrison has taken "The Night" for *The English Review*. I cannot write in this Journal now; the Spring has gone. That is the reason.

One day I was asked to get a "Well-known Man About Town" to 'write' an article on "Will Side-whiskers Return?" Dare I approach a certain side-whiskered peer, well-known as a sportsman? I dared. My visit to his Lordship's house was similar to dozens of other humiliating visits. I crept away from the cold eye of the butler. I went back to the office; I rang up many other well-known men in Town in vain. In desperation. (No stories in the paper, no pay, and all my other news stories that week had been 'spiked'.) I called on Dr Macnamara, who was Minister of Labour in the Coalition Government. I had interviewed Dr Macnamara before, and remembered a kind and sympathetic man. I was let into his wide room in Whitehall, hat in hand. He was writing in shirt-sleeves at a desk by the far wall. Around the walls were ranged charts, with figures and graphic curves - the employment charts. Unemployment was bad then.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir. Please will you give me an interview?"

"I'll help you if I can. What is the interview on?"

"Do you think - "

Pause.

"Do you think -" stammering "that side-whiskers are likely to be fashionable again?"

"What?"

Pause.

"Are side-whiskers likely to be fashionable again?"

Pause.

"Sit down, Williamson. Take a cigarette."

Journalist takes one with trembling hand.

"Come here, Williamson."

He rose and led the way to the charts on the wall.

"Do you see these, Williamson? They are the numbers of men who want work, many of whom are in despair, men who until a little while ago were breaking the Hindenburg Line, and who are now breaking their hearts. Look at the numbers, Williamson."

"Yes, sir."

"And you come to a man who is trying with all his heart to help these poor fellows, to ask him to give you material for an article on 'Are Side-whiskers coming into fashion?'"

"I am sorry, sir."

I tried to make a joke about side-whiskers and beards coming into fashion owing to the number of unemployed who couldn't afford a shave. The joke fell like a slap of wet putty on the floor.

"I am afraid I cannot talk to you about whiskers, Williamson. I am very busy, Williamson."

"Thank you, sir. I ought to have known better." (Goes to the door and turns back.) "I know better now." (Points to figures.) "There will be one more on that list next week, sir. Good afternoon!"

"That is a different story, Williamson. I will give you any *real* interview you like, and will help you if I can; but *side-whiskers*... side-whiskers! No, no, don't apologise again, my dear boy." I hurried away. I returned slowly to Monk's House.

..."What have ye got?"

..."Airy zephyrs."

..."Tell 'em something."

I am told that I screamed these words at the editor on this occasion:

"You don't know how to employ talent when you see it! I'm a race-horse, and all you can see in me is something to draw the weekly dust-cart through the streets!"

About an hour afterwards I persuaded the editor to let me write a small sketch, to appear on the four guineas page, under the heading of "The Country Week". Looking back I am sure he consented out of kindness. This little feature appeared once or twice on the middle page, tucked away in one or other of the corners. It was a hot summer, I remember, but other things beside the heat made me fret in London. I had striven against misunderstanding with one I loved, but without avail. My work became more and more distasteful. London was a wilderness, except for rare oases, as the evening spent in the Danish Club, when I had deserted the paper, with a party of friends including a beautiful fair-haired, cornflower-blue eyed dancer and a young unknown tenor named Melchior who,

I thought would one day be world-famous. He sang some comic songs and some English ballads, while I sat in a corner, holding against the clutch of the waiter a bottle of Schnapps in my hand. I left Lauritz Melchior and his friends about one o'clock and I went back to Monks House to sleep in the room of the editor of *The Evening* - a favourite Saturday roost of mine.

Here is the last *Country Week* sketch I wrote for the paper, which expresses the more tranquil phase of my prevailing experiences in those days:

> *Two swifts were seen yesterday; it is late to see a swift. One sped disconsolate and alone in the sky; the other lay on the lawn, his feet drawn up into his body; his long, scimitar wings wrapped round him like a cloak; his eyes dimmed for ever. Maybe he had been shot, or disease dulled the muscles of those splendid pinions; perhaps he had no wish to live now that the mists of autumn trail the fields and the leaves loosen in the cold wind.*

It is followed by the following:

16 Sept., 1920

Great gloom in the W.D. office to-day. The paper isn't making enough money, so economy must be rigidly enforced. The editor called us all in and said that two of us must go; he was sorry, but - I hear unofficially that I am one of the two. I do believe they think that I have independent means. Ye Gods! If they only knew. Anyhow, perhaps it's best that I should go. The editor, whom I like more and more, says he will take my Light Car Notes until after the Motor Show - two guineas weekly for a half column - and advises me to write fiction. He took me down to the Fiction Editor (we have our punctilio in Monks House: there are editors, and there is a Fiction Editor) and said: "He can write all right but he won't do what he's told." I haven't a wife, and Singleton Gates has. I haven't a girl, and Gordon West has. Austin Small ('Seamark') will of course remain. Then there is the pathetic little woman reporter. No, it must of course be me: the square peg in the round hole: don't get on well with people. So let me be damned, and the sooner the better. In his communique, posted up inside every door so that all can read it, the Chief pillories the editor pretty badly to-day. I took down this from our door, and have pasted it in as a souvenir.

> *The paper will have to be much more full of items and italic paragraphs in future. It has become obvious that the crushing increase of expenses will necessitate the devotion of more space to advertisements. I have held out against this procedure as long as possible, but we must either increase the price of the paper or increase the amount of advertising. Of the two expedients I am decidedly in favour of giving more advertisements. I doubt if the newspapers of Great Britain were ever in such a bad way as they are to-day. The selling up of --'s is a sign of the times. I hear that other such sales are coming. We went into the astounding editorial expenses of* The Weekly *yesterday*

> *and I cannot understand why the editor, who is naturally, for many and obvious reasons, a keen man of business (and is paid by results and partly paid by commission on the profits), should encourage such wastefulness. In the case of* The Weekly *it was put before me yesterday whether it should be reduced to twelve pages or whether it should give more advertisements. But at -- --'s present rate of expenses, the paper can never pay in any circumstances.*

The result being that I am sacked. Good! Now I shall begin to write.

Immediately afterwards an incident occurred which showed me, if I had not known it before, that I was wise in being sacked. At this period *The Daily* was proclaiming its largest circulation; and also trying to induce a rival (and less modern) *daily* to reveal its net sales. The rival *daily* had been founded by a famous Victorian author, and this fact was proudly proclaimed by the *daily*; such things as net sales did not appear to interest its management. Day after day the demands of *The Daily* for the *daily's* net sales were ignored; until, in triumph, *The Daily* announced that it would give six free front page advertisements to the firm which would induce the *daily* to reveal its net sales. Here, thought I, was the *daily's* chance. I hurried round to the *daily's* office, and suggested to the management that the *daily* should announce its sales, claim the reward, and advertise itself for 6 days on the front page of *The Daily*. I saw a charming man with a most pleasing manner; smiling he shook his head.

"You will have to announce it one day," I implored him. "Why not now, and so make *The Daily* - "

He smiled and shook his head again.

So I returned to *The Daily* and warned them of their danger; unsmilingly they shook their heads, and I went out of the office for ever. The next day the challenge was repeated, but the *daily* or its agents were excluded from the free-space offer. I did not care; I went down to Devon to write.