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## Ben Ames Williams and the Saturday Evening Post

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I wrote in one of my notebooks this paragraph:

“Here is what I want to do with my life. In the first place to love and to be loved, worthily, not alone by my wife and by my mother and father and sister, but by the world, or so much of it as I encounter. In the second place to build myself into a writer not only with a popular appeal but with a claim to real rank among those who were worthwhile. In the third place, to hold some post in the public life where I can help to right some wrongs. Whether that post be official does not matter, and perhaps the eye and the pen can do more than public office. In the fourth place, to lift those who are mine to so much of wealth as is necessary to allow us all to get the most—and the best—from ourselves.

Not all the things I sought have been achieved; but the thing I wanted most—the love and trust of my family—is mine. In that certainty today I am strong.”

The love and trust of his family grow with the years, and in them Da is stronger than ever. The rock on the knoll, looking out to the hills, is a symbol of our love. I am glad I have been able to absent me from felicity awhile to tell his story.



### BEN AMES WILLIAMS AND THE *SATURDAY* *EVENING POST*

By RICHARD CARY

**B**en Ames Williams (1889-1953) wrote eighty-four stories before he sold one. For five years, while working full time as a reporter for the Boston *American*, he applied two or three of his off hours daily to turning out narratives which he hoped would appeal to editors of popular fiction magazines. The steady downpour of rejection slips, which dampened his spirits not one whit, was finally stayed by Charles Agnew MacLean, who printed “The Wings of Lias” in *Smith’s Magazine* of July 1915. In that year Williams published three more stories in the so-called pulps, and seemed well launched toward a career as purveyor of gratifying adventure and romance. When in the following year Robert H. Davis, editor in chief of the Munsey magazines, embraced him as both friend and frequent contributor to *All-Story Weekly*, Williams’ level and direction as a

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writer appeared to be defined.<sup>1</sup>

Williams' entry into authorship had been prompted by a desire to capitalize his restless energies, to "kill time," he once said offhandedly. However, the more he wrote, the more he became intrigued by the mysteries of his craft. As he acquired degrees of professional competence, he paid increasing attention to his own emergent creative guidelines. He harked gratefully to Davis' monitory counsels, yet began to navigate his own course. And he lifted his eyes toward a higher plane.

After he raised his rate of publication to six stories for the year, Williams resigned his newspaper job in December 1916 in order to funnel all his vitality into the writing of successful fiction. His confidence (now and later) in the efficacy of literary agents was, to say most, inconsequential:

Can an agent sell a story which an author could not sell? Roughly, no.

Can an agent tell an author why his story did not sell? Roughly, no.

Can an agent teach a writer how to write saleably? Roughly, no.<sup>2</sup>

"Until a writer is able to sell stories, he has no need of an agent," he concluded. Nevertheless, he hired one at this point, an established operator named Paul R. Reynolds. When at first Reynolds merely relayed most of the stories to Bob Davis, Williams felt his lack of faith absolved. "I could have done that myself," he grunted. But he hung on, reluctant to tie up his time with business details and perversely certain "that Reynolds would widen my market and raise my prices more quickly than I could."<sup>3</sup> Soon he would have reason to applaud his sagacity.

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1 For detailed accounts of this period in Williams' life as author, see Richard Cary, "Ben Ames Williams: The Apprentice Years," *Colby Library Quarterly*, IX (September 1972), 586-599; and Richard Cary, "Ben Ames Williams and Robert H. Davis: The Seedling in the Sun," *CLQ*, VI (September 1963), 302-325.

2 Ben Ames Williams, "The Function of the Agent," in William Dorsey Kennedy, editor, *The Free-Lance Writer's Handbook* (Cambridge, Mass., 1926), 214-217.

3 Ben Ames Williams, *Now I'll Tell One* (unpublished autobiography), 212.

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Williams' first recorded refusal from the *Saturday Evening Post* is dated January 29, 1917, addressed to him, and signed "The Editors." They turned down "The Squealer"—which Davis had found "sordid and repellent" in 1915 and which *Collier's* printed, revised, in September 1917—but the corporate frugidity of the *Post* signature was somewhat relaxed by a warming comment: "Its workmanship is interesting and we would be glad to read any manuscript that you care to submit."<sup>4</sup> Late in February he completed a tale about whalers and sent it on to his agent. While in the midst of another, dealing with the Golden Candlestick of the Temple at Jerusalem, Williams received news from Reynolds that he had sold "The Mate of the Susie Oakes" to the *Post*. Jubilation was rife in the Williams household. As Mrs. Williams put it: "The word of the sale . . . came on the ninth of March, and as [Ben's] birthday is on the seventh, it proved to be a fine birthday present . . . we celebrated two birthdays."<sup>5</sup>

For Williams, this was a momentous initiation—"my first sale to one of the 'slick' magazines." Overshadowing that distinction, "The *Saturday Evening Post* was then . . . the magazine which to the beginning writer represented the ultimate goal."<sup>6</sup> At the helm since 1899, George Horace Lorimer (1867-1937) had steered an "elderly and indisposed" periodical to first place in circulation and prestige among those catering to that wide swath of readers designated "the general public." This leadership it retained until halfway through the thirties. As strongly entrenched in the American cultus as hamburger and Santa Claus, its only rival in the five-cent field was the unrestricted ride in the New York City subway. To see one's name introduced into the *Post's* notable roll of authors was to feel oneself entering a special galaxy. Williams' rose-colored reaction is thereby understandable. "Since I had 'broken into the *Post*,' it seemed to me the future was secure."<sup>7</sup> More so, in fact, than he could have dreamed.

"Lorimer was the *Post* and the *Post* was Lorimer," says his biographer. A species of benevolent despot, strong but not

<sup>4</sup> This letter and others quoted in this essay are now part of the Williams collection in Colby College Library.

<sup>5</sup> Florence Talpey Williams, *All About Da* (privately published, Chestnut Hill, Mass., 1962), 75.

<sup>6</sup> *Now I'll Tell One*, 213.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

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hard, Lorimer was with rare exception "Mr. Lorimer" to his writer and editors, and "The Boss" among themselves. A tough taskmaster over himself, he expected from them a comparable devotion to duty. Basically gregarious and sentimental, he kept a tight lid on his emotions and intimate relationships to a minimum. He usually entertained authors at lunch in the company's Philadelphia headquarters, bringing them together with editors, charting the *Post* while he ate. What made the *Post* particularly attractive to writers, over and above the honorific status, was its promptitude of decision, its generous scale of payment, and its regard for authorial sensibility. After Lorimer died, Williams reflected on their association of twenty years.

Although I was to sell many stories to the *Post* during the years that followed, I never came to know Mr. Lorimer except over the luncheon table and in such semi-formal ways. He protected himself against many people. This had perhaps been forced upon him by the fact that so many men and women who sought to know him better had their own interests in mind. . . . Mr. Lorimer always treated me with the utmost consideration; and on the one occasion when he asked me to make a change in a story, he yielded to my opinion that the story was better as it stood than it would be if the change he had suggested were made. There is among many critics and among literary folk in general a disposition to accuse the *Post* of tempting writers into evil ways by dangling the Golden Fleece before their eyes. That may in some cases be true. I do not know. But I know it was not true in mine. I wrote what I pleased, and of my work that was shown them the *Post* bought what they pleased. . . . [Lorimer] was a positive personality and so was I, and it is possible that that lack of tact for which I have always been distinguished would have made impossible any real friendship between us; but I have always regretted that such a relationship did not develop (*NITO*, 213-214).

The attitude on both sides was clearly self-protective, the wariness of two headstrong men with mutual respect avoiding direct confrontation. Williams was never offered a contract, for Lorimer preferred the free-lance approach, but all of his best work was for years shown first to the *Post*.

Exigencies of space compelled Lorimer to cut "The Mate of the Susie Oakes" slightly, without consultation. Williams, in full glow of admission to the palace, did not protest. He concentrated instead on placing another story therein. On September 27, 1917 Reynolds notified him that Lorimer had taken "Steve Scaevola." Williams published eight other stories that

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year, the sum of which impressed him less than the two that made the *Post*. Novice offshoots, they nonetheless caught Lorimer's eye. In 1918 he wrote Williams about the aims of the National War Saving Committee "to sell thrift, savings, solidity to the country," asking his help "to bring this home to the American people in stories and articles or in whatever way you find easiest and nearest at hand." Williams says nothing about his response to this solicitation. He either did not try or did not satisfy. Neither did he succeed with any other theme. Of the twelve stories he published in seven different magazines during 1918 not one turned up in the *Post*.

In a variety of ways, 1919 proved an *annus mirabilis* for Williams. Twenty of his titles were presented in magazines; four serials were converted into books; five were produced as movies; three of his short stories and two serials appeared in the *Post*; one of the former ("They Grind Exceeding Small") became the darling of a dozen anthologies, was reproduced in the *O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1919*; "The Field of Honor" (*American Magazine*) was also certified "as worthy of preservation under covers" by the volume's editor, Blanche Colton Williams (no kin). In number, quality, and revenue Williams had truly achieved a breakthrough. One external factor favoring his ascent was the business recovery of postwar 1919. Circulation of the *Post* climbed back to two million copies and advertisements multiplied commensurately, enabling purchase of a greater number of scripts. "The Great Accident," one of the lengthiest serials ever run in the *Post* (some 150,000 words), would no doubt have been resisted in bleaker times. Lorimer was pleased by the "steady improvement" of Williams' work. He opined that the story "would be better for serial use if it were not quite so leisurely in its movement, but I think by running extra long instalments we can overcome this handicap." Bob Davis, who had been trying to lure "The Great Accident" away from Williams since 1917, surrendered handsomely: "I wanted the story just as bad as Lorimer wants it. I couldn't however print it serially in a monthly magazine. It would have taken twelve numbers to get it to press, and only an absolute, downright, blown-in-the-bottle ass would have had the nerve to cut it. Its appearance in the *Post* will give you national fame. From now on your

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reputation is made. Nobody can stop you."

Williams developed "They Grind Exceeding Small," an exemplum of poetic retribution, from a slim anecdote told him by a friend. He rated it "not a particularly good story" and was undisturbed over its being "published inconspicuously in the *Post*."<sup>8</sup> Conversely, editor Churchill Williams (no kin) prodded him for more such "good" stories, wondering wistfully "what the chances are for this!" Ben Ames himself eventually came to esteem its adoption by so many anthologists.

"Jubilo," the first of Williams' serials printed by the *Post* and one of his most popular over the years, opened the way to acquaintance with Will Rogers. It also inspired a puckish footnote on the fine art of film-making.

He [Rogers] had made a number of moving pictures in the days before speech reached the screen, but of these only one was a success. It happened that that one was made from a story of mine called "Jubilo," and this had led to my meeting Will Rogers in New York while he was playing in the *Follies*, and on other occasions. He once told me that when they were preparing to make "Jubilo," the story, which had been published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, was turned over to a scenario writer to be converted into moving picture form. The writer, according to Will, ran into distractions; with the result that on the day they were to begin shooting the picture, neither the scenario nor the writer could be found. The location had been chosen and the company and the director were ready; so the director took the copies of the *Post* in which "Jubilo" had appeared, and shot the picture from them without waiting for a scenario.

As far as Will knew, and as far as I have been able to discover, that was the only time a moving picture was ever made direct from a story in this way (*NITO*, 337-338).

The decade of the twenties, with its conic spiral of socio-economic boom and bust, was for Williams a period of widening market and literary growth. Alarmed by the flood of easy movie money (his income soared 500% in 1919 and more than doubled again in 1920), he faced down the threat of creeping superficiality. "I deliberately changed my style and the structure of my tales, deliberately sought to write stories that would move at a more leisurely pace, and that would depend more on character and less on action."<sup>9</sup> A courageous decision and one

<sup>8</sup> Ben Ames Williams, "Authorial Ideals and Beliefs," *The Editor* (October 6, 1928), 7; *Now I'll Tell One*, 307-308.

<sup>9</sup> *Now I'll Tell One*, 262.

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he adhered to despite a 50% drop in revenue during 1921. Lorimer was not partial to "introspective" stories, "stories in which one looks within and finds nothing,"<sup>10</sup> and he had already faulted Williams for being too "leisurely." In that year he bought precisely one title for the *Post*, a serial, "Miching Mallecho." Nevertheless, Williams had by now made his mark on a substantial percentage of the *Post's* readership. Adelaide Neall, for twenty-seven years Lorimer's "right-hand man," had in fact asked Williams for an autobiographical sketch to insert in the "Who's Who" section to give these readers "the opportunity to get better acquainted" with him. He instead prevailed on Robert H. Davis, who came through with a typically whimsical portrait, "A Biography Written Backward," featured on April 3, 1920.

Just as Charles MacLean and Bob Davis dominated and shaped Williams' first aspect as author, so did Lorimer and Thomas B. Costain (1885-1965) his second. The advent of Costain to the *Post* in 1920 coincided with Williams' altered course, and Costain's presence indubitably turned the tide in Williams' favor. A vigorous, imaginative, efficient editor, Costain soon established himself as Lorimer's heir apparent. He journeyed up to Boston to induce more contributions from Williams, and they hit it off immediately. In the next two decades they spent pleasant weekends at each others' winter and summer homes, compared notes on their growing children, and—bridge enthusiasts both—often played in tournaments together and discussed the game's intricacies at length, orally and on paper. Most important, Costain took the chill off Williams' contact with the *Post* by assuming direct communication with him in the matter of his submissions, acting as an emollient between two frictional spirits.

In the summer of 1918 Williams started fishing with Bert McCarrison, who owned Hardscrabble Farm in the rural Maine region of Searsmont. Taken by the people and the setting, Williams conceived a series of stories based upon recurring characters and a single locality, because "I came to believe that a background familiar to the reader makes a story richer."<sup>11</sup>

10 John Tebbel, *George Horace Lorimer and The Saturday Evening Post* (Garden City, N. Y., 1948), 241.

11 "Ben Ames Williams," *Saturday Evening Post*, CXCVII (October 18, 1924), 54.



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With actual towns in the vicinity of Searsmont named Union, Unity, Liberty, Hope, Freedom, and Friendship, Williams almost inevitably dubbed his fictional counterpart Fraternity.<sup>12</sup> His chief hazard was managing an authentic transcription of the Maine dialect, “the subtle intonations of a Maine farmer” which, when “translated into print . . . become caricatures.” He surmounted this plight, as did Synge in the Aran Isles, “by catching from the common talk distinctive phrases” and shading them into the larger context.<sup>13</sup> His first two stories about Fraternity were picked up by *Collier's*, which presented them in December 1919 and January 1920.

Lorimer hovered between two stools in regard to the Fraternity construct. He appreciated the appeal of microcosm, the built-in continuity and habituation of such series, and in his time he sponsored Tugboat Annie, Mr. Tutt, Glencannon, Potash and Perlmutter, and Ring Lardner's “Busher,” to name only five. They were mostly fast-moving and funny; Williams' was slow-paced and cursory, depending upon muted accumulation for effects. When Williams offered “Evered,” a serial about a homicidal bull, Lorimer capitulated. He printed it in three installments beginning February 21, 1920, and in addition took “Old Tantrybogus” for March 6. They were the vanguard of some threescore to appear in the *Post*, many on Costain's investigation. Williams planned several as a series within a series, a septology structured on the Seven Deadly Sins. In his presentation copy of *Hostile Valley* to Kenneth Roberts, he wrote: “Evered was anger, *The Rational Hind* was pride, *Mischief* was envy, ‘A Man of Plot’ was covetousness, and this was a try at lust. Gluttony and Sloth were never written.” (Elsewhere he joked, “because they came too close to home.”) In another instance, he attempted to hang a Fraternity tale on the thread of *Hamlet* but abandoned the idea when too many influences

12 Two comments by Williams on this score are noteworthy. In the preface to his *Thrifty Stock and Other Stories* (New York, 1923): “The village called Fraternity is an actual one; and the surrounding countryside has a beauty which grows with long acquaintance. It is perhaps unnecessary to say that the characters are—with one exception—fictitious. The exception is Mr. A. L. McCarrison, better known as Bert. . . . He appears in some of the stories, under the name of Chet McAusland.” In a letter to Richard Thruelson, an editor of the *Post*, July 27, 1938: “The town of Fraternity, since you inquire, is bounded by Montville on the northwest, Morrill and Belmont on the northeast, Lincolnville on the southeast, and Appleton and Hope on the southwest. In other words, in these Fraternity stories I have used the town of Searsmont, Maine, and the immediately surrounding locale.”

13 *Now I'll Tell One*, 258.

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from the original kept forcing themselves into his revival.

Costain's first letters to Williams were models of discretionary and strategic praise. Suggesting a change in text, always potentially explosive, he exhibited utmost deference to Williams' judgment; soliciting a story with political motif, he carefully appended, "We understand, of course, that you prefer to follow your own bent and write whatever story happens to be in the front of your mind"; relating to *Pascal's Mill*, "We all feel that it is perhaps the best work you have done. Certainly, in some respects, it surpasses any of your previous stories." In May 1921 Williams broached to Lorimer a series of short stories treating each of the commandments in the Decalogue, and here Costain best illustrated his function as buffer for The Boss.

After Lorimer had read and reacted to Williams' projection of the Decalogue series, Costain took over. First the agreeable angle. Lorimer, he reported, "was tremendously impressed with the magnitude of the idea." Then the onerous view, which he took upon himself. "I hope you are going to find it possible to treat these stories as a serial and complete them all before offering them for publication." Williams sent in the first five stories, and Costain delicately straddled Lorimer's explicit disapproval and Williams' possible indignation. "I think it would be better to say frankly that Mr. Lorimer feels that the stories are uneven." One he thought was "handled with great strength," two others "sound" but not up to his "highest mark," the fourth "too sketchy" and allegorical, the last "not on a level" with the rest. "It would be necessary therefore to do considerable re-writing." Once again he pressed the issue of employing "a single character throughout" or "a common narrator," this time under Lorimer's aegis. Having exposed the iron, he now donned the velvet. "We hope that you will not misunderstand our viewpoint or misinterpret our purpose." He hoped the series when completed would be published in the *Post*. In a postscript he further softened Lorimer's censures. "By the way, if you don't see your way clear to following Mr. Lorimer's suggestion, could you meet it by laying each story in the same locality?" Williams did not see his way clear. Costain cheered him for pursuing his own plan, which "seems to be the best one." The series went to *Collier's*. In this instance the catalyst failed to mollify the active elements.

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In the next four years Williams' appearances in the *Post* reached their numerical peak, specifically, eight titles in 1923, sixteen in 1924, twelve in 1925, and twenty-one (his highest overall total) in 1926. Skepticism over his expanding vogue and concern over his literary integrity marked the first half of this period. It struck Williams as ironic that "In the year since I had determined to write stories that would not sell, every story I wrote had sold, and the price the *Post* paid me for short stories had doubled!"<sup>14</sup> He reasoned that "If the editors thought too well of my stories, there must be something wrong with them. I re-read a dozen or so, decided that their interest depended too much on plot, and began to reduce plot to a minimum. Mr. Lorimer of the *Post* objected, and his objections could not be taken lightly; but I continued to write what I chose, and found a decided satisfaction in producing an occasional almost plotless story so good that Mr. Lorimer felt constrained to buy it."<sup>15</sup> But gloating was not enough. "Just as in 1920 I had changed the character of my work in order to avoid what seemed to me a dangerous popularity with the moving picture studios, so now I deliberately put into effect another change in order to avoid what seemed to me a dangerous popularity with magazine editors."<sup>16</sup> He agonized over the plotlessness of *The Rational Hind*, the dullness of "The Ancient Landmark," the slowness of *Immortal Longings* and "The Eftest Way," sure no one would buy them.<sup>17</sup> But the *Post* took them all, two of the titles were later issued as books, and one collected in the anthology, *Classics of the American Shooting Field*.

Bob Davis, his action-oriented mentor of the past, told Williams he no longer wrote good stories, he was a slave to his interest in character. As though in direct repudiation, Williams enunciated these three points of his new literary creed in the *Post* of October 18, 1924 (p. 54):

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>15</sup> Ben Ames Williams, *American Notes* (unpublished autobiography), 107.

<sup>16</sup> *All About Da*, 110.

<sup>17</sup> About this unavoidable catch of authorship he wrote: "My judgment of my own stories from the point of view of salability has always been bad. Of all my short stories, readers have seemed to prefer "Homework," "Old Loving-Kindness," "Sheener," and "Solitude." In each case, I kept the stories on hand for a long time after I had written them. . . . In each case I refrained from offering these stories because I thought them probably unsalable. They pleased me as stories, but I did not expect them to please editors. Once the stories had been published, however, I was not surprised that readers liked them" (*Now I'll Tell One*, 306).

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I have tried for some years to hang all my stories on at least two pegs: The one, character; and the other, drama in the eternal sense of the word. It seems to me thus possible to approach most closely to a recognizable portrait of life.

I cannot help feeling that since continued popularity is immortality, so present popularity, unless it demonstrably results from unworthy causes, creates at least a presumption of merit. I would rather write a best seller which the critics scorned than a story which they applauded but which left the people cold.

But I would rather write a story which seemed good to me, whatever others thought of it, than any other sort at all; and by that rule I run.

He was categorically devoted to “experimental work of one kind or another” now, and reconciled to popularity—from a worthy cause.

Williams acceded less testily to requests that he cut his texts, agreeing, for example, that two pages of exposition about a worm farm were dispensable in a short story. Costain turned just a trifle tougher in criteria during the middle twenties but stayed flexible and commendatory in language. He told Williams The Boss considered one of his mystery stories “a bear” and chimed in that the method of telling was “absolutely new.” He urged Williams to diminish Reynolds’ intermediation by letting the *Post* see *all* his stories first—“We generally find that an agent who makes up his mind as to what we want and what we don’t want is wrong four times out of five.” By the end of the year he was complimenting Williams on the “grand lot of fiction” he had provided. “I imagine you have broken nearly all records in 1924.” Over and above the twelve short stories and four serials in the *Post*, Williams had published nine short stories, two serials, and an article in *Collier’s*, *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Country Gentleman*, *Liberty*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman’s Home Companion*, and *Outdoor America*.

1925-1926 were highwater years for the *Post* in respect to growth and prosperity, as they were emphatically for Williams. His reputation spread to the point where he began to be the target for con men and impersonators. He received one letter, in care of the *Post*, from an irate Southerner demanding that he return and marry his jilted daughter; he was reported killed in New Mexico, also working incognito as a farmhand in the Mid-

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west; he was dunned for his son's alleged nonpayment of rent in New York City (Ben Jr. was eight years old at the time). In both years Costain, obviously fronting for Lorimer, attempted to dissuade Williams from his casual line of storytelling. Admitting that there had been no slackening of reader interest in the Fraternity stories, and that there was no question about the value in the Fraternity location, he nonetheless carped on how "continuously" Williams had been writing them, and that "a change of base might be advisable for a time." He allayed the stricture by assuring Williams that the *Post* always got the "best kind" of response from Fraternity stories, and that he could go back to them anytime later on, "of course."

Costain also nibbled at Williams' stories outside the Fraternity fold. Along with rejecting "The Question Puller" in May 1926 (taken by the *Elks Magazine*), Costain said:

You like to write stories around a single situation or idea; and although we like to have them in the *Post*, slender stories of the kind are not ideal for our purpose. There can be no doubt that the more plotty or substantial story goes better with the general reader. You have written three or four slender stories for us recently, and we felt that the list would not stand more of the kind.

We like to have you go your own gait, but perhaps you will pardon a suggestion this time. Give us a few plotty stories now . . .

Williams evidently concurred, for in the next week Costain purred: "We are never anxious to dictate the direction of an author's work, and we hope you will understand. . . . Glad to note . . . that you have some good plotty stories ready to sprout."

The meridian of 1926 was attained on October 9. In that issue of the *Post* appeared "Coconuts," a story fabricated around a mathematical problem for which Williams gave no solution. He later recalled that "The day after the story was published in the *Post*, letters and telegrams poured in on them in Philadelphia and on me. I had so many inquiries that I considered preparing a mimeographed reply." On the 11th Lorimer ejaculated happily, "Hell's apopping down here." On the 14th Miss Neall entered the picture, diverting to Williams epistles from agitated readers, at first in ones and twos, then in packets. "Say something soothing to Mr.—," she begged. Merritt Hurlburd, a staff editor, appealed for a few statistics—

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number of letters received, extremes of time spent in solving the puzzler, et cetera, which he wanted for public relations purposes. A month following the fateful debut, Miss Neall wrote: "We here in the office have about reached the stage where the very word 'coconuts' gives us an attack of nerves." Williams, to boot, continued getting letters on the subject for the next quarter-century. The furore left him modestly untouched. "Of course that flood of letters did not prove that the story was a particularly good one. It merely suggested that many people are interested in mathematical puzzles."<sup>18</sup> He undoubtedly was more gratified by the selection of "The Nurse" (in *Harper's*) as one of the *O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories of 1926*.<sup>19</sup>

The back side of the twenties witnessed Williams' undeterred climb to higher apices with the *Post*. Although acceptances declined in quantity, the prices now paid him set a record for monetary return in 1928. Pleasant encounters outnumbered the abrasive, but a perceptible difference of opinion developed during this era, a presage of future rift. Among the amiable incidents: "Old Loving-Kindness" (April 2, 1927) drew if not more letters than "Coconuts," at least "more letters of appreciation" than any short story Williams ever wrote; Lorimer, who had instituted a department of "Americana" in the *Post* to rebut the contention of H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan in the *American Mercury* that "everybody and everything in America [was] rotten," warmed to Williams' forthright support; he declared "Letters From Fraternity," written by Bert McCarrison and edited by Williams, "good Americana" and published it in six installments; on the closing day of 1928 Lorimer said to Williams, "I am glad to be on the list of those that you number among your friends. We have a long list of writers and a shorter list of those who are both writers and good friends, and you qualify near the top"; "Protect-Your-Men" (March 12, 1927) was collected in *The Best Short Stories of the World War*; Costain informed Williams that "a number of people around here" believed him to be "some new

18 *Ibid.*, 306-b.

19 He derived additional satisfaction when "Scapegoat," in the *Post* on November 7, 1925, was included in John Clair Minot's *The Best College Stories I Know* (Boston, 1931), and the following year in Grantland Rice's *The Omnibus of Sport* (New York).

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sort of machine with the capacity of turning out perfect copy.”

The debits, however, effectively balanced the account. For one, Costain became more assertive. He changed the title of one story seemingly on his own, and in another exacted a change in characterization—“which we believe you could undertake without hampering your literary conscience or anything of that kind”—not without a pinch of deprecation. He objected to Williams’ basal mode: “The descriptive episodes are always one of the best features of a Ben Ames Williams story, but the first galley is all description even now.” And in May 1928 he said it straight out to Williams, eyeball to eyeball: “We have been taking fewer stories the last three or four months and it has been due entirely to one thing. Your interest has been for the time being in psychological reactions and the story has been very slender. We like some stories of that kind but the number we can publish is necessarily limited.”

Williams tilted with Lorimer by proxy over “The Wild Ones,” a short story in which the character of the protagonist emerges through a discontinuous sequence of offhand revelations and a culminating analogy with wild natural creatures. All things being equal, Costain explained, Lorimer preferred direct narration. Williams stuck to his gun, convinced that the “thematic idea” was “more forcibly expressed” from the first-person stance. Shortly, the rumbling in the rear having subsided, Costain acquiesced, and the story was printed as originally cast. On the evidence of hundreds of letters between Williams and his editors, it must be said that he was a reasonable man, amenable to suggestion and quick to revise when criticism seemed legitimate. Yet he could turn adamant when his esthetic principles were affronted. Rather than argue, his usual recourse was to sell to another outlet, of which there was now an eager legion.

The first truly scarifying disappointment Williams suffered from the *Post* came in the spring of 1927 with its decision not to serialize *Splendor*. His work-journal entries disclose that he thought initially about this book in March 1921. Then he saturated himself in relevant authors (Hardy, Samuel Hopkins Adams, Herbert Quick, Dickens, Jack London, Balzac, Pepys, St. Teresa, Tolstoi), collected reams of preparatory notes, projected innumerable lines of narrative and sketches of characters,

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and expended inordinate stores of energy in the final composition. The project took on the nature of a totem for him: "It was my first attempt to express for publication the ideas which I was beginning to formulate." So, when Costain sent the negative news, it did not matter that he placatingly called the script "a big piece of work." Nor did it matter that Dutton snapped it up immediately and published it as a book. Williams looked to the *Post* as his lodestar. Now some of the light had expired.

Twice more in 1929 the *Post* saw fit to turn away long works by Williams. The ineligibility of *Touchstone*, a mystery yarn, did not appear to affect him markedly; he disposed of it as a serial to the *Ladies' Home Journal* and as a book to Dutton. He had brighter expectations for *Great Oaks*, a group of six associated tales about a Georgia island, in which he propounded a favorite thesis—the primacy of environmental over hereditary influence in the development of human psyche.

If there be an underlying theme in the tales I write it is most definitely expressed in this book; for I believe in the potency of place and the impotency of man. In my stories the physical background is usually stressed, because it seems to me usually to explain the character of the actors. The New Englander is as much the product of his rock acres and his bitter winters as is the southerner the result of his calm and pleasant land. . . . I believe that a wise eye, looking across a certain countryside, can with some certainty predict what manner of men he will find dwelling there.<sup>20</sup>

Not strictly scientific, to be sure, but what today is called gut reaction—which makes for headier writers, like Hemingway as against, say, Spilhaus.

The trend of negotiations over *Great Oaks* was somewhat Florentine. In April Costain twice professed his and Lorimer's ardor for "the idea," which kept "looking better to us all the time." Whatever form the series took in Williams' mind, he insisted, would be entirely satisfactory to them. "If a story refused to tell itself in anything less than two or three part length, it must be given its head." After several intermediary exchanges on the subject, Williams mailed the completed series to Lorimer on July 12. The same day, Costain reported from Williams' camp on Lake Winnepesaukee in New Hampshire: "I have read it, and feel that it comes pretty close to being Mr. Williams'

<sup>20</sup> Stanley J. Kunitz, *Authors Today and Yesterday* (New York, 1933), 699.



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best work. . . . I am quite keen about this story personally." Ten days later, on the contrary, Lorimer returned it to Williams with more praise and apologetics than was his wont. "It has had four readings here in the office," he went on, "and we are all in agreement that it will not serialize." Where Costain stood in this final adjudication, the correspondence does not make clear. In a roundabout way Williams learned that Lorimer decried the script as "too dull for utterance." That the book was instantly distributed by Dutton in America and Stanley Paul in England, and that it proved one of his better sellers were bitter-sweet victories for Williams.

Most of the residue of resentment was flushed away when in October 1929 Costain inquired desirously about Fraternity—"we are beginning to get letters from readers who would like more." Now Williams was solidly ensconced in his own creative predilections, so the *Post's* editorial ambivalence toward these easygoing stories no longer jolted him. He had ready patrons for them elsewhere. Notwithstanding, the stories had got their impetus and achieved household fame through the *Post*, and he preferred to place them there. He was unquestionably pleased to see their early resumption.

An event of prime significance to Williams' future occurred as the twenties closed out. Reynolds severed his partnership with Harold Ober, and Williams chose to go along with Ober as his agent on a trial basis. Ober (who handled F. Scott Fitzgerald, among others) promptly demonstrated his aptitude through the duple sale of *Great Oaks*. He became and remained Williams' author representative for the rest of his life. At the outset Williams ruled unequivocally that he would deal directly with Curtis Publishing Company magazines—the *Post*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Country Gentleman*. On his side, Ober started indoctrinating Williams toward two major shifts in *modus operandi*: 1) "It will be a good thing for you, and the *Saturday Evening Post* as well, to have stories of yours appearing in other magazines"; 2) "I don't think any editor is apt to buy a difficult story when he feels quite sure that the moment he declines a story that he will get another offered to him." A compound of astute business tactics with sure advantages for agent as for client, and a beneficial brake on Williams' hyperabundance if acted upon. Ober's advices reformed Williams'

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procedures less than did his own drive toward newer objectives in the writing of fiction. At any rate, Ober guided him expertly through one of the most trying periods of American history, the Great Depression of the thirties.

The full impact of the stock market crash of 1929 did not rattle the world of the *Saturday Evening Post* until well past the middle of 1930. Receipts in the first six months showed a drop of some 5% from the corresponding half in the previous year, but a successful campaign of newspaper advertising staved off any tendency to panic. Oddly, of all topics to come to the fore at this time, the question of a raise in rates consumed the attention of Williams and the top command at the *Post* for four months.

On May 8 Costain put it to Williams plainly: "I have talked to Mr. Lorimer about price. Although he feels that this is a bad time to consider increases in view of the uncertainty of business conditions, he is going to tilt the ante some." Then began a protracted interchange of proposals, agreements, reconsiderations, concessions, withdrawals, conciliations and, finally, tacit compromise. Williams simply expressed hope that the raise for short stories be "a substantial one." Lorimer did not want Williams to be dissatisfied. Costain mentioned a figure 50% higher than Williams' current price, though injecting the proviso that Williams send more stories of "the plotty type" and fewer on "character development." He added candidly that the latter were "not worth the larger price." If Williams "could square it with [his] literary conscience . . . we would be only too delighted to put the increase into effect on the next story." Williams acknowledged this dichotomy in his work. In defense he cited one of his character stories taken by the *Post* which was superior to one of his action stories also taken by the *Post*. He suggested they pay the full increase for stories they "like" and only half the increase for those they did not like "quite so well." Lorimer, through Costain, allowed that this was the "most practical" solution, "so we will leave it at that." As it turned out, no short story ever rated the full increase. Williams, who had left himself more or less on the mercy of the court throughout (I "have no inclination to bargain or haggle"), raised no commotion. With an audible sigh of relief, Costain nudged the subject into limbo. "You are certainly taking a

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most fair attitude about this matter of price and I can tell you we appreciate it. We are getting rather hardened to the other method—the wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

During the twenties Williams contributed eighty-one short stories, twenty-six serials, an autobiographical sketch, and the edition of McCarrison's letters to the *Post*. The decade of the thirties witnessed a sharp quantitative drop: forty-eight short stories, six serials, and seven articles. Two forces largely determined this diminution: the contracting economy and Williams' expanding vision. As the number of solvent banks in the nation shrank, so did the size of the *Post*. From a long-time average of over two hundred pages per issue, by 1933 some comprised only sixty pages, with twelve to fifteen given over to advertisements. Profits dwindled proportionately. When Williams grumbled about the price paid him for an article, the *Post* righteously took a hard stand: “The literary market is distinctly bearish at the present time. Some of the magazines have been rather hard hit and are not buying. The result is that prices are showing a tendency to come down for the first time since the dizzy climb began about six years ago. This is natural enough, and fair enough.” Costain twice paraphrased Lorimer to the effect that the *Post* was being generous, considering the state of things. Despite the stark reversal of circumstance, Lorimer obdurately held to prior principles which had exalted the *Post* as “the biggest nickel's worth in the country.”

The seven predominantly autobiographical articles by Williams in 1930 and 1933 signaled a definite transition in his literary aims. The metamorphosis of his method of turning out a script aptly defines the ultimate direction his writing took. At the very beginning he used a typewriter; his sentences were too short.<sup>21</sup> He next experimented with dictation; his sentences were too long. “Now,” he told a reporter for the *Utica Observer Dispatch* in 1941, “I do it in longhand and each sentence is about the right length.” Translated to conceptual terms: his first method resulted in the great spate of short stories that stamped his presence in the field; his second method produced

21 In this connection, an anecdote related by Tebbel (p. 73) richly illustrates the hypersensitive relationship between Lorimer and Williams. Lorimer had an aversion to stories he thought were too short. “Nobody can really tell a story in less than three thousand words,” he remarked. “De Maupassant did,” Williams reminded him. “De Maupassant's dead,” retorted Lorimer curtly.

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the swarm of two-parters against whose awkward length the *Post* and other periodicals so strenuously inveighed; his third method proved ideal for the cluster of novels milling in the back of his head as the thirties advanced. The scenario is unfolded too neatly here, of course, but Williams' maturation as a writer did intrinsically follow these broad lines from his novitiate "The Wings of Lias" (1915) to his posthumous *The Unconquered* (1953).<sup>22</sup>

Until Costain's departure from the *Post* in 1934, the mixture as before prevailed. Costain continued to congratulate Williams on his "plotty" stories and reprove him for the "character" pieces. Williams submitted some forty titles as possibilities for one of his sea yarns, among them "Pirate's Purchase." Lorimer settled on one of the drabbest, "Make-Believe," for *Post* publication. When Dutton brought out the book as *Pirate's Purchase*, Williams enjoyed another of his tiny triumphs. The *Post* decreed that *Honeyflow* had no prospects as a serial; Dutton thereupon launched it as a book. Score one more for Williams. His reminder about the full pay raise for short stories ("hard times or no hard times") roused Lorimer to asperity: "Costain has passed the buck and your letter . . . to me. Speaking purely from the economic point of view, let me say that I believe writers are today the most fortunate class in America. . . . Now, though we are not planning to reduce prices, we certainly can see no basis for increasing them at this time. . . . I like your work and I value you as a contributor, but, as you will appreciate, I have to watch both sides of the scales."

Williams proliferated ideas for stories at the start of the 30s decade—a David Harum character in Fraternity, a murder mystery in Fraternity, a Utopian tale, a serial à la d'Artagnan, a crook story, a projected novel on a modern Napoleon, an adventure yarn about a mendacious Maine guide. All very well, but Costain warned him that the *Post* was "pretty well loaded up" with material and was "buying only those that hit us pretty hard." The rate of rejection began a long and steady surge. "These are tough times" became the slightly variable dirge. The summer numbers of 1931 were drastically reduced in bulk,

<sup>22</sup> A lesser factor operating in Williams' swing away from short stories was purely practical: "the work involved in writing eight short stories is certainly much greater than that in writing one serial," he told Costain. At current rates, it was better business to concentrate on longer fiction.

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with "some sweeping cuts in prices" to authors. For three of the first four years in this period Williams managed to swim unchecked against the current, faltering a bit in 1932, regaining his wind in 1933. Indicatively, four of his ten acceptances that year were non-fiction. He tried to recapture the exhilarating reader response to "Coconuts" through a similar mental teaser based on the algebraic fallacy that 1 equals 2. Costain advised him to trim out the algebra and beef up the plot, which Williams did, to no avail. He changed the title and sold "The Meddler" to a lesser source several years later. However, Williams did attract bales of sentimental mail by his *Post* story at this time, "The Shape of Fear," wherein a dog attacks and kills his master.

Williams wrangled with Lorimer over both the price and the length of "The Crutle." After first palming off the dispute to Costain, Lorimer set his foot down firmly: "You are under a misapprehension with regard to the two-part story," he wrote Williams. "It is our *bête noire*, and I should be glad never to print another one, as it falls between two stools. It fails to satisfy the part of our constituency that reads only short stories, or the confirmed serial readers who apparently want something that will carry them along for four, five or six issues." Having classified it as neither fish nor fowl, he nevertheless printed it in the *Post* as a two-parter, at his original figure. Ironically, Carolyn Wells sought it out for her annual anthology, *The Best American Mystery Stories of the Year*.

Behind the scenes, Ober kept up a drumming obligato of admonitions and proposals. Patently, the *Post* was "heavily stocked," so why persist in thrusting stories at it only to be rejected? He assured Williams that Lorimer might resent his authors defecting to *Collier's* which he viewed as a direct rival, but not to *Liberty* or *Cosmopolitan* or others, which he did not. Despite occasional scuffles and rebuffs, the *Post* still ranked at the top in Williams' estimation. Following some months of contemplative silence, he explained that "When I have finished a story which seems to me good *Post* stuff, and when I know that if they like it the whole transaction will be cleaned up within a week," then he'd rather let the *Post* have "first shot."<sup>23</sup>

23 Without its knowledge, the *Post* underwent a poetic irony. Having had first refusal of Williams' stories for years, in 1932 it bought "The Sedative" after *Cosmopolitan* had rejected it.

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When Ober faced him with a request from *Redbook*, Williams retorted that he would be glad to sell it a story, but not one "potentially good enough for the *Post*, unless the bargain was . . . at least equal to that which the *Post* would give me." For an obverse instance, about a bridge serial returned by a number of magazines as "too technical," he expressed himself "reasonably sure that it could readily be revised and made saleable to the *Post*." The image of the *Post* which he had formulated as an aspirant to its inner circle and which he had embellished over fifteen years as a favored contributor refused to disintegrate under the blasts of a new reality.

Conditions in the publishing business worsened decidedly as the thirties proceeded. Advertising rates fell, postal rates rose; the *Post* became "quite thin" by past standards, its copy list bloated; Curtis dividends were cut, as were authors' prices—Williams no exception. Stories came back from the *Post* faster and more frequently, one for being "almost in article form," a second for weakness in "trade lingo," and more and more because of the pervading "full list." Although Costain undoubtedly meant to be helpful, his summation in April 1932 had an aura of the moribund about it: "We would like to see stories every so often . . . it would be fairer to you if we did not ask to see everything that you do in short length. My suggestion would be that you do some short stories with the *Journal* and the *Gent* in mind as alternative markets." In June he notified Williams of a 20% cutback in the rate he had been receiving, simultaneously slicing an additional 20% from the price for "The Sedative" ("a little thing in story interest") and a total 60% below the usual level for "Chet McAusland of Fraternity" ("not in reality a story"). To all this Williams reacted as to a grand equestrian abruptly unhorsed. "Of course I am glad to play along in any way I can. I think you know that I've always preferred to sell to you people." If it would help, he said, he would accept part payment in Curtis stock, an arrangement not possible under the company's financial setup.

In his *American Notes* (pp. 107-108) Williams reviewed these parlous events with a blend of puzzlement and subdued umbrage. "My chief satisfaction for some years had come from writing stories which the editors accepted under protest, but I suddenly found myself unable to write stories which the editors

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would buy at all. . . . I wrote . . . more and more; but I sold less and less." He worked out a strategy and revealed it to Ober. He would curtail offerings to the *Post*, stockpile some for the future, and send others to Ober. "Of course if you happen to make any sales, even at reduced prices, I shall be pleased." Decisions by the *Post* in 1933 were mostly adverse. He rerouted a number of short stories to other magazines, and Dutton published *Hostile Valley*, a novel about Fraternity.

Actuated by the phenomenal popularity of Earl Derr Biggers' Charlie Chan and Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu, Costain tried to incite Williams to emulation. "The public just naturally like stories in which an Oriental character appears." Williams mulled over briefly his past efforts at intermittent serials (Inspector Tope, the Headmaster, Fraternity) and concluded that, except for the last, work in such vein did not suit his temperament. "Frankly," he wrote back to Costain, "I don't believe I'm up to the job," giving as major reasons his incapacity to handle oriental character or to invent orient sayings (never having known a Chinese or Japanese national), and his misdoubt that "the mere presence of a Chinaman as a leading figure in a story has quite as much selling power as you think." That was Costain's last editorial impulsion to Williams as a staff member of the *Post*. For the remainder of 1934 the necessity to reject ran so high that Costain resumed his early tack of telling Williams, whenever he could accept a story, "It is one of the best you have sent us in quite a long while." At the end of August he announced he was leaving the *Post* for a position with Fox Films.

Lorimer and Costain had never really learned to live with each other in fourteen years of propinquity. Their relationship was subliminally taut. To Costain, Lorimer represented retardation, a bar to the top; to Lorimer, Costain seemed inordinately eager to take command. Lorimer respected Costain's proficiency and left the *Post* in his hands while he was away, not however without sheets of itemized instructions, nor without keeping in constant contact, once cabling Adelaide Neall, "Is anybody dead have we discontinued publication?" Costain, who all along knew his own strength, chafed under such stringency, had once before resigned in a huff but retracted on Lorimer's entreaty. Now he left for Hollywood, later inaugurated

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the *American Cavalcade* monthly, then became an editor at Doubleday, Doran & Co. In all these capacities he regularly solicited Williams for viable materials. Their correspondence petered out in the forties when Costain renounced the editorial yoke to free himself for the more lucrative writing of historical romances, soon taking his place in the front row of bestsellers with *The Black Rose*, *The Moneyman*, and *The Silver Chalice*.

With Costain's exodus from the *Post*, Williams fell into the jurisdiction of editors Wesley W. Stout, Erdmann Brandt, and Lorimer's son Graeme. After several rejections by the first two, of stories too "thin" and "lacking action," Graeme principally assumed the duty of handling Williams' scripts. His letters are a chronicle of diminishing acceptances, which he conveyed with deference (due Williams as an old hand) and finality (due the magazine as a canted vessel). Before 1934 was out he reported unfavorably on eight stories—because of retroactive viewpoint, too obvious conclusion, too late for the football season, unconvincing motivation, lack of love interest—before one caught hold. George Lorimer, whose opinions Graeme adverted to more than once, came to the fore in October and again in December to dulcify Williams after rejection of a Fraternity piece. "There is no reason why you should not write an occasional Fraternity story," he urged, "provided you have a good strong plot for it. Atmosphere and background were a help to the earlier stories, but we have so thoroughly covered the ground round Fraternity that I think in future stories the dependence will have to be on the story itself." He was rubbing directly against the grain of Williams' intent in these deliberately lyrical tales. Lorimer must have thought he made amends by buying "The Idolator" as the year ended.

To Ober, Williams confessed complete frustration and some sadness over his impaired situation with the magazine: "I have quit trying to guess what the *Post* will or will not do," he wrote. "They are sometimes pretty slow in deciding on a story now, and it has worked out for the last year or so that I seldom offer them more than two stories a month." Matters improved a trifle in 1935 (seven acceptances) and remained virtually stagnant in 1936 (six). Not yet ready to forsake the field, Williams condensed and revised stories voted down by the *Post* and sent them to Ober, with occasionally a script not seen by the *Post*.<sup>24</sup>



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His market, dominated for a dozen years by the *Post*, dilated again to include more frequently *Collier's*, *Country Gentleman*, *Redbook*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Women's Pictorial*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Bridge World*, *Progressive Farmer*, *The Writer*, *New York Sunday News*, *Portland Sunday Telegram*, and the *Boston Traveller*. Ober found it expedient now and again to sell at somewhat lower prices but he took precaution that these decrements did not hurt Williams' rates "in other quarters."

Graeme Lorimer, always specific about grounds for rejection ("you once said that you preferred reasons to polite evasions . . . so I'm taking you at your word"), explained that improbabilities of plot and two-dimensional characterizations in *Crucible* enjoined it for *Post* usage; Houghton Mifflin issued it as a novel. When Graeme was occupied elsewhere, it befell Brandt to pass the *Post's* judgments along to Williams. Two clichés earmarked his letters: 1) "In Mr. Graeme Lorimer's absence it is my unpleasant duty to return this story"; 2) "Needless to say, we appreciate having had the opportunity of reading it." Repeated *ad nauseam*, they must have irritated Williams more acutely than the routine declination. The one silver note among all this dissonance was struck by Adelaide Neall, who wrote nostalgically about "Coconuts": "I still receive six or eight letters a year from persons who have turned their hair gray, puzzling over this thing."

Still in the fullness of his vigor, George Horace Lorimer announced his retirement from the *Post* in a signed editorial on December 26, 1936. Privy to this news before public release, Williams sent him a three-page, single-spaced letter, most of which merits reproduction here for overtones revelatory of both men's natures.

December 21, 1936

Dear Mr. Lorimer:

I suspect that you and I just now have one feeling in common; the feeling that something which has been for a great many years apparently permanent and unshakable is about to end. Even though your withdrawal from the editorship of the *Post* is by choice, I suspect you

<sup>24</sup> Ober, ever ardent about extending Williams' territory, responded with alacrity: "I think it would be a good thing for the *Post* to occasionally see a story in another magazine, which they have not seen. If they know that they are seeing absolutely everything of yours first, they may be a little too casual about declining stories."

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must have, in advance of the fact, a sense of loss, a feeling that a great part of yourself is gone forever. . . .

I first became acquainted with the *Saturday Evening Post* so long ago that I do not remember whether it was before or after 1900. My Grandfather Williams lived in a little town named Oak Hill, Ohio; and my father, and his brother, and his four sisters were all pretty avid readers. . . . I remember discovering once when I spent a summer at my grandfather's home—in the disused attic, what seems to me in retrospect to have been a great heap of magazines, and most of those magazines were either *Lippincott's* or the *Saturday Evening Post*. My recollection of the latter may be faulty, but I remember it as not much more than a large leaflet, in which I nevertheless found a great many things the reading of which gave me pleasure.

From the time of my marriage in 1912, until we built our present home in 1923, I bought and kept at least one copy of every issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*; and in our house in Newtonville they were all arranged in order on shelves built for their accommodation. . . .

I'm not sure how long ago it was that I began to identify you with the *Post*, or the *Post* with you. Mr. Reynolds sold you one of my stories for the first time in 1917, and I remember what a kick I had from that sale. The story was called "The Mate of the Susie Oakes," and had to do with the whale fisheries. It may have been sold to you in the latter part of 1916, but I remember that it was published in April 1917, because I found it in a copy of the *Post* which I bought on the way home from Ohio, just after the United States entered the War. It was hidden away in the back part of the magazine in a sort of apologetic manner; and, as I recall it, a paragraph or two, either at the end or the beginning, had been dropped out bodily for "make-up" reasons.

A good many years later, I used the word "tremorous" in a story, and the proof reader queried it and suggested "tremulous" instead. I was quite aware that there was no such word in the dictionary as "tremorous," and yet it seemed to me then—and does now—a good word in the spot where I used it. So I crossed out the "tremulous" on the proofs. However, when the story appeared, "tremulous" it was.

On another occasion, I described in one of my stories a cribbage game at the climactic point involving a matter of pegging out; and for some reason—presumably a question of space—two paragraphs were condensed into one in the story, by someone in your office, with the result that the dealer of that particular hand was said in the story to have failed to score a single point. Every cribbage player knows that the dealer must always peg at least one point, and probably a dozen people wrote me to complain about the mistake I had made.

I think those three occasions are the only ones upon which any change in one of my stories has been made in the *Post* office. Certainly they are the only ones I have ever noticed. Which is one of the reasons why writers, during your many years as Editor there, have preferred publication in the *Post* above other magazines.

This letter set out simply to offer you and Mrs. Lorimer and Graeme the Compliments of the Season, and I apologize for writing at such

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length! But I could not resist expressing the sense of personal loss I feel in anticipation of your retirement, and the regret I have always felt that, in spite of our numerous professional contacts, I have not had an opportunity to know you personally more intimately. I have always felt that you and I have fundamentally the same point of view toward the fundamental things in human life. It may be that I acquired it from you. Certainly it has been a part of my own character for many years. . . .

Cordially yours,  
Ben Ames Williams

The tensility of their long relationship is easily inferred. To the end they addressed each other by their last names.

On the last day of that year Lorimer answered graciously: "I, too, have many pleasant memories of our long association, and I shall look forward to seeing you from time to time in the future, as when I return from my vacation I shall have a little more leisure and a chance to circulate more freely." There is no record that they did indeed meet again. When Lorimer died in October 1937, Williams dipped into his great store of affective humanity and characterized the editor appreciatively for Mrs. Lorimer:

I never knew him so well as I wished to, but I never saw him without feeling for days afterward a definite and stimulating reaction from that contact.

Each of us is apt to discover in the individuals we meet some particular trait which may or may not really exist; but it always seemed to me that the fundamental thing in Mr. Lorimer was that he was shy, that he had the embarrassed simplicity of a boy. Probably this is largely my imagination, but I always felt it very strongly in talking with him; and certainly it was never his stature as a man which impressed me so much as what seemed to me his simplicity. . . . It always seemed to me that his strength lay in the fact that the magnificent dimensions of his own life and career had never distorted his sense of proportion in the least degree.

At the *Post* a new era was taking shape. Lorimer had designated Wesley Winans Stout to take his place as editor in chief, and he had been duly installed. Unlike his predecessor, from whom all decision flowed, Stout leaned to a collective, consultative approach with his associate editors Graeme Lorimer, Erdmann Brandt, Richard Thruelson, Martin Sommers, W. Thornton Martin for art, and Miss Neall. Despite Brandt's suasive remarks ("our readers have missed you in the book. . . . Noth-

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ing would give us more pleasure than to have you back. . . . Personally, I have a hunch it won't be long"), Williams fared dismally under the new system. In all of 1937 he placed precisely one short story with the *Post* (low mark since 1921), and a total of eight short stories and one two-parter in the remaining four years of Stout's regime. This anecdote recounted by Williams in his *American Notes* (p. 108) adroitly exhumes the strains of failure, chagrin, *idée fixe*, and illusory desire that wracked his mind at that time.

In 1937, I finished a long serial called *Crucible*. No magazine would buy it, but Houghton Mifflin agreed to publish it as a book. I was summoned to a "sales conference" and Ferris Greenslet asked:

"Mr. Williams, your latest serial was published in the *Post* when?"

"In 1933."

"And what have you been doing since then!"

"Trying," I told him, "to write another serial which the *Post* would buy."

When his fiction fell on barren ground, Williams tried to sell non-fiction to the *Post* with as little success. Discovery of a bona fide first edition of Poe's *Tamerlane* in a Skowhegan, Maine, attic jogged a comprehensive essay on its history out of him. The original and two recasts were turned down. He next based a short story upon actual incidence. Brandt sent back the verdict: overlong, anticlimactic. Williams inserted a variant ending ("I have already tried a dozen different ways to wind up this story") which the *Post* group approved, and so "Come-Uppance," a neo-Flying Dutchman experience, made the grade. He wondered if the *Post* would be interested in an article about curling, a Scottish game then gaining some currency in Canada and New England, which he had taken up zealously. No, the *Post* would not, but had he considered its possibilities as a back-ground for fiction? Yes, he had, and proceeded to incorporate it into a story. The *Post* returned it. Stout asked Williams if he had any "present-day, non-mystery" serials fermenting. Williams quickly provided a two-page synopsis about a bitch-wife and mother who ruins the lives of her husband and four daughters, and as quickly withdrew it when it did not "seem to write." He proposed another, which eventuated as *Time of Peace*; it too never took root in the pages of the *Post*.

Two matters of lateral importance overhung the months of

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July and August 1939. The first revolved around the *Post's* desire to publish a biography of Will Rogers by his widow. She consented to do it without collaborator but soon learned that she needed help. She asked for Williams, whom she had met in Hollywood during her husband's filming of Williams' "Jubilo." Followed now a protracted, labyrinthian series of negotiations and maneuvers between Mrs. Rogers and the *Post*, and the *Post* and Williams, rather reminiscent of last year's Howard Hughes cabal without the smear of fraud. The *Post* opted for a full-scale, formal biography; Mrs. Rogers held out for a selective, anecdotal frame. The *Post* arranged meetings between her and Williams; she turned skittish and avoided them. The *Post* offered Williams a stated sum in payment; Mrs. Rogers felt it would detract from her own total. Telegrams flew back and forth. Subsidiary rights were questioned. Her indecision deepened. She now stipulated that her collaborator not be a "name." Williams bowed out after a couple of fruitless trips in midsummer to New York and Philadelphia. "Uncle Clem's Boy" by Betty Blake Rogers finally appeared in the *Post* in eight parts (October-November 1940) pretty much in form, point of view, and idiom as she had specified, no collaborator cited.

The second episode bristled with potentials for serious legal altercation but Williams' affable attitude rendered it small potatoes. Stout informed him that a story called "Wooden Nickels" in the *Chicago Daily News* was a manifest piracy of Williams' "Nutmeg Burley" in the *Post* of November 12, 1938. Did he wish the *Post* to write or would he take action himself? Williams agreed that copying had been done, "However, I don't feel particularly indignant about it." He knew a chap who wrote daily short stories for a Boston paper for a pittance, and under such pressure "it seems to me not surprising that ethical considerations might occasionally be forgotten." In any case, since the *Post* owned the serial rights, it was their affair. Stout did admonish the *Daily News*, though less about the "shoplifting" than the probable low pay to the poor hack. So died a tempest in a teacup.

Williams appeared in the *Post* only three times in 1939, the third story portentously titled "Times Have Changed." The next year was drearier, rejections numbering at least twenty-two,

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with only one acceptance. After prolonged haggling over reductions in length (Williams made three), numerous “perhaps minor changes,” and “unnecessary sex implications,” Brandt announced that the entire staff was now in accord over “My Grandmother’s Leg.” Williams took time out to recapitulate. He had started off by writing short stories, intentionally concentrating in the genre because he usually earned more for a story than for a book. As he grew older, however, he tended to write longer and longer stories; he had more to say and he wished to do more with his characters. Often he would begin a short story and wind up with a serial. Editors, on the other hand, were demanding shorter and shorter stories. “The big weeklies more and more imitate the picture magazines. They’ll all be down to one word on a page one of these days,” Williams grumbled to an interviewer. He attributed his loss of love for the short story partly to over-anxiety when he could not sell them during the depression, partly to his having “lost the touch,” and partly to their not being “fun any more.”<sup>25</sup> To another newspaperman he explained his disaffection in another way. He had become extremely “tired of the necessary cutting for a short story—so I gave up short story writing and let myself go with novels.”<sup>26</sup>

For decades Williams had circumvented the concept of writing a novel initially as a book. His first eleven books were reprints of ten magazine serials and one collection of previously published short stories. *Splendor* (1927) was his first pristine volume to the public, although it too had been intended as a serial. The same pattern held for his next sixteen books. Not until *Come Spring* (1940) did he consciously envision a novel as a unit. “There was so much respect in my family for books,” he told van Gelder (p. 26), “that—well, the idea that I could write anything so impressive as a book did not occur to me until I was well along in my thirties. It was only after publishers had been putting hard covers on my stories for a number of years that I decided to make a try as a novelist.” This was his admissible fraction of the motivation. The other—1941 was his apocalyptic year with the *Post*. His final story, with

25 Robert van Gelder, “An Interview With Mr. Ben Ames Williams,” *New York Times Book Review* (February 14, 1943), 2, 26.

26 William H. Clark, “Ben Ames Williams Hides Away at Dawn to Write His Books,” *Boston Sunday Globe* (November 12, 1944), 3.

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the wryly prophetic title of "Road Discontinued," appeared in the magazine on February 8. Once or twice yearly until 1950 he half-heartedly turned out a tale for other periodicals, but with his severance from the *Post* Williams' days as a writer of short stories consequentially ended.

The doleful last words were left for Adelaide Neall to intone. In three letters from June to September she tiptoed exquisitely over his feelings (she had been with him from the beginning, twenty-five years back), setting forth in excusatory phrases the several reasons his fiction no longer suited the *Post*, now desperately reaching for a new readership in times of headlong socio-cultural change. She pinpointed length as his premier handicap, also competition from the largely pictorial *Life* magazine, the expanding attraction of radio, and the frenetic pace induced by imminent war. "I still believe sincerely that you are going to write stories for us and I know you can," she assured, at the next breath having to concur with "the rest of the staff" that his stuff was inadequate to the newer needs. Into his private journal Williams impressed his own thoughts at year end: "Except for the May-June spree in recoil from *The Strange Woman*—I wrote no magazine fiction. . . . I am now bent on writing books, novels, rather than stories, and see no immediate likelihood that I will write another short story." His face was to the wind now and he sped resolutely in his chosen direction. In the remaining thirteen years of his life he produced nine books, including his best known—*The Strange Woman*, *Leave Her to Heaven*—and his best—*House Divided*, *Owen Glen*, *The Unconquered*.

It is arguable that the determining vector in Williams' life as a writer was the *Saturday Evening Post*. He had commenced writing fiction without preconceptions or pretensions, assertedly to fill in wasteful hours and turn an honest dollar. He might have hunkered down smugly in the mystery-romance-adventure formulae favored by pulp magazines, his first haven. The *Post's* higher requirements forced him to upgrade his standards; its literate, middle-American audience bestirred him to search inward for a medium personally truthful and publicly responsive. Dreading the stereotype, he scrupulously reversed his field when his fiction sold too readily. The *Post* nurtured his natural

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andante style, exemplified in the Fraternity stories. Most important, Williams uncovered the core of his own sensibility in the ethos of the *Post*.

Williams was a large, amiable, decent, optimistic, meat-and-potatoes man, wary of sophistication or posture. He would have said of writers what Lorimer said of editors, that their prime qualification "is being an ordinary man." Williams did write to this effect: "I never lived in New York where writers like to foregather; and the number of members of my profession with whom I have had more than the most casual acquaintance is small. The men I have known best have been doctors, lawyers, architects, newspapermen, men of business, farmers, guides, and woodsmen. I am at ease with them." He proceeded solidly on this basis of a world he knew. "My stories have been for the most part manufactured out of things I have seen and heard and read and thought."<sup>27</sup> "Jubilo" is about a flivver and dishwashing, he told an interviewer.

The philosophical, the ostentatiously intellectual angles of creative writing he eschewed for the same pragmatic reason. Asked if he had ever taken a course in story-telling, Williams rejoined with a stout *no*. "I once read a book on it. It helped me not at all."<sup>28</sup> Yet he developed an eclectic set of theories wholly operable within the frame of his endowment: the arch function of art is "to stimulate emotion"; "discords between persons bound together by blood ties" constitute the most dramatic human situation; if a story is to succeed it must embody a necessary harmony "between the reader's preconception of what should happen and the fictional version." Williams' immense reverence for the great books drew him back to "the old Greeks." From Aristotle he extracted the meditations on pity-and-terror and the tragic flaw. "I have repeatedly tried to write stories on the general theme that a man's mistakes or misdeeds do in later life rise up to confound and sometimes destroy him. . . . I try to follow the logic of character, regardless of whether the ending is happy or unhappy."<sup>29</sup> And a subtler apperception

<sup>27</sup> Tebbel, 209; *Now I'll Tell One*, 9-a; David Noel, "Ben Ames Williams," *Scholastic*, VI (April 4, 1925), 5; *Now I'll Tell One*, 408.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, *Fiction Writers on Fiction Writing* (Indianapolis, 1923), 263.

<sup>29</sup> Hoffman, 388; *Now I'll Tell One*, 410; Ben Ames Williams, "Fiction Harmony," *The Writer*, XLIX (March 1936), 67; Herbert Edwards, "Ben Ames Williams at Hardscrabble Farm," *Down East*, XV (April 1969), 38.



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of the happy ending, so often a sore point between him and the *Post*:

Now, there can be beauty in tragedy. There can be happiness in tragedy; and there is no reason in the world why a short story which has a tragic conclusion cannot at the same time have a happy ending. Even death is often the happiest thing that can happen to a man at a given time. . . . a story should end in such a way that the reader, if he voices his thoughts, will say to himself: "Well, there! That's the best thing that could have happened to him!"<sup>30</sup>

In these days of rampant Mailers, Capotes, and other televised prima donnas, Williams' modest apprisement of his gifts, methods, aims, and accomplishments comes as a refreshing breeze from the slopes of Helicon:

I have been a professional writer, working at my trade, for some twenty-five years. I make no claims to genius or even to talent. I learned to write by hard work, and I have worked hard at writing—and enjoyed it.

To have worked hard at writing fiction, without any pretense to inspiration, is held by some to be vaguely contemptible. I do not agree with this point of view. I find nothing despicable in having liked to write, nor in having written a great deal—some of it very poor—nor in having sold as much as possible of what I have written.

. . . . .

Certainly I am not conceited about my work. Occasionally I write something which seems to me good of its kind, and I have always tried to write short stories and novels as well as I could. But I have rarely persuaded myself that they were good. . . . So, though critics have compared my work favorably with that of authors as various as Thomas Hardy and de Maupassant, as William Dean Howells and Dumas, as Sigrid Undset and Bret Harte, I have not been deceived (*NITO*, 408-409; 10-11).

Nor did he deal in other forms of self-delusion. He purposefully bucked the tide of editor-approval in the twenties, inverting his style when it appeared to him too slick and his stories selling too readily. Truth of self-expression meant more to him than a glut of bylines. In the forties, he resisted the hectic new temper of the times, amplifying rather than dehy-

30 Ben Ames Williams, "The Happy Ending," *The Writer*, LIV (October 1940), 292. A member of the Editorial Board, Williams contributed to this magazine a number of articles on the practical and conceptual facets of short-story writing.

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drating his product.<sup>31</sup> As a writer, Williams underwent progressive exfoliation in three stages: first, he shed the pulps; second, he transcended the *Post*; finally, he forged for himself, as any right artist must inevitably do. But for the *Post*, which brought him out frequently against its own inclination, Williams might never have achieved his ultimate proportion.

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31 The germ of Williams' penchant for the longer form of fiction unquestionably languished in the deep recesses of his mind for many years before he allowed it to emerge. As early as 1923 he made these discerning observations in his epilogue "Note" to *Thrifty Stock*, a collection of his short stories:

"The novel, obviously enough, depends for its interest upon delineation and development of character, and presents a comprehensive picture of some phase, large or small, of the social system. There need be no plot; there is usually merely a chronology. The story, on the other hand whatever its length, depends for its interest primarily upon incident and situation; it deals with conflicts and contrasts, with sacrifices and surrenders, with achievements and acquirements, with penalties and punishments, with sorrow and rescue, prosperity and disaster, and all the torment of obstructed passion. In short, with drama. There need be no social background; there need not even be any characters, in the strict sense of the word" (p. 347).

"...it is obviously much more difficult to write a great story than it is to write a great novel" (p. 347).

"It is probably fair to say that a short story is harder to write, in proportion to its length, than any other form of fiction... It is infinitely easier to tell a story in ten or fifteen thousand words than it is to tell the same story in five thousand" (p. 349).

"A novel may be written in a blind, leisurely, chronological fashion, a page at a time, the end never very definitely in view... The writer of a great short story conceives his story, not as a beginning, nor as a middle, but as a whole" (p. 351).

