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Epilogue

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With something less than reverence and something more than dalliance, Richard Hallet read myriads of dicta about the art of literary composition enunciated by famous writers. Like Stevenson in the beginning, he played the sedulous ape to several, notably Conrad and Kipling. In time Hallet assumed his own stance and rendered mature judgments on the vagaries of these propositions. His range of quotation is truly broad and frequently illuminating. Here is a small intimation plucked at random from his assorted writings.

“A man writing about the genesis of his stories is pretty certain to get into a snarl, as Mr. Poe did, when he told us so glibly how ‘The Raven’ came to be written inevitably in the form it now has. That article of Poe’s is pretty egregious rationalizing; and if I tried the thing in any detail, I should fall into the same trap.”

“When an English critic suggested that one of Conrad’s books might have been written in two hundred pages, instead of the four hundred it actually took, Conrad retorted tartly: ‘It could have been written on cigarette paper. As ‘They were born, they suffered, they died.’ And this was true of all my efforts that had to do with writing. There was usually need of cutting.”

“Technique is too liable to be synonymous for complexity and subtlety. Technique ruined Henry James. Few candid people will say that his later work is even half as good as the simpler Roderick Hudson. The earlier stuff of Conrad and Kipling is better than the later, for the same reason . . . . [Technique clouds] the issue, much as a cuttlefish squirts ink.”

“I never did find the secret of glib literary mechanism. Is it posture? Mark Twain used to write lying in bed . . . but, then, David Graham Phillips wrote standing up to a high reporter’s desk. Is it temperature? Bossuet composed his ‘Funeral Orations’ in a cold room, with his feet in a tub of cold water . . . . Is it odors? Schiller wrote William Tell with an apple rotting on his desk. Is it lighting? The poet Young put his ‘Night Thoughts’ together by candlelight streaming through the eye-sockets of a
human skull. Is it diet? Dryden ate raw meat to produce brilliant dreams, the stuff of poetry.”

“The danger of watching the tricks of a contemporary consists in liability to ape him in your own stuff, especially if he is a powerful contemporary. We have with us all the time young shadow-forms of Kipling, O. Henry, etc. I dogged Conrad nearly to my undoing. A man with some writing instinct can pick up the mannerisms of another writer as easily as butter absorbs a taint.”

“It was Martial who coined the word plagiarism, but he could not say in what a new idea consisted. We are all as imitative as monkeys. Did the first man who used the moon in a love story acquire it as his intellectual property? . . . There are no rights in subject matter. And for the most part, we do not invent or originate our words. We thieve daily from those prehistoric intellectuals who hewed us out man-speech from monkey-talk beginnings. The English language is an old wives’ tale, and the dictionary is a plagiarism in alphabetical order.”

“As Walter Pater says of ‘that principle axiomatic in literature,’ that, ‘to know when one’s self is interested, is the first condition of interesting other people.’ I have gone astray before now by deluding myself into thinking I was interested in a given story simply because I had decided to write it.”

“I have to have a pretty definite scheme, a sequence of events with a denouement very clearly in mind, before doing much writing . . . . Scott certainly didn’t. He wrote The Bride of Lammermoor when he was so nearly out of his head with pain that when the proofs came in he read them, he asserts, as if they were the work of another hand altogether. William de Morgan, to give a late instance, said he let the story drip off his penpoint. If I did this, it would drool, not drip.”

“Easy writing makes hard reading, and a quite famous lady who wrote six hundred pages without — so to speak — stopping to draw breath was accused by her critics of suffering from a swelling of the pituitary gland, which resulted in an excessive secretion of words. Writers of this kind were called hyperpituitaries.”