WILLIAM WALLACE COOK [whose occasional pen name was JOHN MILTON EDWARDS] (1867–1933) was an extraordinarily prolific American author who produced popular works in many genres, among them westerns, mystery stories, dime novels, science fiction fantasies, boys' adventure tales, serial fictions, stage plays and screenplays. Born in Marshall, Michigan, he decided to end his schooling after two years at Bryant and Stratton's Business College in Chicago, the city to which his family had moved. From that time on, he was employed in a variety of jobs, including railroad ticket agent, court reporter, payroll manager, stenographer, and reporter for the *Chicago Morning News*.

The first work of fiction for which he was paid was sold to the *Detroit Free Press* in the fall of 1889, when he was twenty-two, and he soon began writing series that also appeared there, and elsewhere in such weekly and monthly publications as *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, *Puck*, and *Figaro*. He went on to produce a great deal of work for Street & Smith, the leading New York publisher of dime novels (and, in time, of an array of specialty and mass circulation magazines), a firm that was founded in 1855 and remained in operation until it was bought out by Condé Nast in 1959. Over the years, Cook's writings were also published in the pulp magazine the *Argosy*, as well as the *Blue Book*, *Peoples Magazine*, *All Story*, and the *Railroad Man's Magazine*, among others. During the 1920s, he wrote regularly for *Top-Notch*, a publication intended for teenage boys, and remained very much involved in producing movie scripts for popular stars like the cowboy Tom Mix.

Today, though, Cook is probably best known as the author of *Plotto: The Master Book of All Plots*, which was first published in 1928 and went through numerous editions. In addition to offering a way to generate overall plots, this compendium provides an inventory of almost fifteen hundred conflicts from which an author can select to advance and complicate the story. Among those said to have made use of this encyclopedic resource are Alfred Hitchcock and the mystery writer Erle Stanley Gardner. Presumably at the suggestion of the contemporary graphic author Art Spiegelman, in 2012 Tin House brought out hardcover and digital editions of *Plotto*—whether in a spirit of irony or as an emergency aid to writers in distress, who can say for sure?

Cook died at the age of sixty-six in 1933, in the same Michigan town in which he was born. The pages presented here are taken from what he offered readers as his frank account of the first two decades of his career as an author—*The Fiction Factory: Being the Experience of a Writer Who, for Twenty-Two Years, Has Kept a Story-Mill Grinding Successfully*, published in 1912 by The Editor Company in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

—*SD*

John Milton Edwards

The Business of Fiction

"WELL, MY DEAR," SAID JOHN MILTON EDWARDS, MISERABLY uncertain and turning to appeal to his wife, "which shall it be—to write or not to write?"

"To write," was the answer, promptly and boldly, "to do nothing else but write."

John Milton wanted her to say that, and yet he did not. Her conviction, orally expressed, had all the ring of true metal; yet her husband, reflecting his own inner perplexities, heard a false note suggesting the base alloy of uncertainty.

"Hadn't we better think it over?" he quibbled.

"You've been thinking it over for two years, John, and this month is the first time your returns from your writing have ever been more than your salary at the office. If you can be so successful when you are obliged to work nights and Sundays—and most of the time with your wits befogged by office routine—what could you not do if you spent ALL your time in your Fiction Factory?"

"It may be," ventured John Milton, "that I could do better work, snatching a few precious moments from those everlasting pay-rolls, than by giving all my time and attention to my private Factory."

"Is that logical?" inquired Mrs. John Milton.

"I don't know, my dear, whether it's logical or not. We're dealing with a psychological mystery that has never been broken to harness. Suppose I have the whole day before me and sit down at my typewriter to write a story. Well and good. But getting squared away with a fresh sheet over the platen isn't the whole of it. The Happy Idea must be evolved. What if the Happy Idea does not come when I am ready for it? Happy Ideas, you know, have a disagreeable habit of hiding out. There's no hard and fast rule, that I am aware, for capturing a Happy Idea at just the moment it may be most in demand. There's lightning in a change of work, the sort of lightning that clears the air with a tonic of inspiration. When I'm paymastering the hardest I seem to be almost swamped with ideas for the story mill. Query: Will the mill grind out as good a grist if it grinds continuously? If I were sure—"

"It stands to reason," Mrs. Edwards maintained stoutly, "that if you can make $125 a month running the mill nights and Sundays, you ought to be able to make a good deal more than that with all the week days added."

"Provided," John Milton qualified, "my fountain of inspiration will flow as freely when there is nothing to hinder it as it does now when I have it turned off for twelve hours out of the twenty-four."

"Why shouldn't it?"

"I don't know, my dear," John Milton admitted, "unless it transpires that my inspiration isn't strong enough to be drawn on steadily."

"Fudge," exclaimed Mrs. Edwards.

"And then," her husband proceeded, "let us consider another phase of the question. The demand may fall off. The chances are that it WILL fall off the moment the gods become aware of the fact that I am depending on the demand for our bread and butter. Whenever a thing becomes absolutely essential to you, Fate immediately obliterates every trail that leads to it, and you go wandering desperately back and forth, getting more and more discouraged until—"

"Until you drop in your tracks," broke in Mrs. Edwards, "and give up—a quitter."

"Quitter" is a mean word. There's something about it that jostles you, and treads on your toes.

"I don't think I'd prove a quitter," said John Milton, "even if I did get lost in a labyrinth of hard luck. It's the idea of losing you along with me that hurts."

"I'll risk *that*."

"This is a panic year," John Milton went on, "and money is hard to get. It is hardly an auspicious time for tearing loose from a regular pay-day."

John Milton and his wife lived in Chicago, and the firm for which John Milton worked had managed to keep afloat by having an account in two banks. When a note fell due at one bank, the firm borrowed from the other to pay it. Thus, by borrowing from Peter to pay Paul, and from Paul to pay Peter, the contractors juggled with their credit and kept it good. Times were hard enough in all truth, yet they were not so hard in Chicago as in other parts of the country. The World's Columbian Exposition brought a flood of visitors to the city, and a flood of cash.

"Bother the panic!" jeered Mrs. Edwards. "It won't interfere with your work. Pleasant fiction is more soothing than hard facts. People will read all the more just to forget their troubles."

"I'm pretty solid with the firm," said John Milton, veering to another tack. "I'm getting twelve hundred a year, now, with an extra hundred for taking care of the Colonel's books."

"Is there any future to it?"

"There is. I can buy stock in the company, identify myself with it more and more, and in twenty or thirty years, perhaps, move into a brownstone front on Easy street."

"No, you couldn't!" declared Mrs. Edwards.

"Why not?"

"Why, because your heart wouldn't be in your work. Ever since you were old enough to know your own mind you have wanted to be a writer. When you were twelve years old you were publishing a little paper for boys—"

"It was a four-page paper about the size of a lady's handkerchief," laughed John Milton, "and it lasted for two issues."

"Well," insisted his wife, "you've been writing stories more or less all your life, and if you are ever a success at anything it will be in the fiction line. You are now twenty-six years old, and if you make your mark as an author it's high time you were about it. Don't you think so? If I'm willing to chance it, John, you surely ought to be."

"All right," was the answer, "it's a 'go.'"

And thus it was that John Milton Edwards reached his momentous decision. Perhaps you, who read these words, have been wrestling soulfully with the same question—vacillating between authorship as a vocation or as an avocation. Edwards made his decision eighteen years ago. At that time conditions were different; and it is doubtful whether, had he faced conditions as they are now, he would have decided to run his Fiction Factory on full time. . . .

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Edwards' earliest attempt at fiction was a dramatic effort. The play was in three acts, was entitled "Roderigo, the Pirate Chief," and was written at the age of twelve. The young playwright was Roderigo, the play was given in the loft of the Edwards barn, and twenty-five pins was the price of admission (thirty if the pins were crooked). . . .

In 1881 "Simon Girty; or, The Border Boys of the West" was offered. The first performance (which was also the last) was given in Ottawa, Kansas, and the modest fee of admission was 5 cents. . . .

Shortly after this, the musty records show that Edwards turned from the drama to narrative fiction, and endeavored successfully to get into print. The following, copied from an engraved certificate, offers evidence of his budding aspirations:

Frank Leslie's
BOYS' AND GIRLS' WEEKLY.
Award of Merit.
This is to certify that John Milton Edwards,
Ottawa, Kansas, has been awarded Honorable
Mention for excellence in literary composition.
New York, Oct. 30, 1882. FRANK LESLIE.

This "honorable mention" from the publisher of a paper, which young Edwards looked forward to from week to week and read and re-read with fascination and delight, must have inoculated him for all time with the fiction virus. Forthwith he began publishing a story paper on a hektograph. Saturday was the day of publication, and the office of publication was the loft of the Edwards' barn. Even at that early day the author understood the advantage of holding "leave-offs"* in serial work. He was altogether too successful with his

* "Leave-off"—the place where a serial is broken, and the words "To be continued in our next" appear. Mr. Matthew White, Jr., Editor of the *Argosy*, is supposed to have

leave-offs, for his readers, gasping for the rest of the story and unable to wait for the next issue of the paper, mobbed the office and forced him, with a threat of dire things, to tell them the rest of the yarn in advance of publication. After that, of course, publication was unnecessary. . . .

In 1882 the Edwards family removed to Chicago. There were but three in the family—the father, the mother, and John Milton. The boy was taken from the Ottawa high school and, as soon as they were all comfortably settled in the "Windy City," John Milton made what he has since believed to be the mistake of his career. His father offered him his choice of either a university or a business education. He chose to spend two years in Bryant & Stratton's Business College. His literary career would have been vastly helped had he taken the other road and matriculated at either Harvard or Yale. He had the opportunity and turned his back on it.

He was writing, more or less, all the time he was a student at Bryant & Stratton's. The school grounded him in double-entry bookkeeping, in commercial law, and in shorthand and typewriting.

When he left the business college he found employment with a firm of subscription book publishers, as stenographer. There came a disagreement between the two partners of the firm, and the young stenographer was offered for $1,500 the retiring partner's interest. The elder Edwards, who would have had to furnish the $1,500, could not see anything alluring in the sale of books through agents, and the deal fell through. Two years later, while John Milton was working for a railroad company as ticket agent at $60 a month, his old friend of the subscription book business dropped in on him and showed him a sworn statement prepared for Dun and Bradstreet. *He had cleared $60,000 in two years!* Had John Milton bought the retiring partner's interest he would have been worth half a million before he had turned thirty.

The fiction bee, however, was continually buzzing in John Milton's brain. He had no desire to succeed at anything except authorship.

Leaving the railroad company, he went to work for a boot and shoe house as bill clerk, at $12 a week. The death of his father, at this time, came as a heavy blow to young Edwards; not only that, but it brought him heavy responsibilities and led him seriously to question the advisability of ever making authorship—as he had secretly hoped—a vocation. His term as bill clerk was a sort of probation, allowing the young man time, in leisure hours, further to try out his talent for fiction. He was anxious to determine if he could make it a commercial success, and so justify himself in looking forward to it as a life work.

The elder Edwards had been a rugged, self-made man with no patience for anything that was not strictly "business." He measured success by an honorable

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coined the expression. At any rate, Mr. White has a great deal to do with "leave-offs" and ought to know what to call them.

standard of dollars and cents. For years previous to his death he had been accustomed to see his son industriously scribbling, with not so much as a copper cent realized from all that expenditure of energy. Naturally out of sympathy with what he conceived to be a waste of time and effort, Edwards, Sr., did not hesitate to express himself forcibly. On one occasion he looked into his son's room, saw him feverishly busy at his desk, and exclaimed, irascibly, "Damn the verses!"

Young Edwards' mother, on the other hand, was well educated and widely read; indeed, in a limited way, she had been a writer herself, and had contributed in earlier life to *Harper's Magazine*. She could see that perhaps a pre-natal influence was shaping her son's career, and understood how he might be working out his apprenticeship. Thus she became the gentle apologist, excusing the boy's unrewarded labors, on the one hand, and the father's *cui bono* ideas, on the other.

The Chicago Times, in its Sunday edition, used a story by young Edwards. It was not paid for but it was published, and the elder Edwards surreptitiously secured many copies of the paper and sent them to distant friends. Thus, although he would not admit it, he showed his pride in his son's small achievement.

From the boot and shoe house young Edwards went back to the railroad company again; from there, when the railroad company closed its Chicago office, he went to a firm of wholesalers in coke and sewer-pipe; and, later, he engaged as paymaster with the firm of contractors. Between the coke and sewer-pipe and the pay-rolls he wedged in a few days of reporting for *The Chicago Morning News*; and on a certain Friday, the last of February, he got married, and was back at his office desk on the following Monday morning.

The first story for which Edwards received payment was published in *The Detroit Free Press*, Sept. 19, 1889. The payment was $8.

In April, the same year, the *Free Press* inaugurated a serial story contest. Edwards entered two stories, one under a *nom de plume*. Neither won a prize, but both were bought and published. For the first, published in 1891, he was paid $75 on Feb. 2, 1890; and for the second, published a year later, he was paid $100.

With the opening installment of the first serial the *Free Press* published a photograph of the author over a stickful of biography. On another page appeared a paragraph in boldface type announcing the discovery of a new star in the literary heavens.

The spirit of John Milton Edwards swelled within him. He feasted his eyes on his printed picture (the rapid newspaper presses had made a smudge of it), he read and re-read his lean biography (lean because not much had happened to him at that time) and he gloried over the boldface type with its message regarding the new star (he was to learn later that many similar stars are born to blush unseen) and he felt himself a growing power in the world of letters.

Verily, a pat on the back is a thing to conjure with. It is more ennobling, sometimes, than a kingly tap with a swordpoint accompanied by the words, "I dub thee knight." To the fine glow of youthful enthusiasm it opens broad vistas

and offers a glimpse of glittering heights. Even though that hand-pat inspires dreams never to be realized, who shall say that a little encouragement, bringing out the best in us, does not result in much good?

And in this place John Milton Edwards would make a request of the reader of fiction. If you are pleased with a story, kindly look twice at the author's name so you may recall it pleasantly if it chances to come again under your eye. If you are a great soul, given to the scattering of benefactions, you might even go a little farther: At the expense of a postage stamp and a little time, address a few words of appreciation to the author in care of his publisher. You wist not, my beloved, what weight of gold your words may carry!

From the summer of '89 to the summer of '93 Edwards wrote many stories and sketches for *The Detroit Free Press*, *Puck*, *Truth*, *The Ladies' World*, *Yankee Blade*, *Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly*, *Chatter*, *Saturday Night*, and other periodicals. In 1890 he was receiving $10 a month for contributions to a little Chicago weekly called *Figaro*; and, during the same year, he found a market which was to influence profoundly a decade of work and his monetary returns; James Elverson paid him $75 for a serial to be used in *Saturday Night*.

Undoubtedly it was this serial that pointed Edwards toward the sensational story papers. A second serial, sold to *Saturday Night*, Oct. 21, 1891, brought $150; while a third, paid for July 20, 1893, netted a like amount. These transactions carried the true ring of commercial success. Apart from myth and fable, there is no more compelling siren song in history than the chink of silver. Edwards, burdened with responsibilities, gave ear to it. . . .

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Even in 1910 Edwards had been swayed by his growing convictions. Almost unconsciously he had begun shaping his work along the line of higher achievement. During 1911 he has been hewing to the same line, but more consistently.

Edwards has demonstrated his ability to write moving picture scenarios that will sell. But is the game worth the candle? Is it pleasant for an author to see his cherished Western idea worked out with painted white men for Indians and painted buttes for a background? Of course, there are photoplays enacted on the Southwestern deserts, with real cowboys and red men for "supers," but somewhere in most of these performances a false note is struck. One who knows the West has little trouble in detecting it.

This, however, is a matter of sentiment, alone. The nebulous ideas most scenario editors seem to have as to rates of payment, and the usually long delay in passing upon a "script," are important details of quite another sort. And, furthermore, it is unjust to throw a creditable production upon the screen without placing the author's name under the title. Of right, this advertising belongs to the author and should not be denied him.

In 1910 a moving picture concern secured a concession for taking pictures with Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Pawnee Bill's Far East Show, and Edwards was

hired to furnish scenarios at $35 each. He furnished a good many, and of one of them Major Lillie (Pawnee Bill) wrote from Butte, Montana, on Sep. 2;

"Friend Edwards:

I saw one of the films run off at a picture house a few days ago and I think they are the greatest Western scenes that I have ever witnesed—that is, they are the truest to life. I had a letter from Mr. C—— yesterday, and he thinks they are fine.

Your friend,

"G. W. Lillie."

For a time Edwards thought his faith in the moving picture makers was about to be justified. But he was mistaken. He received a check for just $25, which probably escaped from the film men in an unguarded moment, and no further check, letter, or word has since come from the company. The proprietors of the Show had nothing to do with the picture people and regretted, though they could not help the loss Edwards had suffered.

When the moving picture writers are assured of better prices for their scenarios, of having them passed upon more promptly and of getting their names on the films with their pictures, the business will have been shaken down to a more commendable basis. Possibly the film manufacturers borrow their ideas of equitable treatment for the writer from some of the publishing houses.

The "hack" writer, in many editorial offices, is looked down upon with something like contempt by the august personage who condescends to buy his "stuff" and to pay him good money for it. Perhaps the "hack" is at fault and has placed himself in an unfavorable light. Writers are many and competition is keen. Among these humble ones there are those who have suffered rebuff after rebuff until the spirit is broken and pride is killed, and they go cringing to an editor and supplicate him for an assignment. Or they write him: "For God's sake do not turn down this story! It is the bread-line for me, if you do."

Did you ever walk through the ante-room of a big publishing house on the day checks are signed and given out? Men with pinched faces and ragged clothes sit in the mahogany chairs. They have missed the high mark in their calling. They had high ambitions once—but ambitions are always high when hope is young. They are writing now, not because they love their work but because it is the only work they know, and they must keep at it or starve (perhaps *and* starve).

A taxicab flings madly up to the door in front, and a stylishly clad gentleman floats in at the hall door and across the ante-room to the girl at the desk. They exchange pleasant greetings and the girl punches a button that communicates with the private office of the powers that be.

"Mr. Oswald Hamilton Brezee to see Mr. Skinner."

Delighted mumblings by Mr. Skinner come faintly to the ears of the lowly ones. The girl turns away from the 'phone.

"Go right in, Mr. Brezee," she says. "Mr. Skinner will see you at once."

Mr. Brezee's "stuff" has caught on. Dozens of magazines are clamoring for it. Mr. Brezee vanishes and presently reappears, tucking away his check with the careless manner of one to whom checks are more or less of a bore. He passes into

the hall, and in a moment the "taxi" is heard bearing him away.

The lowly ones twist in their chairs and bitterness floods their hearts. Like the author of "Childe Harold," Brezee awoke one morning to find himself famous. These others, with the dingy Windsor ties and the long hair and pinched faces never awake to anything but a doubt as to where the morning meal is to come from.

After hours of waiting in the ante-room, checks are finally produced and passed around to the lowly ones and they fade away into the haunts that know them best. Next pay-day they will be back again, if they are alive and have been given anything to do in the meantime.

Is *this* game worth the candle? What shall these men do with their "little gift" but keep it grinding, merciless though the grind may be? They cannot all be Oswald Hamilton Brezees.

Before a young man throws himself into the ranks of this vast army of writers, let him ponder the situation well. If, under the iron heel of adversity, he is sure he can still love his work for the work's sake and be true to himself, there is one chance in ten that he will make a fair living, and one chance in a hundred that he may become one of the generals.