LITERATURE AS A BUSINESS PROPOSITION

(By WINNIFRED REEVE)

The average business man has only a hazy idea concerning the men and women who write, and of the value of their product. He looks upon writers as impractical folk engaged in an unremunerative and uncertain employment. Sometimes he goes farther and designates them as "nuts."

Nevertheless these "nuts" produce material that make immense fortunes and give employment to thousands of people. Without the writers there would be no publishing houses, no newspapers, no magazines; the gramophone would be silent—for composers are authors of music—advertising agencies and literary brokers would close up shop and the printing enterprises would be at a standstill. The motion picture industry, which is said to be the fourth great business in the United States today, could not carry on without the author. The theaters would close their doors, for the actor could not act without a play written by an author.

Until recent years the author received but a minimum of the profits that accrue from his work. Though possessed with the power of making fortunes for others, he suffered through his own business inability and he was the prey and the victim of the very ones who became rich through his labor.

Bret Harte's daughter died in the poorhouse. Yet Bret Harte's publishers are in the millionaire class. "Ben Hur," I am told, sold for the nominal sum of $1000. It is impossible to estimate the enormous returns that poured into the coffers of the publishers of that story and the producers of the play.

Du Maurier sold "Trilby" for $500 to the publishers and the novel ran into edition after edition, had an enormous success as a play and is running now to crowded houses in the movies. I could mention a score of instances of literary property that has made fortunes for its publishers and for which the author has received scarcely anything.

But all that is of the past. The author today is no longer a long-haired, dreamy freak of nature. His house may not be as large as the financial magnate's; few authors ride in Rolls-Royces, and some of them still have bank rolls as thin as their clothes, but this is the day when at all events in such countries as the United States and England his interests are safeguarded and his country realizes his importance and his value. Someone—I think it was Mark Twain—started a campaign in the United States to organize the authors even as the labor unions were doing. Incidentally, Mark Twain himself died a millionaire.

There came into being the Authors' League of America. It set out to teach the authors the value of their product and to direct him into the way he should dispose of it. So strong did this league become that I believe there was scarcely an author in the United States who did not enrol. I was myself one of the charter members. The author now says in effect to the publisher: "Authors can live without publishers. Publishers cannot live without authors, for authors can themselves become publishers, but publishers cannot be come authors, because the author is born—not made." He said practically the same thing to the theatrical manager and to the magazine editors. The author sent his emissaries to Washington and they said in effect to the legislators there: "You have been rooting long enough for the other fellow—the fellow who is sitting on the back of the author. We are here to see that you change the laws so that they will be made just and right, and if you do not give us justice, every pen in this country will be used to expose and condemn you." "The pen is mightier than the sword," goes the old adage, and few men in public life could withstand the onslaught of the united men and women who controlled the nation's pen.

The laws were changed. Literary brigandage became a dangerous and a criminal game that brought a heavy penalty. Copyright laws were framed to protect and not merely to exploit the author. His children's rights in that property after his death were safeguarded. Piracy of the work of an American author is punishable with a heavy penalty under the law. This is only a small part of what the coming together of the authors brought to pass.

Today the annual earnings of a popular and successful author compare with the salary of the president of the United States. I know personally several authors who are earning fifty or sixty thousand dollars a year, and some of them have cleared a cool million. I myself, when in New York seven years ago, made an average of ten thousand a year, and I made $60,000 from one book alone. I am speaking in terms of dollars and of cents because I want to make clear the fact that literature represents one of the most profitable enterprises in the world.

The point I wish especially to bring out is this: Canada might very well have a share in the profits as well as the prestige that accrues from the product of the authors. Such an enterprise—and I am calling it by a business term—should be cultivated and encouraged. It should grow and expand here in Canada as it has in the United States. Under present conditions, Canada's authors who have not gone over to the States are driven to earn their living by other means than their pen. Our market is small and sometimes mean. We have few periodicals that pay well—and a snubbishness exists which sometimes turns the Canadian editor's eye greedily toward the work of authors in other countries. Our publishers are doing the best they can for the author, but we need the support and sympathy of the Canadian public. We need protection from men who frame laws that are levelled at our craft. The present copyright law is a disgrace to Canada. No self-respecting author could do otherwise than resent its terms. Our work is not only open to piracy, but we are discriminated against in favor of those who were born in other lands. Under the terms of the law, the Canadian, born in England or other lands is exempted, while the native born Canadian author is ham-strung.

I wrote and I spoke to Sir James Lougheed concerning this law. He denied that he had sponsored it. He said it was a government measure. He said that we had to have a copyright law and that this was the best they could do at that time. He stated that he realized it was not perfect, but they were beset by the labor unions at the time. Now no emergency, however pressing, is justification for a wrong. Kicking one man in order to make another laugh is not good work. I cannot see that even the labor unions would desire to profit at the expense of another craft.

We know that this country is in sore need of both capital and immigration. It does us no good to hug to ourselves the secret that this country possesses immense mineral and agricultural resources; that its climate is unrivalled, and that this might become the real Land of Opportunity and Promise, if only we could bring to it the right sort of people. The only way in which we can do this is by the most intensive kind of publicity, and the greatest publicity conveyors that this country possesses are its authors. Professional advertising and publicity stuff cannot compete with the work that the author can do. Longfellow's "Evangeline" did more to show the world the lovely land of Nova Scotia than a ton of advertising would have done.

We all know what has happened to Canada through not having authors of her own to describe her to the world. Charlatans of the pen from other lands have come to this country for short visits and returned to exploit the country in books, magazines and upon the screen. None of us relish being depicted in the weird and wild fashion that Canadians are revealed in snow stories to the world. A young woman here in Calgary recently returned from abroad, and in London she was induced by friends to go to see a "Canadian" play in a local theater. They described it as "wonderful," and it was written by an English dramatist who should have known better. She stayed but for the first act. It was a scene in Calgary. The curtain rose on a rough bar-room. (The dramatist by the way ignored the prohibition laws existing at that time). Upon the bar leaned a noble mounted policeman. He wore, of course, the red coat, but as he had just come in from riding in a wild storm, his legs were encased in chaps made of tiger skins. Dancing alternately on the bar, the chairs and tables and the floor was a young Calgary girl arrayed in pink skin tights and some Mary Pickford curls. From the corner table a villainous looking French-Canuck snevgalled har. Presently the door burst open, and a fearful blast of hail and wind and snow and icicles and everything that the Canadian climate alone produces rushed in through the door, bearing with it a pitiful young Indian girl, around whose head was a red ribbon in which was stuck a turkey feather at the back, and who was dressed in a beaded skirt something like they use in the can-can ballet dances. With her white papoose hugged to her back she cast one anguished glance at the dancing girl in tights, and then her bold outraged eyes lighted upon the man in the corner, now shrinking back against the wall. A pause and the Indian girl leaped at the white girl. They struggled back and forth, while crawling from beneath the bar came an aged Indian chief, father of the wronged girl. He wiggled his way in full sight of all, yet unseen by them, across that Calgary bar-room, till suddenly he was upon the neck of the

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terrifeid French-Canuck, and a moment later he had scalped him neatly from neck to brow.

Now, there's a Canadian play for you. True, is it not? Do you imagine that anyone who sees it will pine to come to Canada? But think:

Supposing a Canadian author should write a play or a story of this country. Supposing, instead of showing the land all garbed in snow and ice, he revealed the wide spreading fields of grain, the blue sungilt skies, the noble mountains rising like a miracle across the horizon. Supposing he showed something of the spirit, of the feeling of tip-topness which we all feel here—the feeling that makes a man hold his chest up and walking along with a spring to his feet. Supposing the Canadian author took his pen and with a loving full heart wrote a role that was redolent with color and romance, that fascinated and enthralled its readers, would not then this country seem not only a desirable place to visit, but the veritable land of promise. Only the Canadian author can tell the true Canadian story, and do not think that among our writers we have not the talent—aye, genius needed for such a work! The two most distinctive novels published in New York last year were the work of Canadians—I refer to Maria Chapdelaine and to Marjorie Pickthall's "The Bridge." Yet the author of Maria Chapdelaine was a hired man on an Ontario farm, who was run over by a train and buried as a tramp. It is true he was born in France, but he was saturated with the lore and the love of his adopted Canada. Marjorie Pickthall lived only a few years after she had achieved recognition and fame. There are many other Canadian authors, equally talented. They need only encouragement and a chance to make a livelihood in a country where laws are not enacted especially to discriminate against their craft.