COMPLAINT DEPARTMENT

A Peevish Conversation

"WHY," said the Commander-in-Chief, "don't you write something for the Real magazines instead of frivoling away your evenings the way you do going on dancing parties with snips?"

(I may explain that in the special vocabulary of the Commander-in-Chief, a snip is a young person—usually an attractive young person.)

"Because", I answered, "I have reached the age when I have nothing to communicate—nothing, certainly, that the real magazines want to offer to their select public as paid-for reading matter next to advertising."

"But," persisted the Commander-in-Chief, "you know how to write so well that it is a shame you shouldn't do it. After all these years—"

"I know," I said, gracefully accepting the compliment, "I know. It is a fearful anticlimax. Here I have been thirty-odd years mastering a complex and laborious art, only to find that I have no proper use for it. After spending the best part of my life learning how to put words together neatly so as to make them mean exactly what I want to say, neither more nor less, I suddenly find out that I haven't anything to say. You could call it tragic, if you wanted to."

"I call it ridiculous," said the Commander-in-Chief. "The truth is you are too lazy. All you think of is being amused."

"When I was young—very young indeed," I said, "I had lots to say. Or I thought I had. And I used to sit up nights trying to put on paper the things I thought were inside of me. I wrote and wrote and wrote. A frightful mass of words got set down. But the right words were hard to find, and generally they were so mixed up with a multitude of wrong words that it all came to nothing. What is worse, I was not always able to tell the difference, and no end of good postage stamps were wasted sending the stuff away to editors who did not want it."

"But you got to be an editor yourself," said the Commander-in-Chief.

"I did," I admitted. "It took a long time, but it seemed the only way to get what I wrote printed. As an editor I always abused my privilege shamefully. I insisted on using my own stuff, although nobody knew better than myself that no other editor would buy it. In that way I contrived to get a lot of practice.

"And after years and years of that practice, I found that I had, as you say, learned to write. I had got the right words trained so that they came to call not quite inextricably tangled up with the wrong ones—though an unruly flock of the wrong ones came too and rather many of that sort stayed mixed in always. That made writing laborious. Because I had to

go over things so often to get the wrong words out and to make sure that the right words were in.

"The result—the natural result—was that by the time I had finished I had usually forgot what it was all about. That rather spoiled it. The interest in what I started out to say had slipped so far into the back of my own head that the reader could not get it into his head at all. And there you are. Naturally when I began to realize this truth, I began to stop wanting to write. It is no manner of use writing unless somebody reads your writings. I do not mean, of course, just writing for a living. That is different—like making bricks when you are paid for making them by the hundred and do not care what becomes of them afterward—whether they go into model tenements on the East Side of New York or into imitation Georgian and mock-Colonial palaces with gardens to lure simple-minded city womenfolk out into the already over-populated suburban real estate market that goes by the name of 'the country'."

The Commander-in-Chief looked up challengingly. It is a hobby of hers that we are going to move to the country some day, and she spends hours looking at pictures of small inexpensive mansions set in the midst of lawns and shrubbery—the sort the more unscrupulous illustrated magazines are full of.

"We were not talking of houses," she said. "We were talking of writing. Or rather of NOT writing."

"Of writing", I said firmly, "writing for a living. It is a particularly low form of manual labor, recognized as such by all Soviet governments. And I do it every day. What is worse I have done it every day for years and I suppose I shall do it every day for many more years. The one advantage is that you do not in the least care what you write about. And no more do you care whether you have anything to say. Because you can say what somebody else wants to say and does not quite know how, or what somebody else wants still somebody else to have said. Or even what a lot of people have been saying over and over again since the world began to talk. After all there has got to be somebody to do that sort of thing. And nobody could be better for the job than the fellow who has learned how to write and has nothing to say of his own."

"It's a shame," said the Commander-in-Chief, "it's a perfect shame to get that way. And it is still more of a shame to defend yourself for getting that way. If you would sit down and read once in a while instead of going and dancing with snips at your age—"

"The snips", I said, "are an antidote. When you have nothing to say, you do not have to say it to light-footed fillies. They require only to be danced with. At my age what one needs most is to be kept young. And the company of young persons—"

"At your age," said the Commander-in-Chief severely, "you ought to have better sense."

"Moreover", I continued, "knowing how to do a thing is the only way to be sure it is not worth doing. In those youthful days of mine—and for quite a long time afterward—while I was struggling to learn to write, I used to regard authors with a sentiment surpassing awe. Now I know how the trick is done. Even though I can't do it. Having nothing to say is the hitch there, of course. It is fatal. But the trick is none the less a trick. And the cards of all the tricks are spread out under my eyes every day. When I

first began to meet authors—real authors who had their names on the title-pages of books—I was thrilled to the bone. The very first one, I remember, was May Sinclair. She was a very plain old maid to look at with lots of rings on her hands. But I was thrilled all the same. Afterward, you remember, there was a regular galaxy. You went along and met most of 'em too—and we were both thrilled. Perhaps you can recall some of their names?"

"There was Kipling", she said eagerly, "and Locke—and Conrad—and Henry James, and De Morgan, and Galsworthy and Wells and Chesterton,—and the Archdeacon of Ely, and the nice historian who was best man at Bernard Shaw's wedding—and Lord Dunsany, of course, and the other Chesterton that smoked the pipe in the carriage and was so annoyed because he couldn't in the subway—and—Arnold Bennett, only I wasn't along—and—"

"That sort of people, generally", I put in, "the people that have whole rows of our book-shelves devoted to them. All that you have mentioned were ready made when we met them. And they impressed me tremendously—as you know. But that isn't the whole story. A lot of other folks I already knew one way and another began to turn into authors over night under my very nose, as it were. Some of them *I* made into authors—or helped make 'em. I could name several, that any regular patron of the circulating libraries would recognize at a glance.

"And *they* weren't any different afterward—after they turned into authors, I mean. Sometimes they were worse. They got their stuff published and—paid for. I published their stuff and paid for it with my trusting employers' money confided to me for the purpose. Some of it was good, some of it was, at least, fair to middlin',—and some of it was just plain bad. The only really distinguishing fact about all of it was that it got paid for. It grew in my mind to seem no more worth while to be an author—after all the dreams of my youth—than to be any other sort of maker of something to sell. In a little while I began rather to look down on authors, because they pulled down so little for what they did sell and so particularly little for what they sold that wasn't made to order for the railway station and subway news-stand trade."

"I don't see why you should turn up your nose at them for that," said the Commander-in-Chief tartly.

"No more I do," I replied, "or I pretend to only because I can't do the stuff myself. But it all comes to the same thing in the end. It is not worth doing except for what you get out of it in cash, and there is no more reason for wanting ardently to be an author than for wanting ardently to make shoes. I wish I did make shoes—a lot of them. At present prices I ought to clean up in a year more than any self-respecting author could accumulate in a lifetime even with the aid of relays of stenographers and a typewriter of his own at home nights."

"You are talking nonsense, and you know it," said the Commander-in-Chief in a manner which disposed of the whole subject. "I just saw the plans of a perfectly dear inexpensive little house in a magazine I picked up in your office. I borrowed it and brought it home to show you. Right here, you see, is the entrance hall, twenty feet by thirty—"

But what's the use?

—H. I. BROCK