



A Stroke of Genius

By
Thomas Thursday

THOSE chaps, Samuel Langhorne Barker and Ellis Butler Swain, are just as humorous as a coal famine! Why, when I read Barker's 'Finnish Huckleberries,' all that I needed to make me cry was a little soft music and some low lights. And, say, every time I think of Swain's 'Pigs is Pork,' I get as weepy as a two-weeks-old widow. And the public eats so much of that stuff that they get indigestion of the brain and wonder what's the matter with them. Why, they tell me that the editors just wear out their auto tires chasing after those fellows. I tell you, Jim, the only way for a new writer to get a story published nowadays is either to buy a magazine outright or marry the editor's pet stenographer. Believe me, I never brag; but you know yourself that my stories have got that bunch of millionaire scribes beaten to a fare-you-well!"

This explosive criticism occurred one night while Jeff and I were furnished-rooming together out in Cleveledo, Calichusettes. Regular pals, you know. Wore each other's shirts, socks, suits, and, during hard times, took turns at the overcoat. At that time we were both employed in the assembling department of the Irrational Crookometer Company. The salary to start was twelve-fifty per,

and apparently it was about the same to finish. We had been working there for nearly a year, but up to that time the firm had not even raised a window.

Jeff, being the more ambitious of the two, decided to write humorous stories for the magazines. Being a failure at almost everything else, he figured that he ought to be a whirlwind at the writing game. Wasn't that the way most of the big guns of the profession started? He believed it was, otherwise he couldn't account for the successful authors. I, of course, was perfectly willing to listen to his assorted ravings—which was almost as tedious as composing them.

Desirous of starting business in the proper literary fashion, we purchased a typewriter on the "chase-'em plan"—one dollar down and two bell rings per week. Jeff—his full name was Jefferson, named after the famous Thomas, you know—wasted a ream of perfectly good bond paper in his efforts to master the vagaries of the keyboard, bill for said wastage amounting to one dollar and ten cents. However, after about three months' practice, he managed to typewrite, in a semi-readable manner, three of his best literary efforts. They were: "The Learned Lunatic," "The Speed of a Snail," and "The Strength of Senator Garlic."

Rest assured, we read and reread, polished and repolished that trinity of literary gems from every possible angle. We would pet them at breakfast, hug them at lunch, and use them as dessert at dinner. How could any editor, possessing at least a spoonful of brains, reject such rare humor? Not a chance in the world! We had visions of smoke tanks, divisions of gold, and revisions of our living habits, all rolled up into one glorious nightmare.

II.

OUR next move was to discover the hiding place of the nearest magazine—owing to the new postage rates. To get the proper address of such periodicals we delved into the mysteries of Jeff's newly acquired book entitled "One Thousand Places to Sell Stories; or, Why Work for a Living?" On page 23 we were pleased to learn that one of the largest magazines in the country, *The Flipperino Weekly*, was published right in Cleveledo. Fine! Under such favorable conditions, Jeff figured that if the editor dared to purloin or plagiarize his pearly masterpieces he could easily dash around to the office and declare war. Wasn't he, at one time, a special officer in a baseball park? He surely was!

That evening the three stories were mailed to the unsuspecting editor of *The Flipperino Weekly*. Neither of us got much sleep that night. About three a. m., Jeff, who had been silent for at least fifteen minutes, poked me in the ribs, wishing to know what we were going to do about the motion-picture rights. Would the editor get all the gravy? What would the M. P. folks pay for stories like his? Raved out, Jeff finally passed into the land of restless dreams.

III.

DIDN'T I tell you that a new writer doesn't stand a chance of charging through an editor's barbed-wire entanglements? That's all the thanks a fellow gets for writing stories that appeal to the people instead of some dyspeptic editor!

You guessed it! The gems came back, and Jeff was just as peeved as a tailless cow trying to chase hungry flies off her back. The editor, however, was not altogether heartless, for he requested Jeff to

revise the "Senator Garlic" yarn and submit it again.

"Can you imagine a goop like that?" raved Jeff, quivering like a bowl of gelatin on an old-fashioned ferryboat. "He picks out the worst of the three and wants it revised! What'll we do about it, Jim?" he asked, calming down about twenty degrees.

"Just what the editor requests," I replied emphatically.

Personally I figured that a nibble was just as good as a catch, provided the hook was baited in the proper manner on the next cast-out. Anyway, it showed that there were fish in the editorial waters somewhere, and all it required to hook them was a little patience on Jeff's part.

"It's a mystery to me why he selected that Garlic story," continued Jeff. "The other two were hummers, believe me. Well, you see what boobs get the editorial jobs."

IV.

DURING the next few days Jeff and I disguised "The Strength of Senator Garlic" in such a way that we didn't recognize it after the job of revision was done. Jeff's method of promoting thought was to pace up and down the room like a candidate awaiting election returns. He had read somewhere that Robert Louis Stevedore and Arthur Conan Sherlock were inclined to indulge in several choice fits before writing a masterpiece. Jeff was following the approved methods of thought stimulus, all right, and it would not be his fault if "The Strength of Senator Garlic" didn't appeal strongly enough now to the mind of the editor.

"What do the *Flipperino* people pay for a three-thousand-word story?" inquired Jeff, sticking the pen behind his ear.

"About two cents a word to new writers, I guess," I replied.

"Two cents, eh? Well, now, let's see—that would land us sixty bones, wouldn't it?"

"Yep."

"Say, Jim, can't we stretch 'Senator Garlic' into five hundred dollars?" asked the enterprising Jeff.

"Certainly not! You can't turn a short story into a three-hundred-page novel," I answered impatiently.

"I can't, eh? I guess you don't read some of the best sellers, Jim. Why, some of those bathrobed scribes can write a four-hundred-page novel in such a manner that you couldn't find enough plot in it to make a decent short story! Fellows like that ought to come under Federal supervision during war time for wasting paper and good ink. And the funny thing about it is that all the Factory Fannies, Stella Stenogs, and Candy Carries go plumb nutty over such stuff!" Jeff punctuated his remarks with hands, legs, and arms, without serious injury to the mirror. "Why, every time some poor dub of a boss leaves his office for a little liquid refreshment the girls yank out George Starr Cushion's latest sob entitled 'The Frozen Tear of Texas,' and forget all about the boss' interest. Jim, if it wasn't for the dear girls, about ninety per cent of those writers would have to go back to the factory and don overalls."

"Stop knocking, Jeff," I chirped. "They get away with it, don't they? And they own motors and live in swell hotels. Give 'em credit!"

"Credit beans!" grunted he, turning to finish the revision of his story.

V.

THE following morning, on our way to the factory, we mailed the revised manuscript. Jeff whistled various popular and unpopular tunes during working hours, as he felt assured that he would soon be able to tell the manager to hire a new boy. The rest of the fellows couldn't understand what had come over Jeff, because hitherto he had been the prize grouch of the shop. Saturday night he came near quitting the job. He figured that he would soon receive a check for sixty dollars, which would put him on velvet until he could write his next masterpiece. Luckily I persuaded him to wait a while, as jobs were scarce. It was a good thing he heeded my warning, because that same evening a letter from the editor awaited him at home. It read like this:

DEAR MR. SWEENEY: You will be pleased to learn that your story, "The Strength of Senator Garlic," has been accepted by this magazine, and will appear in an early issue. Inclosed we send you check for two dollars and fifty cents (\$2.50), which sum is our regular rate of payment for a story like yours. I trust that you will become a regular contributor from now on. Yours

sincerely,

HICKS BALDOME, Editor.

Well, sir—or ma'am—when Jeff got the full gist of that editorial bullet into his sensitive and vainglorious noodle, I thought that he'd require the service of a strait-jacket.

"Get a cop!" he howled, pacing up and down like a New York thermometer. "What does that goop think I live on—doughnut holes and air wafers?"

"Take it easy, Jeff; maybe the editor made a mistake," I said soothingly.

"Mistake!" he glared. "I should say he did make a mistake!"

No sleep that night. Jeff tossed around like a Mexican jumping bean and growled intermittently in a most uncanny manner. Poor Jeff; he was all in!

VI.

ON the level, Jim, don't you think my story outshines all the rest of that sickly looking bunch in this magazine?" asked Jeff, passing me the latest issue of *The Flipperino Weekly*, which contained his story. To be perfectly candid, Jeff's yarn did loom up far ahead of all the rest, and I told him so. "Say, I've got an idea that will make that editor feel as cheap as a dime in front of a barrel of sugar," said he confidentially.

"Shoot!" was my request.

"Listen!" he began. "We'll frame up some fake letters of praise and send them to our friends in different parts of the country. The scheme is to have them rewrite them and send them to the editor, signing their own name. Some idea, eh?"

I agreed that it was a corker—if it worked!

Now, I learned in after life that letters of praise to an editor are just as welcome as a revolution to a grade-A Bolshevik. Such epistles, you understand, are a means that a poor editor has of knowing the pulse of his clientele. But the letters often rub the editorial fur in the wrong direction. Perchance the editor will receive five hundred letters praising a certain story and one howling that said story was hopelessly bad; then it's a ten-to-one shot that the editor will agree with the minority communication. Letters are bully things for the editor, but let the author beware! Neither Jeff nor I understood editorial psychology at that time.

VII.

DURING the next half hour Jeff busied himself with the frame-up letters. The composing of them delighted him to the core. He was at his very best when it came to the manufacture of fairy tales.

“Have a slant at this, Jim,” he said, as he passed me one of the finished letters. It read as follows:

Hiandry Vermaine,
December 5, 1917.

*Editor “Flipperino Weekly,” Cleveledo,
Calichusettes.*

SIR: Allow me to congratulate you on selecting a real story at last! “The Strength of Senator Garlic” was the best yarn your bone-dry magazine has ever published. Give us some more stories by Jefferson Sweeney. He’s a genius! Yours truly,

P. O. Box 1861. HIRAM FLUKE.

“It’s a little raw, Jeff, isn’t it?” I said.

“Raw your grandmother! I’d put a bomb into each one if I could. Read the rest.”

That the reader may have the benefit of Jeff’s genius, I’ll give two more complete samples:

Fishhook, Florolina,
December 7, 1917.

*Editor “Flipperino Weekly,” Cleveledo,
Calichusettes.*

DEAR SIR: Has the magazine changed hands recently? It certainly looks that way, because I found a live story in your last issue.

Prior to this number, all the stories appeared to me as if the writers had dyspepsia or rheumatism of the brain. If you wish to have your magazine continue to have a healthy circulation in these parts, why, you’d better give Jefferson Sweeney a contract for life! His “Garlic” story was so comical that my ever-hungry brother postponed his breakfast to read it. Yours for the change,

P. O. Box 1770 MAUDE CHEWING.

Here’s the other:

Takalook, Washingtah,
December 4, 1917.

*Ed. “Flipperino Weekly,” Cleveledo,
Calichusettes.*

DEAR ED: When I read “The Strength of Senator Garlic,” by Jefferson Sweeney, in your last issue, I was obliged to turn to the title-page

to see if it was the same magazine Well, well, well! You woke up at last! Why, heretofore your stories were so sad that our minister used to take them for his Sunday sermon text. Now, if you will promise to give us some more of Mr. Sweeney’s tales, I will take a year’s subscription, and pay for it out of my own pocket this time. The present subscription was a Christmas present given to me by a veteran of the Civil War. Yours sincerely,

P. O. Box 1492. PHILLIP O’CANN.

VIII.

I’LL be back in a few minutes, Jim—just going over to the post office and mail the letters,” said Jeff, putting on his cap and overcoat.

“How many are you going to send?” I asked.

“Seven this time—more in a few days,” he replied, as he breezed out of the room.

Left alone, I tried to vision the learned editor’s conduct after reading Jeff’s strategical correspondence. I couldn’t imagine that gentleman otherwise than taking it all to heart and immediately forwarding Jeff a life contract.

Fifteen minutes later Jeff returned, excited and out of breath. “Did I leave one of the letters here?” he asked, panting.

“I don’t see it,” I replied, after searching around the room.

“Well, I bought stamps for seven, but when I started to stick them on I discovered that one letter was missing.”

“Maybe you lost it. Whom was it addressed to?”

“To an old friend, Tom Kelly, out in Florafina, Maryware,” he answered, scratching his head.

“It’ll be all right, I guess. Possibly some conscientious person may find it, stick on a stamp, and shoot it into the mail box,” I remarked philosophically.

For the next few weeks Jeff promenaded around with one of those don’t-touch-me-I’m-holy walks, figuring on the blessed day when he would be able to discard his overalls forever. And of course I humored him in his whim, believing that eventually I would be the same to him as Monsieur Bourrienne was to Napoleon Bonaparte. Knowing somewhat of the life of Jack London and Oliver Goldsmith, I was imaginative enough to dream that Jeff was capable of attaining the same literary

eminence. Wasn't he struggling for recognition in much the same manner as those chaps? He surely was, in my opinion.

IX.

LOOKS like another letter from the editor," I remarked one evening as we entered the house.

"That's the stuff!" said Jeff, as we dashed up to the room.

"I'll bet it's a contract," said I enthusiastically.

"Oh, boy! It's the bacon, all right!" was his joyous return.

"Bet you can't leave it on the desk five minutes without opening it," I said.

"No bet! I'm going to open that letter just as soon as I take my mitts off," he answered excitedly.

Well, sir—or ma'am—when Jeff read that epistle of supposed-to-be joy he changed so much that he wouldn't have had a chance to pass the physical examination of a wooden army. "The game's up!" he gasped, dropping into a chair.

"What's the matter—bad news?" I asked solicitously.

"Worse'n that! Something went wrong. Read it for yourself."

I did. Surely it was a twenty-four carat knockout wallop. Listen to the innocent editor:

MR. JEFFERSON SWEENEY, *Thirteen Luck Avenue, Cleveledo, Calichusettes.*

DEAR MR. SWEENEY: I take this opportunity of informing you that I would be pleased to give you a life contract, provided, of course, that your future stories are guaranteed to be just half as humorous as your art and method of correspondence. No offense, please. Yours pleasantly,

HICKS BALDOME, Editor.

What is your guess? That the editor found Jeff's lost letter? Something like that. *He* did not find it, but the office boy did. How could he? Too easy. The office boy lived next door to us, it turned out upon investigation. Did he open it? Oh, boy! And did he hotfoot to the editor with it? He did. Tough luck? It was. My, but you are a good guesser!