A TRIO OF WEEKEND NOVELISTS

By Charles Hanson Towne

WHEN I was editing a popular magazine, it was astonishing how many young writers used to come to me and say, when I reprimanded them for not working harder, "Oh, I could write well if only I had more time!"

I wish I had known Frank Swinnerton, J. D. Beresford, and Michael Sadleir then, to toss their records of production into the faces of these lazy upstarts! But I didn't. Afterward, I met them in London; and I met every one of them in his office.

"You mean his study", I can hear the reader correcting me.

I do not. I mean his office; and they weren't very pleasant offices, at that. Frank Swinnerton gives three days a week — to be exact, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays — to Messrs. Chatto and Windus. When I presented a letter to him, I was asked to wait in a little reception room which contained a chair, duly labeled as in a museum, that used to belong to Charles Dickens at Gad's Hill. I did not sit in it. I wish I had now. I don't know why I didn't, for I have always been a great Dickens lover, and I like thrills — even vicarious thrills. But then we seldom do the things we really ought to do. (Will those young lazy writers whom I scolded in the opening paragraph please come back at me?)

In a moment I was asked by a very charming young English girl to follow her to Mr. Swinnerton's private office. It is always easy to follow a pretty girl, even when you are excited about being in close proximity to a chair once occupied by Charles Dickens.

She opened a door for me, after we had swung down a very dim corridor; and there, in a far dimmer interior room, sat a man with a blondish beard. I recognized him at once, for I had frequently seen his picture. His desk was as neat as mine is always untidy, and he rose to greet me in the most delightful and gracious way. Above his head was a somewhat soiled skylight; if you know London you will realize how gloomy the little office must have been. We talked in half darkness; and the foolish thought crossed my mind, I remember, that "Nocturne" might have been conceived, if not actually born, in this place; or maybe the middle aged "September". Yet the light that pours through those splendid pages and often blinds you with its brilliance was not in this room, and must have come from the fire in the man's soul. How could he work in such a place, I wondered. But I did not dare commiserate him. I once worked in a room without a window for six whole months, and got along very well indeed. There is a lot of bosh about the necessity of streaming sunlight and distracting views. If it is in you to be a writer you will be one, sooner or later. The only windows you need are your two eyes. (If this bears the Pollyanna hallmark, I am sorry; for I am by no means, I hope, a stupid optimist.) But Swinnerton does not write his own books here. He reads the manuscripts

of others; and though it is dim, it is likewise quiet — which is also a point for the "glad" school of writers and readers.

Novelists, like poets, do not look "queer" these days. I recall once asking Richard Le Gallienne what Kipling looked like, and he answered, without a moment's hesitation, "Why, he might have been the man to come in and fix the gas metre — or he might have been the genius that he is."

Frank Swinnerton is everyday looking, if you know what I mean. He is "regular". There isn't any long or bushy hair, or badly fitting clothes, and his glasses are clean and ready for work. His shapely hands betray the artist in him; but so few people notice hands, I find. He is slim, and his voice is sympathetic and youthful. He seems ageless to me — I couldn't possibly make even a rough guess at the number of years he has lived. But this I do know: that he has lived much and deeply; and each novel of his that I have read seems to me better and bigger, more stupendous than the last.

He is such a good critic that it would be a tragedy for the coming tribe of English writers who send their manuscripts to him if he should take it into his head some day to give up literary advising. Arnold Bennett tells a story of once sending the manuscript of a new writer to him, with the request that he read it and then tell its faults to the young hopeful in his (Bennett's) presence. It was an illuminating hour; and not only was the inexperienced author convinced and impressed, but Bennett himself confesses that he learned something, too. And it is this kind of constructive criticism that is offered in this dingy little room. The light in Swinnerton's brain is generously shared. He finds it exhilarating to help other writers, remembering the first help he got from men higher up; and he holds that the reading of other people's manuscripts does not interfere with his own creative work. You see, he has that rare gift, which amounts almost to genius, of being able to lay aside his Chatto and Windus duties the moment he closes his office door behind him on Thursday afternoons. A Dr. Jekyll and a Mr. Hyde; only, instead of tearing down, he builds up. "What a lesson could here be learned!" some pious Sabbath School teacher might say, with great originality, to her class of ambitious boys. I refuse to say it myself, except in quotation marks; for I am no moralist. I flee from all moralists as fast as I lingeringly parted from Mr. Swinnerton.

Then it was Beresford I saw — the author of the thrilling "Revolution" and many another fine novel. He is somewhat luckier than Swinnerton, in that he gives but a day to Messrs. Collins and Company, in Pall Mall. And he has two large windows looking on the street, and a soft rug, and a much wider desk, on which there were even fewer manuscripts. Here, too, was that mysterious London calm and peace, though the whole world seemed to have been rolling by me only a moment before.

The English have a quality of detachment that I envy. Their ability to shove extraneous things into the dust heap is something that we might well emulate. If London crashes at their windows, they simply close the pane.

Now, anyone who knows anything at all about a publishing house knows that no one can simply drop the reading of manuscripts when the gong sounds, and go and live a totally different life. (This despite what I just wrote concerning the double barreled Swinnerton.) Those same manuscripts have

a way of lopping over into the sanctity of one's home; or there is always something "very special" that must be read immediately, no matter what one's plans may be. Then, too, if one loves his work of literary adviser, there is perpetually that thrill of expectancy whenever a package is opened. "This may be IT!" one is apt to say to oneself. It is greatly to the credit of any man if he brings out an unknown author. J. D. Beresford is one of those who believe in young blood; it was he who inaugurated the idea of publishing the Collins group of "First Novels" which have gone so well. Prizes are offered for the best reviews — again these must be prepared by new critics, not by old standbys. Two years ago Beresford urged his house to introduce F. Scott Fitzgerald to the English public; and ever he has his eye on the New World for someone promising, interesting, and full of fire.

He told me that he tries to do his own writing in the mornings; and his wife aids him by keeping three strenuous little boys quiet. After luncheon he does what he wishes down there in the country, behind his hedge, until teatime comes round; then he works again until dinner is ready, and in the evenings he plays with the children, smokes, and reads — reads either an old volume or something fresh from someone's inspired typewriter. But all this will be changed for him soon. He must give up the country place — the long lease has run out — and he and Mrs. Beresford are afraid they may have to live in the sounding city the greater part of the year. With his quiet tastes, his instinct for contemplation, the novelist does not relish this shift. Yet he will not permit it to disrupt his work. The schedule must be adhered to, if stories are to continue to come from his pen — as certainly they are. Moreover, he has set himself the task of writing a play for a popular young actor in London. The stage has always tempted him; and when we talked, over our delightful luncheon, of the possibilities of his success in this field, he was humanly hopeful of his dialogue. It is brilliant in his novels; why shouldn't he be able to project that sort of talk over the footlights, and keep an enthusiastic London audience laughingly interested? Yet the novelist in Beresford must not be lost for the playwright. He does not intend to abandon one career for another. That would be unthinkable. One thing is sure: his genius for the apt and telling phrase will stand him in good stead when he lifts his pen to write for the theatre; and any comedy he produces will be a work of distinction, even if a new kind of public should unhappily fail to appreciate its worth.

Beresford wants to talk in America. He has never crossed the ocean. Yet he says he knows just what America is like. I'll wager he doesn't. America is changing so rapidly that what was yesterday taken for granted is today taken for idiocy. Where we used to carry books on our weekends we now carry flasks and radios. I told Mr. Beresford this; but he would not take me seriously. He doesn't believe that there is such a thing as prohibition — it is hard to realize it when you are enjoying a bottle of Chablis. Neither do we believe there is such a thing; so perhaps he knows, after all, as much about the States as we shall ever know. But we know one thing: we want Beresford to come over; and we like his novels tremendously.

It is young Michael Sadleir, who wrote that extraordinary novel, "Privilege", who is the real office worker of the trio; for there is not a day, literally,

save sometimes Saturday, when he is not to be found upstairs in the house of Messrs. Constable and Company, diligently attending to the solemn business of bringing out other people's books. He gets out all the publicity for the house, lunches at the Garrick Club, and goes home rather late in the afternoon to Mrs. Sadleir and three young Sadleirs. In his leisure moments he collects first editions, and rambles about London to discover curious corners and crannies — he loves every foot of the monstrous town, and probably knows more about it than those wise men who write our guidebooks. He is but thirty four years old; and for a year after he left Oxford he came to America and worked in Boston for Houghton Mifflin Company. He liked us so well that he did not want to go back home; and now he is anxious to come again — this time to address any audience that wants to listen to him. I feel sure that Sadleir has the personality that will appeal to Americans — he is alive, genuinely interested in other people, and conscious of the arresting drama here.

"How do you find time to do all the things you love to do?" I couldn't help asking him.

"I use all the odd moments", he answered, as quick as a flash. "I write very slowly — only a few hundred words a day, at the most; but it is astonishing how a manuscript will grow beneath your hand if you keep at it all the time. I get so deeply involved with my characters that they come to be a part of me; and I want to utilize Monica and Anthony in 'Privilege' for another book — or books. I have by no means finished with them, nor they with me. You know how it is sometimes: a character will step into a story, and before you know it, he or she takes on new meanings. Though I started out to use a boy like Anthony only indirectly, he became, suddenly, an absorbing figure to me; and if in 'Privilege' he is little more than a peg upon which to hinge a few situations, I feel that I must one day do more with him; and with Monica, too, as I said. Some day I will plunge back to these old loves and see what I can make them do; or, rather, see what they can make me do!"

Men like these, who know so much about the way a novel should be written, are at the helm to advise the writers who will follow them. If a budding author has anything at all in him, it would be bound to be brought out after a talk with any one of my engaging trio. I should say that the British hopeful is rather well off for literary godfathers; for here are three men who know and love literature and are never too busy to dispense what they have learned.