

"Juvenilia"

By Arthur Conan Doyle

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It is very well for the master craftsman with twenty triumphs behind him to look down the vista of his successes, and to recall how he picked out the path which has led him to fame, but for the tiro whose first book is perilously near to his last one it becomes a more invidious matter. His past presses too closely upon his present, and his reminiscences, unmellowed by the flight of Tears, are apt to be rawly and crudely personal. And yet even time helps me when I speak of my first work, for it was written seven-and- twenty years ago.

I was six at the time, and have a very distinct recollection of the achievement. It was written, I remember, upon foolscap paper, in what might be called a fine bold hand-four words to the line, and was illustrated by marginal pen-and-ink sketches by the author. There was a man in it, and there was a tiger. I forget which was the hero, but it didn't matter much, for they became blended into one about the time when the tiger met the man. I was a realist in the age of the Romanticists I described at some length, both verbally and pictorially the untimely end of that wayfarer. But when the tiger had absorbed him, I found myself slightly embarrassed as to how my story was to go on. 'It is very easy to get people into scrapes, and very hard to get them out again,' I remarked, and I have often had cause to repeat the precocious aphorism of my childhood. On this occasion the situation was beyond me, and my book, like my man, was engulfed in my tiger. There is an old family bureau with secret drawers, in which lie little locks of hair tied up in circles, and black silhouettes and dim daguerreotypes, and letters which seem to have been written in the lightest of straw coloured inks. Somewhere there lies my primitive manuscript, where my tiger, like a many-hooped barrel with a tail to it, still envelops the hapless stranger whom he has taken in.

Then came my second book, which was told and not written, but which was a much more ambitious effort than the first. Between the two, four years had elapsed, which were mainly spent in reading. It is rumoured that a special meeting of a library committee was held in my honour, at which a bye-law was passed that no subscriber should be permitted to change his book more than three times a day. Yet, even with these limitations, by the aid of a well-stocked bookcase at home, I managed to enter my tenth year with a good deal in my head that I could never have learned in the class-rooms.

I do not think that life has any joy to offer so complete, so soul-filling as that which comes upon the imaginative lad, whose spare time is limited, but who is able to snuggle down into a corner with his book knowing that the next hour is all his own. And how vivid and fresh it all is! Your very heart and soul are out on the prairies and the oceans with your hero. It is you who act and suffer and enjoy. You carry the long small-bore Kentucky rifle with which such egregious things are done, and you lie out upon the topsail yard, and get jerked by the flap of the sail into the Pacific, where you cling on to the leg of an albatross, and so keep afloat until the comic boatswain turns up with his crew of volunteers to handspike you into safety. What a magic it is, this stirring of the boyish heart and mind! Long ere I came to my teens I had traversed every sea and knew the Rockies like my own back garden. How often had I sprung upon the back of the charging buffalo and so escaped him! It was an everyday emergency to have to set the prairie on fire in front of me in order to escape from the fire behind, or to run a mile down a brook to throw the bloodhounds off my trail. I had creased horses, I had shot down rapids, I had strapped on my mocassins hindforemost to conceal my tracks, I had lain under water with a reed in my mouth,

and I had feigned madness to escape the torture. As to the Indian braves whom I slew in single combats, I could have stocked a large graveyard, and, fortunately enough, though I was a good deal chipped about in these affairs, no real harm ever came of it and I was always nursed back into health by a very fascinating young squaw. It was all more real than the reality. Since those days I have in very truth both shot bears and harpooned whales, but the performance was flat compared with the first time that I did it with Mr. Ballantyne or Captain Mayne Reid at my elbow.

In the fulness of time I was packed off to a public school, and in some way it was discovered by my playmates that I had more than my share of the lore after which they hankered. There was my debut as a story-teller. On a wet half-holiday I have been elevated on to a desk, and with an audience of little boys all squatting on the floor, with their chins upon their hands, I have talked myself husky over the misfortunes of my heroes. Week in and week out those unhappy men have battled and striven and groaned for the amusement of that little circle. I was bribed with pastry to continue these efforts, and I remember that I always stipulated for tarts down and strict business, which shows that I was born to be a member of the Authors' Society. Sometimes, too, I would stop dead in the very thrill of a crisis, and could only be set agoing again by apples. When I had got as far as 'With his left hand in her glossy locks, he was waving the blood-stained knife above her head, when----' or 'Slowly, slowly, the door turned upon its hinges, and with eyes which were dilated with horror, the wicked Marquis saw----' I knew that I had my audience in my power. And thus my second book was evolved.

It may be that my literary experiences would have ended there had there not come a time in my early manhood when that good old harsh-faced schoolmistress, *Hard Times*, took me by the hand. I wrote, and with amazement I found that my writing was accepted. *Chambers's Journal* it was which rose to the occasion, and I have had a kindly feeling for its mustard-coloured back ever since. Fifty little cylinders of manuscript did I send out during eight years, which described irregular orbits among publishers, and usually came back like paper boomerangs to the place that they had started from. Yet in time they all lodged somewhere or other. Mr. Hogg, of *London Society*, was one of the most constant of my patrons and Mr. James Payn wasted hours of his valuable time in encouraging me to persevere. Knowing as I did that he was one of the busiest men in London, I never received one of his shrewd and kindly and most illegible letters without a feeling of gratitude and wonder.

I have heard folk talk as though there were some hidden back door by which one may creep into literature, but I can say myself that I never had an introduction to any editor or publisher before doing business with them, and that I do not think that I suffered on that account. Yet my apprenticeship was a long and trying one. During ten years of hard work, I averaged less than fifty pounds a year from my pen. I won my way into the best journals, *Cornhill*, *Temple Bar*, and so on; but what is the use of that when the contributions to those journals must be anonymous? It is a system which tells very hardly against young authors. I saw with astonishment and pride that 'Habakuk Jephson's Statement' in the *Cornhill* was attributed by critic after critic to Stevenson, but, overwhelmed as I was by the compliment, a word of the most lukewarm praise sent straight to my own address would have been of greater use to me. After ten years of such work I was as unknown as if I had never dipped a pen into an inkbottle. Sometimes, of course, the anonymous system may screen you from blame as well as rob you of praise. How well I can see a dear old

friend running after me in the street, waving a London evening paper in his hand! 'Have you seen what they say about your *Cornhill* story?' he shouted. 'No, no. What is it?' 'Here it is! Here it is!' Eagerly he turned over the column, while I, trembling with excitement, but determined to bear my honours meekly, peeped over his shoulder. 'The *Cornhill* this month,' said the critic, 'has a story in it which would have made Thackeray turn in his grave.' There were several witnesses about, and the Portsmouth bench are severe upon assaults, so my friend escaped unscathed. Then first I realised that British criticism had fallen into a shocking state of decay, though when some one has a pat on the back for you you understand that, after all, there are some very smart people upon the literary Press.

And so at last it was brought home to me that a man may put the very best that is in him into magazine work for years and years and reap no benefit from it, save, of course, the inherent benefits of literary practice. So I wrote another of my first books and sent it off to the publishers. Alas for the dreadful thing that happened! The publishers never received it, the Post Office sent countless blue forms to say that they knew nothing about it, and from that day to this no word has ever been heard of it. Of course it was the best thing I ever wrote. Who ever lost a manuscript that wasn't? But I must in all honesty confess that my shock at its disappearance would be as nothing to my horror if it were suddenly to appear again--in print. If one or two other of my earlier efforts had also been lost in the post, my conscience would have been the lighter. This one was called 'The Narrative of John Smith,' and it was of a personal-social-political complexion. Had it appeared I should have probably awakened to find myself infamous, for it steered, as I remember it, perilously near to the libellous. However, it was safely lost, and that was the end of another of my first books.

Then I started upon an exceedingly sensational novel, which interested me extremely at the time, though I have never heard that it had the same effect upon anyone else afterwards. I may urge in extenuation of all shortcomings that it was written in the intervals of a busy though ill-paying practice. And a man must try that and combine it with literary work before he quite knows what it means. How often have I rejoiced to find a clear morning before me, and settled down to my task, or rather, dashed ferociously at it, as knowing how precious were those hours of quiet! Then to me enter my housekeeper, with tidings of dismay. 'Mrs. Thurston's little boy wants to see you, doctor.' 'Show him in,' say I, striving to fix my scene in my mind that I may splice it when this trouble is over. 'Well, my boy?' 'Please, doctor, mother wants to know if she is to add water to that medicine.' 'Certainly, certainly.' Not that it matters in the least, but it is well to answer with decision. Exit the little boy, and the splice is about half accomplished when he suddenly bursts into the room again. 'Please, doctor, when I got back mother had taken the medicine without the water.' 'Tut, tut!' I answer. 'It really does not matter in the least.' The youth withdraws with a suspicious glance, and one more paragraph has been written when the husband puts in an appearance. 'There seems to have been some misunderstanding about that medicine,' he remarks coldly. 'Not at all,' I say, 'it really didn't matter.' 'Well, then, why did you tell the boy that it should be taken with water?' And then I try to disentangle the business, and the husband shakes his head gloomily at me. 'She feels very queer,' says he; 'we should all be easier in our minds if you came and looked at her.' So I leave my heroine in the four-foot way with an express thundering towards her, and trudge sadly off, with the feeling that another morning has been wasted, and another seam left visible to the critic's eye in my unhappy novel. Such was the

genesis of my sensational romance, and when publishers wrote to say that they could see no merit in it, I was, heart and soul, of the same way of thinking.

And then, under more favourable circumstances, I wrote 'Micah Clarke,' for patients had become more tractable, and I had married, and in every way I was a brighter man. A year's reading and five months' writing finished it, and I thought I had a tool in my hands that would cut a path for me. So I had, but the first thing that I cut with it was my finger. I sent it to a friend, whose opinion I deeply respected, in London, who read for one of the leading houses, but he had been bitten by the historical novel, and very naturally he distrusted it. From him it went to house after house, and house after house would have none of it. Blackwood found that the people did not talk so in the seventeenth century; Bentley that its principal defect was that there was a complete absence of interest; Cassells that experience had shown that an historical novel could never be a commercial success. I remember smoking over my dog-eared manuscript when it returned for a whiff of country air after one of its descents upon town, and wondering what I should do if some sporting reckless kind of publisher were suddenly to stride in and make me a bid of forty shillings or so for the lot. And then suddenly I bethought me to send it to Messrs. Longmans, where it was fortunate enough to fall into the hands of Mr. Andrew Lang. From that day the way was smoothed to it, and, as things turned out, I was spared that keenest sting of ill-success, that those who had believed in your work should suffer pecuniarily for their belief. A door had been opened for me into the temple of the Muses, and it only remained that I should find something that was worthy of being borne through it.