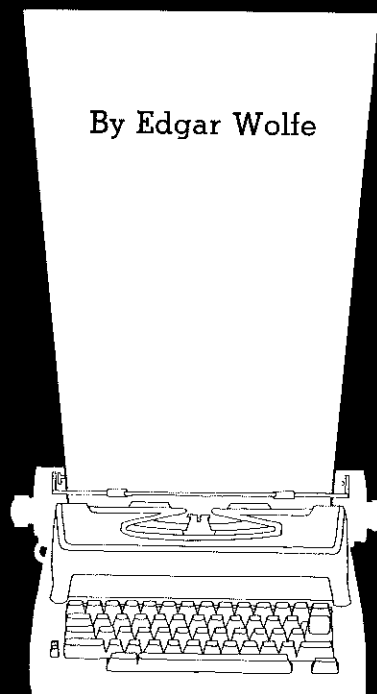


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ELLING STORIES

In tracing how he
learned to write, a
master storyteller
remembers some
painful lessons

By Edgar Wolfe



I

am going to repeat, since it may be useful to some and interesting to others, what I said to a writers' conference a few years ago about the art of narration. As I thought about my assignment, I was hard put for a while to decide just where I could take a manageable hour-long slice out of so large a subject. In the end I fell back upon narration to explain narration. If I told the story of how I myself had learned to tell a story, then anything of value that I might have to impart would come out naturally and in a way that my hearers might have a chance to remember. So I began.

I wrote my first story, which was brief and about a squirrel, when I was 7. All I remember is that my mother, who may have been my only reader, liked it and praised. That, I dare say, was something to find out, that by writing a story I might win praise. But mothers admire very easily, and teachers are less predictable.

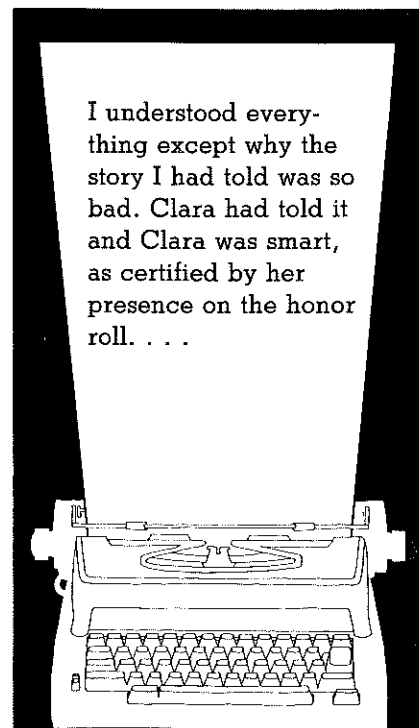
It was my fourth-grade teacher, Miss Cusick, who was responsible for my next two efforts at storytelling. Her assignment one Friday was to come prepared on Monday to stand up before the class and tell a story. Nothing said about the origin and nature of the story. Just tell a story. It was around Halloween, and it happened that my Cousin Clara, who was in high school, chose that weekend to titillate my brother and me with a bedtime ghost story. We lay listening as she sat on the bed beside me and told it.

It seemed that a small part of a dead man's anatomy had been deliberately

separated from the rest of him. I don't know why, except that perpetrators have their whims and their fancies. As for ghosts, we all know that they like to keep what used to be themselves all together and undisturbed. So much for motivation.

Now to set the scene. Picture an isolated country house on a windy, pitch-black night with a lone man lying in bed in the northwest bedroom upstairs—which corresponded exactly to the location of our bedroom, I couldn't help noticing. For some reason, the man is apprehensive and finds it hard to go to sleep, but he tells himself that it is silly to be afraid. The doors and windows are all locked. Relax and go to sleep.

But even as he thinks this, downstairs the ghost is flowing through the front door. At the bottom of the stairs, it stands and listens a moment, and then the man in his bed becomes aware of the presence below as it intones slowly and lugubriously: "Who-o-o-o's . . . go-o-o-t . . . my-y-y . . . bi-i-i-g . . . to-o-o-o-o-oe?" No answer. The man can only quake and cower in his bed—and wait. And what he fears follows. Up the stairs comes the ghost, dragging its chains. Halfway to the



top, it pauses to inquire again for its missing member and then continues its ascent. Then the empty south room receives the question, and the northeast room after that: "Who-o-o-o's . . . go-o-o-t . . . my-y-y . . . bi-i-i-g . . . to-o-o-o-o-oe?" Then back along the stairwell come the ghostly footfalls and the following chains, and for a long moment there is only excruciating silence as the ghost pauses on the threshold of the right room. Not that the man even now can see his visitor. He has scrooched down under the covers so far that he has tunnel vision. But the sounds resume and enter, and from midroom again comes the ghost's question, its voice sad and accusatory and as sepulchral as Cousin Clara could make it. Then at last the ghost reaches the bed and leans down. It lifts the covers a little. It peers in, so that now, at last, half dead with fright, the man cannot help seeing the luminous shape of the ghost.

And suddenly Clara's voice dropped down to a surprising whisper, more rapid and less drawn out: "Who-o-o's . . . go-o-t . . . my big to-o-oe?" And then—"YOU HAVE!" she yelled and grabbed me, to my considerable vicarious fright and real delight.

Well, as you have guessed, it was this possibly familiar tale that I elected to tell to my fellow fourth-graders, and it failed. The class' only reaction seemed to be to stare either at me or at Miss Cusick and wait. The teacher kindly allowed me to get into my seat before she delivered judgment.

"Edgar," she said, "where did you get that story? That's just very, very poor. It is not acceptable. You can do better than that. What I want is for you to come prepared tomorrow to tell us another story, a *much* better one. Do you understand?"

I understood everything except why the story I had told was so bad. Clara had told it and Clara was smart, as certified by her presence on the honor roll every six weeks. How could she have liked the story if it were all that bad, and how could I have thought it so exciting and funny? Or could it simply be that I had told it so badly that the teacher had thought it was poor when it wasn't? I knew I was bashful and therefore my rendition of the ghost's voice, unlike Clara's, had been flat and hurried, without force or

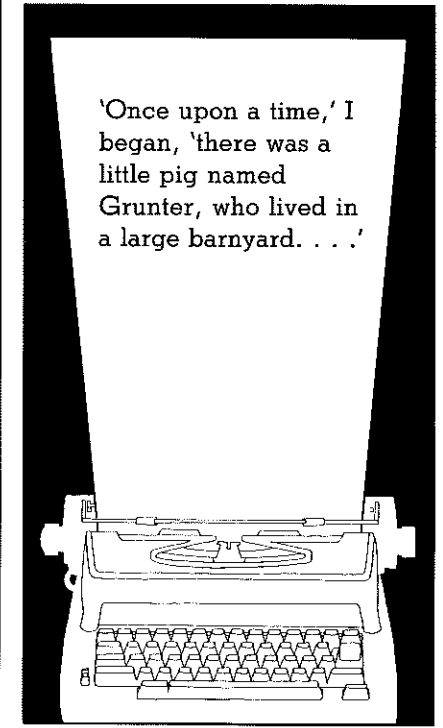
feeling. And as for the climax, of course I couldn't make myself do what was required, grab my nearest classmate and yell out loud in class.

But oughtn't a teacher be smart enough to make allowances and see how good the story would be if rightly told? She almost acted as if it had been downright indecent or in the poorest of taste, a concept with which at age 9 I couldn't have been familiar, but which I was shocked, I believe, into vaguely conceiving. It was natural, too, that I should make comparisons. What was so good about the other kids' stories? Not very much, as far as I had been able to see, but my judgment hardly mattered. What I had to live with in any case was the unalterable fact that out of all the stories told mine alone was unacceptable, and I hung my head in shame and puzzled resentment.

But only for a while. There was no sense in prolonged pouting when I had been given a chance to redeem myself. So I soon began using all my spare moments trying to think of another story. It shouldn't have been hard. I liked stories. There was nothing that I liked better. Yet every desirable story that came to mind had to be rejected. Some were too long. Others Miss Cusick would be sure not to like. Then there were those too-familiar tales taken from our school readers. Probably half of my classmates had used these, and our teacher had not disapproved, but I wanted to tell something that no one else had heard or read before, not even, if possible, Miss Cusick.

Yet the choice of a story from the school readers would have had one distinct advantage. I could have reread it. I could have got it letter-perfect. Not so at all for those few stories that finally, late on Tuesday morning, I felt I would most like to tell, but I was appalled as I reviewed them in my mind by the exceeding badness of my memory. Not only had I become maddeningly vague about important turns of events in each of the tales, but I could not recall enough of those essential details without which a story in the telling is reduced to a lifeless skeleton. Not that at the time I could have phrased matters as I have just done, but truths can be felt before expression of them is possible. I knew that what I

had to do was to read again whichever story I finally chose—and I couldn't. There was no way. One story I had read at Aunt Kate's in a town that was miles away. Another was in a library book the name of which I had forgotten. Nor could I reread that exciting tale my mother had read aloud to me a couple of years before from *The Youth's Companion*, about a Blackfoot Indian boy named Pit-a-ma-kin. The magazine had been borrowed from Grandma, who lived only a few blocks away, but who had the distressing habit of consigning old magazines to the bonfire after a very few months. So it was obvious what I would have to do if I chose one of those stories—invent what I couldn't remember, which would be hard to do. I was ignorant. Pit-a-ma-kin's author, James Willard Schultz, for instance, was not. He'd lived among the Blackfoot in Montana, and he knew what he knew so well that he couldn't forget. But all I had done was to read and promptly forget, not all, but too much. I couldn't invent. Why, if I wanted to try making something up, it might as well be—the idea jumped into my head—a story of my own! It would be easier! And suddenly it seemed that I



had no other choice. I couldn't do anything else!

At home the night before, I had tried to find and read some wholly new and usable story, but in vain. And now that I had suddenly given up also on remembered stories, how much time was left? Only the little I could steal from our arithmetic lesson and after that the noon hour! Then Miss Cusick would pronounce that dread name, my own, and I would have to go forward. How could I have a story by then? For if it was my ignorance that had made me give up on reconstructing forgotten parts of published stories, wouldn't ignorance prevent the invention of my own story, too? But I *had* to do it! Besides, I could *select* things I was least ignorant about and thus avoid the *appearance* of ignorance. At worst, even if the story did turn out to be pretty bad—as it would, I was already resigned to that—well, at least—and suddenly I laughed—it would serve Miss Cusick right! She ought to have liked my Big Toe story!

As it turned out, I was able to do little more during my walk home to lunch and back to school again than to decide upon a hero and the opening situation. After I had told that much, I'd just have to go on, I didn't know where. There was no delay in my finding out where. The bell rang. We children on the schoolground lined up and marched in to our places. Quiet. My eyes looked at my desk. My hands gripped the seat. Little pig. I tried to think. Grunter. But my mind suspended operation and waited. Then, at my name, I was up and out in the aisle, moving forward. Then I confronted the class.

"Once upon a time," I began, "there was a little pig named Grunter, who lived in a large barnyard with his father and mother and brothers and sisters and all the other animals, and he should have been happy because Farmer Brown gave the pigs all the corn and slop they liked, and Farmer Brown had even dug a mudhole for them so they could get in on hot days and cool off.

"But Grunter," I went on, "was not contented. His pen had no shade except for the shadow of the barn and a little shade in a thicket of plum brush in one corner. Grunter would look through the barnyard fence to some

woods a half-mile away, and the more he looked, the more he wanted to go exploring. Those woods kept looking so shady and cool that he felt he just had to get out somehow and go there.

"Now in the fence corner behind the plum brush, Grunter found a place in the wire mesh of the fence that looked a little weak. He pushed on it and it gave a little. He could just get his little snout into it. He made this discovery while all the other pigs were in the mudhole enjoying themselves. So no one saw Grunter push his head into that hole and twist and turn till the wire gave way a little more and the hole got larger and larger. At last he had made it big enough, and he squeezed through.

Then off he ran as fast as he could. What leafy shade there was in the forest! How cool it was! There was a creek, too, and Grunter enjoyed a good swim. After that, he was hungry and rooted around for something to eat. There were acorns under some big oak trees. He had never seen acorns before, but something told him they ought to be good to eat, so he tried them, and they were. He gobbled up all that he wanted.

"Then he went on till pretty soon he was up in the mountains. He'd never seen mountains before. There were rocks to see and valleys to look down on, and he climbed and looked and climbed some more. He even thought he could see Farmer Brown's barn away down there, but it looked so small and different he wasn't quite sure.

"Pretty soon he heard something behind him and looked carefully around. At first, he didn't see anything, but then he did. Peeking out from behind a big tree, there was a monstrous yellow cat, about 20 times bigger than any cat Grunter had ever seen before. Grunter was scared. He knew that big mountain lion wasn't following him around to play games with him, but must think a little pig would make an awfully good dinner.

"Suddenly Grunter wished with all his heart he had never run away from the barnyard. It seemed the safest of places. If that cat came there and jumped over the fence, as he easily could, Grunter's father and mother

would rush at him and fight as best they could, and the cows would lower their heads and use their horns, and the horses would neigh and rear and kick. And Farmer Brown, too, he would come running with his shotgun and his big barking dog. So the mountain lion would see he had no chance and leap back over the fence and be gone.

"But now, all by himself, Grunter couldn't think of anything to do but act suddenly before the big cat expected him to. This he did. He dashed ahead into deeper woods where the underbrush was thick and young trees crowded. The lion pursued, but it was harder for him to get through the underbrush than it was for Grunter. Then Grunter ran down into a gully that went down the mountain, and the lion, who had been badly scratched, gave up. So the little pig got down the mountain into the forest that he had first entered.

"But he didn't know which way to go. He went around in circles for a while without knowing he was doing it. But after a while he knew he was lost, and then he was frightened again. He was afraid he could never find his way out of the woods and back to the

barnyard. But just then he saw a big collie dog trotting along through the woods with his nose to the ground, and right away the dog saw Grunter and started barking. Then Grunter recognized Farmer Brown's dog Shep. But Shep didn't act very friendly. He knew Grunter had no business out of his pen, so he dashed at the little pig, nipping at his back and tail. Grunter still didn't know which way to go, and all he tried to do was to get away from Shep. But Shep knew which way Grunter should go and nipped him in just the right places to make him run out of the woods and see the barn. Then he ran straight back to his hole as fast as he could. Shep was satisfied then and stayed behind and quit barking.

"Grunter squeezed back into the barnyard and found the other pigs at the trough eating supper. He hurried to join them, but he was too late. There was nothing left. But he didn't really miss his share of the food so much because of all the acorns he'd eaten in the forest. Anyhow, he was very grateful to be home again, and he vowed to be contented ever after. He wouldn't even tell his brothers and sisters where he had been, but if they found the hole he had made, he would warn them about mountain lions and tell them it was safest to stay in the barnyard."

So that was the story—or that's the way I tell it now. I remember it well enough to be fairly true to the plot, but no doubt the wording and the transitions in some respects and a number of places are more mature contributions. But what you are most interested in now, I suspect, is what Miss Cusick said to me this time.

I half expected her to demand again: "Edgar, *where* did you get *that* story?" but instead she congratulated me. "Now *that* is a good story!" she said. "An *excellent* story! Just ever so much better than that wretched one you told yesterday."

It is good to be praised, and I was happy about it, but I wished she hadn't alluded again to the Big Toe story, which raised again in my mind that question of how smart my teacher really was. Hadn't she in the least suspected that I had made up the little

pig story? What would she have said if she had? Had I been overpraised? I honestly doubted that a story I had made up could be better than Clara's ghost story.

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ut far more important than questions that couldn't be answered was how I appraised my own performance. I had undoubtedly learned things. I could make up a story! I could, if I had to, do it on the spot. If I could manage to start somewhere, I could manage to go on. I could think of things to have happen in order to get to some kind of ending that would do. And to this day, I think that what I learned from that experience was as important as anything else I ever have learned about storytelling. The principle is the simplest there is: *one thing leads to another*. Always. Inevitably. Logically. If one thing happens, another thing has to happen next, and a storyteller just has to think of what it is and tell it.

One of the words I just used was *logically*, and of course the lesson learned wouldn't have been worth much if my brain hadn't naturally been logical. I realized that things that happened did so step by step. I couldn't jump over difficulties. There had to be a reason for everything that happened. People had to be persuaded to accept what I told them, just as Miss Cusick had accepted my Grunter story.

As for that bad practice of jumping over difficulties, I came to understand more about that during the next three years, thanks to a couple of friends, Grif and Leith. They, too, it turned out, liked to make up stories, and we three told our yarns to each other and to other boys. Only, my friends' stories failed to satisfy me. "Somehow or

other," they would say, "he"—their hero—"got away from this guy that was chasing him, and then he walked down the street, and suddenly another big guy started following him, and so he ran again, and big guy did, too, and they ran. . . ."

Well, that kind of story won't do. I don't mean to inveigh against all chance occurrence and coincidence in fiction, since of course these do happen in life, sometimes most notably, but still no one should lose sight of the fact that if something happens, it does so in a certain way and for a certain reason. That *how* and that *why* belong in a story. One thing leads to another.

These were observations that seemed to apply to all the good stories that I read, even the fantastic ones, given their premises, that there were fairies or ghosts or life upon Mars. Their authors did not resort to "somehow or other" at important junctures, but always tried to make clear, or clearly suggest, how one thing led to another and why whatever happened did happen. Of course, had my youth occurred in more recent times and had I read some of the chaotic, illogical, surreal dream-stuff and the many sheer absurdities that fiction may now

I think that what I learned from that experience was as important as anything else I have ever learned about storytelling: *One thing leads to another. Always.*

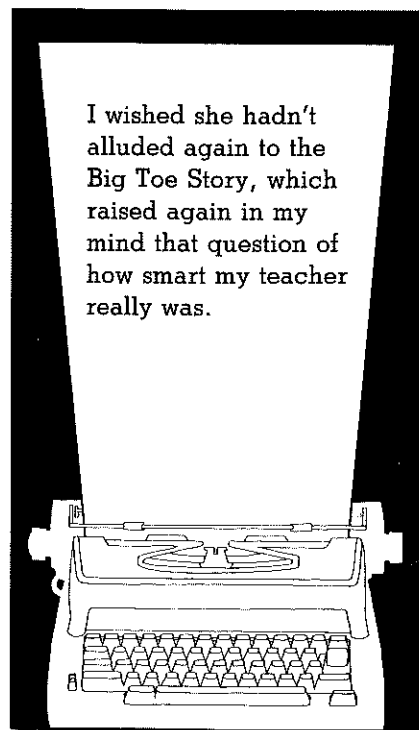
present to us, I don't know what I would have thought. Would there have been a critic handy to tell me that there can be method in madness and that all rules have exceptions? I don't know. I don't know.

Anyhow, I, for my part, followed my rules, unformulated though they then were, and was doing so when in eighth-grade English my version of how Frank R. Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger?" ought to end made a hit with my teacher and classmates.

I decided that the hero, guided by that little hand movement of the princess, opened the door on the right, and out came—the tiger! So jealousy had triumphed over love in the heart of the princess? No, jealousy had triumphed *first* and *then* love, for down into the arena jumped the princess, and as the great beast stalked and crouched and sprang (described very much à la Edgar Rice Burroughs, of whose Tarzan stories I was then fond), she managed to run and interpose her own body at exactly the right time between the springing tiger and her beloved. The surprised hero was knocked backwards and off his feet by the impact. Scrambling up, he saw with horror who had saved him and at the same time perceived that his natural inclination (since he was a brave young man) to try to save the girl was now quite useless, for the tiger had torn her throat out at first bite. At the same moment, he was startled by the inarticulate scream of a man rushing past him straight at the tiger. That accommodating beast promptly reared up to receive his second prey, the king himself, who, breaking free from the belated grasp of his attendants, had followed his daughter into the arena, thus proving himself in the crisis fully as impulsive as she, and so he met the fate that he deserved. As for the young man, the hero, I really forget how I disposed of him, but I probably thought that there had been enough carnage and allowed him, under cover of all the commotion, to withdraw from the arena and then, with the greatest dispatch, from that "barbaric kingdom."

With this performance, my elementary lessons culminated, and I went on into the high school, where I learned the most, I reluctantly confess, by

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cheating. There was only one such occurrence, but so successful was it that it is a great wonder that I learned anything at all, but I did. Let me tell you about it.

First, though, if you are to see the exact nature of what I did, I must tell you about a somewhat related incident that happened when I was a freshman. What I wrote then was a deliberate and conscious adaptation, but by no means in intent either cheating or plagiarism. I wanted and fully expected my teacher to see exactly what I had done, but I was disappointed. I never found out whether she did or not, but I don't think so. I believe she missed the whole point.

What I wrote resulted from an overheard conversation. A classmate of mine, Gladys Eberhart, was telling our English teacher, Miss McHenry, how much she had enjoyed a Jerome K. Jerome essay from our *Eighth Grade Classics* called "Uncle Podger Hangs a Picture." Whether our teacher had read and shared Gladys' enthusiasm for this piece, I don't recall, but she asserted that she just loved Jerome's book of essays *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*. So did I. We had that book at home, a volume not only notable for its humorous contents, but for its smooth celluloid binding with a colorful illustration printed upon that smooth cover, which was bound on by a ribbon going through the perforated gathers and tying the book together.

Not long after that, the class finished reading Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Miss McHenry promptly asked us to write a short play. High school kids were different in those days. No one protested or complained. The teacher had spoken. We wrote our—not plays, of course—dialogues or conversations.

Next day in class, Miss McHenry called on a girl to read what she had written. It was dull and brief. Another play. Pointless. Then mine. It was longer, and I was unusually confident. "Seeing the Baby" I called it. I remember that I finished and sat there grinning at the teacher, who I thought would recognize the source and perceive the humor in what I had done, but apparently she did not. She looked doubtful and strangely troubled. What

she said was, "Edgar—is that original?"

I understood the implication and sat there still grinning, but grinning now to conceal my consternation. How to answer? How to answer honestly? The word that came out was, "Hardly."

Miss McHenry stared at me a long moment and decided, it seemed, to let the matter go, nor did she ever question me afterwards. I think we handed in our "plays" and never got them back, perhaps because of Miss McHenry's uncertainty about mine.

What I had done, you see, was to take an incident out of Jerome's *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow* essay "On Babies" and adapt it for my little comedy. It was hard work. It made me read and think very closely. The dialogue was mostly Jerome's, but I changed what I had to. I had to make up stage directions. I had to decide where to start and what to leave out and when to stop. And also involved was that matter of making sure that the reader could see how one thing led to another.

Anyhow, I was terribly disappointed that Miss McHenry did not help me in my shyness to explain what I had done if she could not recognize it

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for herself. I had expected to have a private joke to share with a teacher I very much liked, and instead had only a doubt and a question.

And now I come to my other job of adaptation, which was, as I have said, out-and-out cheating, though I did what little I could to diminish the extent of my guilt. It came about as the result of another sweeping assignment that this time pretty much the whole class felt was beyond the ability of any of us to do—honestly. Or so I judge on the evidence. "Write a 3,000-word short story," our junior English teacher said and gave us two weeks to do it in. Now Miss McHenry had been a teacher we all respected, but Miss Newton was a nice, vivacious, attractive, enthusiastic and quite inexperienced young woman who lacked a good deal in judgment. Had she been able to give us some practical instruction and useful suggestions concerning the construction of short stories, I think I would have believed in myself and not been tempted. Writing some kind of short story was certainly not beyond my ability, but when stories began coming in to Miss Newton with surprising promptness and these copying early birds began garnering their A's, you might say that I panicked. The class lamebrains were getting A's, and I observed how one girl who was a good student, but honest, received a C. I was a competitor and could not endure the thought of getting a C while those of lesser ability got A's by cheating. Another adaptation seemed to be in order, one this time that I would feel it essential that the teacher not find out about.

Choosing the climactic incident from a novel by Morgan Robertson, a once-popular writer of sea stories, I made a short adventure story out of it. Reading more closely and thinking perhaps harder than I had ever done before in my life, I decided on a place where I could jump into the middle of things and a place where the adventure would naturally end. Sure enough, starting where I did, there were a few sentences and expressions I had to change, and I worked very hard trying to make what I wrote come up to Robertson's usual quality. At every point there were hard decisions. What

could I leave out? What *must* I retain? I honestly kept looking for expressions I could change and say in my own way. I honestly wanted to be a little bit honest. I considered every word and every phrase and every sentence to see what could possibly be expressed differently—better, if possible. But, alas, to my constant consternation, I kept reaching decision after decision against change. Robertson had said things very well, had used the right words, had got the right emphasis. I couldn't improve on him, and, often enough, when I did imagine that better expression might be possible, I ran into my old difficulty of ignorance. What did I know about the sea, which I, a midlander, had never seen? What did I know about life on an American warship in 1898? Or about the entrance to the harbor of Havana? Or the operation of a steam launch? Being so ignorant, I couldn't be half-honest or a tenth-honest. The final wording—I counted, I analyzed—was about 95 percent Robertson.

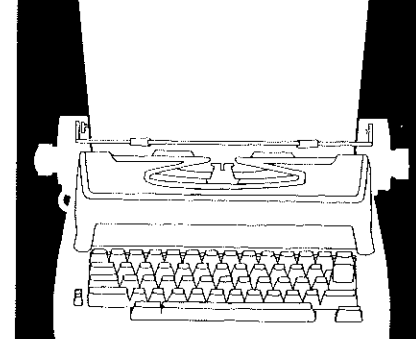
So I was a cheat—but I learned things. I kept observing with amazement Robertson's transitions, words and phrases that were indispensable and couldn't be left out, wording that kept track of the passage of time, that varied the expression, that avoided monotony, moved the reader along, tied everything together, helped readers to see why things happened and how one thing led to another. Often I wondered whether I could dispense with certain details and often I found that I could not. I saw their uses, and when I did find that I could leave some of them out, I felt I had scored a little triumph. When Robertson summarized, I made myself see why he could do so at that point and not at others. I eliminated all the thoughts of the hero that concerned the girl he had left behind and whom he despaired of ever getting, making my story strictly adventure. These omissions were a special trouble to me. I had to invent my own effective but unwordy transitions at these points to keep Miss Newton from guessing that the story had ever read differently from the way it did now. I learned things, too, about description and appeals to the senses. I increased my vocabulary. Whatever could be

learned, I think, by being compelled to pay the most minute attention to the exact wording of an author who was not great but who was certainly in every respect a competent professional writer, those things I learned.

Later, I had the very mixed pleasure of observing Miss Newton read my story with apparent delight and hear her exclaim over how good it was, never asking how I could possibly have learned all those things about the Battle of Havana and the American Navy during the Spanish-American War. I held a certain contempt, I am afraid, for the teacher who couldn't smell a rat anywhere, but I told myself that it was I who deserved by far the most contempt, not only for my moral weakness but for that youthful ignorance of life that made me afraid to invent an original story. I vowed I *would* write another story before long, and this time it would be all mine and laid in a setting I knew something about, not in the harbor of Havana during a war that had taken place years before I was born.

Two years later as a college freshman, I lost no time in trying out successfully for the freshman-sophomore writers' club, Pen and Scroll,

I considered every word and every phrase and every sentence to see what could possibly be expressed differently, but alas, Robertson had said things very well.



with the kind of story I had promised myself to write. It was naive in some ways, but it wasn't set in a remote time or place that I could know nothing about. Instead, I had a narrator-hero pursued at night, after an argument, by a mad religious fanatic, knife in hand, who when the hero dodged aside, went crashing to his death over the precipice of Cedar Bluff, above the Marais des Cygnes River, west of Ottawa. It was true that I had never known any mad religious fanatics, but I thought I knew something about religion, and I had clambered along both the precipice and the face of Cedar Bluff a number of times. My imagination had something to work with. The story was tremendously exciting, everyone said.

By this time, I had pretty well learned the basics of narrative writing. What I needed after that was to read ever more thoughtfully and observantly, to practice writing more and more, to receive sound criticism and some judicious praise, and, finally, when I deserved it, to be published. The creative writing courses I took from R.D. O'Leary, Dorothy Van Ghent and Ray B. West Jr. helped. It was from them that I got the criticism I needed and learned how intelligent and imaginative people generally might be expected to receive what I wrote.

I suppose it would be a wonder and worth the telling if I could recall precisely at what time, under what circumstances and by what means I mastered, to the extent that I did master, the fine and complex craft of fiction, certain of the more effective techniques thereof, and many of the admirable uses of language, but I cannot. Blame it on that old inconsistent weakness of my memory, the same, pretty much, that I manifested in the fourth grade. ▲

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