

# THE BOOKMAN

VOLUME LXXVI

March, 1933

NUMBER 3

## "THE BREAST OF THE NYMPH"

*by Branch Cabell*

YOU have written out for me, O most enviable fool, a list of questions which you desire me to answer as a guide for your future, so that you may "become a writer". Each question has a ring so familiar that I may not guess how often, how very, very often, I have received your pathetically brisk, and forthright, and business-like letter before I received it, yet again, today.

You are, you inform me (and indeed you almost always are) one of the editors of your college magazine. You are "majoring in English", and besides your pursuit of "other English courses for necessary backgrounds", you are, you tell me, the member of "a creative writing class". You have set every commended trap, in brief, to capture the straying muse in order that you may domesticate her out-of-hand as your helpmate in letters.

"Am I", you continue, in somewhat the pouncing manner of a lawyer who discredits a witness, "on the right track? Should I imitate the style of so-called model authors in my writing? If so, whom would you suggest? Should I get a few years' experience on a newspaper? I have an idea that it is well to become steeped in classicism. I am working conscientiously to that end. Is it advisable to continue? Or should I study present-day literature more?"

And yet other question upon question do you put to me, about such unrelated matters as art and Mr. Ludwig Lewisohn and magazine-editors and the best book of synonyms, out of an engaging belief that I, who have no

least interest in your welfare, will be willing to devote a day or so to answering all these questions one after the other.

Still, it is not difficult to answer your questions. The reply is that I do not know. It is my private opinion that whether you do the things about which you inquire will not matter a straw's weight in your possible evolution as an author. It is also my absolute conviction that whether or not you do eventually "become a writer" is an affair in which I have not the tiniest interest. In brief, I can see no logical reason why I should not drop your letter into the waste-paper basket, and so have done with both your infernal briskness and you.

Instead, I fall a-wondering why you should want—or at least should temporarily imagine that you want—"to become a writer". The term, to begin with, is staggeringly vague. People write all manner of oddments, such as verse, and society columns, and sermons, and advertising copy. Yet I believe your term is apt enough. I look back, across some seven lustres, to the time when I too was the editor of a college magazine, and when I too debated most of the questions you raise, and when I too meant "to become a writer". For there was never any doubt in my mind, after my sixteenth year or thereabouts, that I would "become a writer". And yet there was never any definite notion, I am sure, what form this writing was to take. There was certainly no delusion that writers were rewarded with affluence or high station.



AUTHORSHIP was not esteemed in the Virginia of my boyhood, and in fact, for all practical purposes, authorship was unknown there. Upon but two flesh-and-blood writers had the eyes of my adolescence rested; and none, in so far as I knew, thought of these two as being, primarily, writers. One was Amélie Rives, whose first novels were then being read furtively in Richmond, with shocked zest, as really not at all the sort of thing which you might expect from an unmarried girl, and as, in brief, books which the well-bred must blandly ignore when such books were published by a Rives of Albemarle—and the other was Thomas Nelson Page, who, in Richmond, was esteemed and made much of on the ground that, apart from being “one of the real Pages”, he had married considerable money in taking his second wife.

A bit later, to be sure, when I was at college, I heard that the youngest Glasgow girl had published a book, but by that time my business in life was fixed, nor did I remember clearly which one of the three was Ellen. It comes back to me that my informant, whom Appomattox had retired from lieutenant-colonelcy in the Confederate Army, described it as one of the most damnable things he had ever heard of in his life, that Frank Glasgow's daughter should be getting mixed up with that sort of thing. Since my informant too had a daughter, in whom my young eyes could detect no flaw nor any imperfection at that season, I have no doubt that I looked respectfully sympathetic.

No, when I was your age there was no tangible prompting for me to turn author. The sin of Virginia was written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond, as Jeremiah has failed to remark: it was graven upon the tombstone of her dead excellence. She had not honoured any artist. She had

esteemed only the cheap and ready glories of big words spoken in her praise, and in the praise of all her customs, by the equally cheap and the far, far more ready demagogue: the word which is written Virginia had not rewarded.

The leather-lunged congressmen and the braying senators she took into her bed of love, and they defiled her with loud platitudes: she doted also upon divers retired, but not at all retiring, Confederate veterans, whose voice was as the voice of asses. To the roaring of wild pastors she hearkened amorously. All these had bruised her teats so that her breasts might nurse the young no longer. With all these never-idle talkers Virginia had played the wanton in a little corner, in the plashed mire of her stagnant backwaters, saying, Speak to me of my pre-eminence! And they all had spoken to the desire of Virginia, very egregiously.

Of beauty and of chivalry and of grey legions they spoke, and of a fallen civilization such as the world will not ever see again, and, for that matter, never did see; of a first permanent settlement, and of a Mother of Presidents, and of a republic's cradle, and of Stars and Bars, and of yet many other by-gones, long ago at one with dead Troy and Atlantis, they babbled likewise for interminable years, without ever, ever ceasing. The wind blew away their words as each word was spoken: still did they vocalize in the wind's teeth.

There were no written words to outlive their babblings, for Virginia did not read, nor did she honour any writer. She doted only upon the big words which the aspiring candidate bellowed, or which grey little men with chin whiskers declaimed weepingly from the platform or from the pulpit. She honoured stucco idols. She honoured mush. No honest writer might thrive in Virginia.

There was no art of any kind in Virginia. There was but an endless braying. All these things did I behold there in the days of my youth: nor are these ills yet dulcified, to express the matter just as mildly as possible.

No, when I was your age, my dear sir, there was no least tangible prompting for me to write; nor did I have any notion as to what I intended to write. There was simply the blind and very strong instinct, much such as you voice now, "to become a writer".

So near as I may judge, every person who eventually does in any serious sense "become a writer" is conscious in his youth of this large dim vocation. The *poietes*, the "maker", is called by what power he knows not, to make things out of words. It is as though a spell has been laid upon him, after the approved Hellenic fashion, through one brief and chance-given sight of unveiled beauty, revealing that which seemed not utterly human, but an ambiguous and in some degree a more sinister loveliness than men seek ordinarily. He has seen this but as a gleaming beheld only in part and only for the space of a heart-beat—a space wherein the beholder's heart did not beat at all, but faltered between terror and worship and longing. He has seen, somehow, what Swinburne, in one rare moment of lucidity, has called "the breast of the nymph in the brake". It is that matter, I think, which every true romantic tries at one time or another to commemorate in words: yet if you reply with a blank stare I can but hastily agree with your commonsense.

Nor do I mean to speak further of this matter. For this is, I admit, a matter with which the ordered life and the slowly garnered wisdom of man's race have no concern, and of which human reason may well doubt the civic and economic worth. It is a

trivial matter which the aging deny with shrugged shoulders; they speak also of hormones and of Freud and of greensickness very comfortably: but the eyes of young men have seen this matter, and they stay perturbed.

So at least I believe; and if I happen to be wrong I can always reply in self-defence that it is by no means for the first time. I believe, too, that in youth the elect writer envisages in some sort, very far away, the notions which are some day to be his notions. They have not yet entered his mind. But he glimpses them as remote and lovely and dear wraiths, and he knows that by and by they will become clear and intimate. He does not, through heaven's mercy, foreknow what tyrannous taskmasters they will prove, nor what tricksters either. He is conscious only of their allure and of a magic to which his inmost being responds. In his youth the elect writer is thus doubly a nympholept, in that his seeing is bedazzled also by the resplendent beauty which is later to inform his books.

The question is but whether he have the strength of mind to conquer all these aberrations. It has been justly observed that many men are poets in their youth, but that nevertheless (although Rossetti phrases the outcome with a difference) the most of them get over it quite satisfactorily. They get over it, and they evolve, along with the average of mankind, into the respectable practitioners of one or another respected profession, with no nonsense about them. The routine of commonsense engulfs them: they put on flesh and develop bank accounts; in a thicket they look to find no more than a lost golf ball or a spot handy for bodily relief. They become, in brief, mature: and the world is thus happily stocked with book buyers, who endeavour through fine literature to recapture some seeming of their lost youth.



WITH the professional creative writer who has any spark of genius the case is otherwise. He does not forget that silvery strange gleam. He retains always some immaturity, in a ratio so direct to his ultimate importance as to suggest that literary talent is but a form of arrested development. He has need of this immaturity, God knows, in his droll trade. For, as you may see a child a-gallop upon a non-existent horse, just so must the creative writer direct and restrain and spur this or the other non-existent character until all have galloped or cantered, or have limped half-foundered, it may be, to the appointed goal-post of his Explicit. He does not, in fine, with the comparative temperance of Tom o' Bedlam, call for a horse of air to get him through this world, but elects to drive a lean herd of phantoms tally-ho. That is his business in life, and it will not bear looking at rationally.

It follows that the elect writer is not, and cannot afford to be, in any mundane sense, rational. To the contrary, for the sake of his writing's health and gusto he must cherish an all-pervading illogic, which under cool inspection appears not far removed from feeble-mindedness. And he does. None who has been much thrown with accomplished and original writers can fail to note their peculiar childishness. Here is the child's vanity, and the unchecked impulsiveness, the unreason, the naïve lying, the petulance, the catch-as-catch-can morality of a child, displayed, as it were, all over the place.

Now as touches this point, of "temperament", the romantic writer at least has back of him some weight of rowdy tradition and his own old legend of wine and garrets shared tête-à-tête. To discover any professed romantic who did not hold any such irregular traffic regularly would be, in fact, as unsettling as to learn that your bootlegger was

a total abstainer: it would cause you to deal elsewhere. Yet I do not find that to compose the most painstaking sort of "realism" tends to make its writer a bit more credible as a human being. I have known sundry "realists", and each one of them was a fine triumph of fantasy. You have but to think about Sherwood Anderson or Sinclair Lewis, for example, to perceive that either of these two authors, if put by conjuration into any one of his own books, would flaunt among the sombre creatures of his fancy like a flaming phoenix or a red-and-gold hippogriffin.

Creative writers of every kind, in brief, appear to me to be rather fantastically gifted children—like changelings who as yet remember a little magic picked up in their faëry nurseries,—and they do not ever, except in exteriors, become mature. They can play at being grown-up, of course, like all other children; and some of them can do it quite well for an hour or so. But at bottom each knows that he cannot afford the comfortable ossifications of real maturity. He knows that creative literature is but a variant of the child's game "let's pretend", and that to excel in it requires the retention of a childish turn of mind.

If I appear to belittle creative literature by pointing out that it (like many other high matters, such as religion, or a sense of honour, or the institution of marriage) makes but a poor showing in the cold light of intelligence, that is far from my design. I intend, rather, a compliment. Age and experience will teach the considerate to distrust every exercise of human intelligence, and to observe that life is made livable only through a wise choice in delusions. The artist in letters and the patrons of the artist in letters are all deluded after a most handsome and comfort-giving fashion, I think, and nobody ought to ask more.

**B**UT to return, my dear sir, to your brisk demands. I can say only that the creative writer needs, to begin with, and to sustain him even to the wrought iron gates of the cemetery, a peculiar order of childish unreason which will permit his following, day in and day out, after he does not know precisely what, into regions of which he can have no foreknowledge beyond the fact that they in all probability do not exist. Such unreason is the one requisite of a successful word-monger, and the one way to acquire it is to be born with it. In other words, *poeta nascitur*. Nor is this congenital unreason to be regarded as, of necessity, a misfortune. Sometimes, to be sure, it leads the creative writer into the traditionary rags and gutters. At other times it results in a quite comfortable livelihood, as go things physical, and the man is not nominally an outcast.

I admit that the difference here is not so great as you might think. The born poet remains always a nympholept. He remembers, even when surrounded with affluence and royalty statements, that equivocal vision which in his youth did now and then, if but for the space of a heart-beat, appear to be a vital and tangible and near-by matter. It seems to be near him no longer in middle life; it thins; it comes more rarely: and by him it remains unattained forever. He questions the truth of this matter: and yet he cannot question those stinging, half-derisive memories of this matter, which keep him, even in his luxurious town home, and in his trim country residence, and in the warm arms of enamoured ladies, an outcast from the comfortable repetitions and mufflings of mature life.

He who has once heeded this matter, and who has not put it out of his mind resolutely as a mere delusion, can have no human associates; and he knows it. He is conscious of

that never-ending loneliness which more mature persons drug with the routine of commonsense affairs. Among the well-satisfied he hungers after he does not clearly know what; there was but a silvery flashing, half-seen, not wholly seen, to awaken inexplicable desires: and he lives as the lost heir of a kingdom of whose existence he is by no means convinced.

Meanwhile he gives all time and labour to his art, to that insatiable fetish which demands not only time and labour, but requires also that its devotees' most private emotions shall be displayed in cold print. You have read, I am sure, during your endeavours "to become steeped in classicism", the old myth of Atys; and you thus know that a goddess may be served with unconscionable tribute. Well, and creative literature is not a whit less exigent than was Cybele. All decency and all reserve must the fond fanatic of letters give over to his art, to an art which he studies so zealously that in due course he becomes conscious of its unimportance in the continuous flowing away of time, which abducts all things, by and by, even the newest and most talked-about books.

**A**M I counselling you, it may be you will ask, not "to become a writer"? To counsel anybody about anything was not ever a custom with me, my dear sir. To write books has diverted me now for some thirty years; it appears to me, in my more reasonable moments, a singularly futile and childish and thankless task; and yet, for no reason ever revealed to me, I have enjoyed doing it. I am but pointing out (and proving, also, by the force of example) that the elect writer is fashioned not through any course of training but through his innate irrationality.

I must point out likewise that whatsoever follows the present stage in your career must necessarily prove an anti-climax. It is the de-



fect of those notions which woo the elect writer in his youth, when they become apparent but have not yet entered his mind, that they do not ever surrender to his ardours wholly. All nymphs are thus evasive. They do, it may be, come a bit closer by and by, like unwilling models approaching an artist in whom they have no great faith; and to some degree each notion will consent, as it were, to sit for its portrait with marked resistiveness. Then, while each tarries impatiently, the poor man does the very best he can with his adjectives and his commas, and he manages to catch, perhaps, a sort of likeness. And for the while he takes pride in that which he has done, not knowing his doom.

After a little, though, he notices that in some especial bit of work he has produced no supreme masterpiece. Upon every aging artist, I think, dawns in this way, very gradually, the horrible and astounding doubt that his genius may be not unparalleled in the world's history. It is a contingency at which no elect writer need ever glance in his youth.

But the aging author when he turns back to his beloved own books—and to so infer-

nally many of them, too!—in which there was once no flaw to be discovered, in which but yesterday the sprightliest wit frolicked and so much of beauty revelled statelily, he does rather wonder to find these books pululating, overnight, as it were, with the inadequate and the awkward. Sentences which he had remembered as being of his unalloyed best have taken on a flavour of stale pie-crust; here the rhetoric both lumbers and gushes, like a street-sprinkling wagon; and now entire paragraphs stun him with the bludgeon of his own dulness. There is, in brief, no more dreadful reading for any honest writer than he must find inevitably in his own books, after a while. Those lovely notions which so elvishly allured him into so much of heart-breaking labour are simply not apparent anywhere; they have hired him, for a lifetime, with fairy gold. And they themselves, he reflects, those comely and light nymphs, they are busied at their appointed task, very far away from him now, in search of still another stripling, who is not yet ensnared, but who already plans "to become a writer".