

CONFESSIONS OF A SONG WRITER

BY PAUL WEST

I AM in receipt of a letter from George Terwilliger, of Pieplant Junction, Kansas. It is marked "strictly private," and far be it from me to betray the confidence of its writer, so let us read it. It says:

DEAR SIR—I have just learned your latest beautiful song entitled "Nelle Bring the Hammer. There's a Fly on Baby's Head" and I think it is grand. I know that the writer of such lofty sentiments must be a noble character and willing to help others, so I am writing to ask your advice about becoming a song writer.

I know that I have plenty of talent. Sometimes when I am running the reaper on my father's farm the sweetest melodies come to me, but I cannot write them down. But my head is full of them and the most beautiful song poems.

Now how can I get these songs published? If I send them to a publisher, I am told by my friends that they will be stolen. Anyway I cannot send them because I cannot write them down. How can I write them down? Or would I better come to New York and see you, if you are not too busy, and let you write them? You could put your name on some of them and mine on the rest, and I should give you half the money we got for them.

If I had them written down and sent them to publishers, they would rob me, but they would not dare to rob you. So please tell me when I had better come to New York.

Yours melodically, GEORGE TERWILLIGER.

I have taken the liberty of improving the diction in places, and of changing the name of the writer of the letter. In fact, I do not believe that I could tell you his exact name anyway, for the writing of the letter looked as though it had been penned while George was riding on a reaper over very rough land. I have also changed the name of my "latest beautiful song." Otherwise the letter is O. K.

Nor is it the first of the kind I have ever received. The world is full of George Terwilligers and George's sisters and maiden aunts and younger brothers. And there is the same conspiracy to rob him and the family of their beautiful melodies and soul stirring words. It is a shame, the way the entire brotherhood of song publishers is downtrodding the Terwilliger family.

Fixing Things Up

SOMETHING ought to be done about it. Also, the Terwilliger family should be set right in a few matters. For while they have the correct idea about some things, they are away off the key in others. As they seem to select me as their friend, the go-between in their fight against the publishers, suppose I take this opportunity of fixing things up?

In the first place, George has the wrong idea about me, and I take it for granted, about most songwriters. We are, in his estimation, a poetic crowd, long haired and velvet collared, mooning in a fine frenzy as we listen to the songs of the birds or the rippling of purling streams, from which we derive our inspiration. He can see us, I imagine, gazing into a pair of blue eyes, or brown, and immediately rushing to the piano to indite a musical heart throb to the aforesaid orbs. He tells me that he feels inspiration while running the reaper. Well, I never ran a reaper, so I don't know. I should imagine it to be a good place to get inspirations, if there are such things. I never had one, that I know of, and I never knew anybody that ever did have one.

How One Ballad Was Written

ONCE I got a letter from a young lady, accompanying a copy of a song that I had written. The letter said:

Would it be too much to ask you to autograph this copy of your beautiful song? And would you mind telling me how you got the inspiration for it? It is so beautiful, so ennobling, that I think you must have been in a very poetic mood when you wrote it. How do you get that way? Is it natural, or does it just happen?

I happen to remember how I wrote that particular song. It was this way:

"Say," said my publisher one day, "we're hard up



"Now Everybody Join in the Chorus!"

for a good high class ballad. There's quite a call for them just now; so why don't you knock out one? Binks has a blamed good melody that would do. Have him play it, and see if you can't get the song out right away."

I went into one of the little piano rooms in the publishing house with Binks, the composer. He played me his melody, which was good. In fact, it was one of my favorite melodies, and had always been.

"I have a kind of title for this," said Binks. "I saw it on a book. It's 'When the Sunshine Hits Your Hair, It Looks Like Treads o' Burnished Gold,' or something like that. How do you like it?"

"Wait a minute," I said, "and play the refrain again." He did so, while I wrote rapidly, writing up to his line, so that it would end the refrain. I could not think of a rime for one of the lines, so I "padded" it for the nonce, and laid the hurriedly written verse on the piano beside Binks' MS. music. "See if this fits," said I.

Binks tried the words and music together. They fitted, pretty nearly, so I took out a syllable here and inserted one there, and in a few minutes it was done. Then I wrote a verse to begin the song. Binks had no music for the first part of the num-

ber; so he agreed to make the tune fit my words. In a few minutes he was at it. In half an hour the song was done. We called the publisher in, and he heard it.

"That's the kind of dope," he said. "I'll telephone to Cissie Contralto right away. She was in here looking for something like that yesterday. Give me the second verse at once." So I did.

That was the way that inspiring ballad was written. It's the way most of them are written.

One Kind of Inspiration

I WROTE my first song under the impulse of an inspiration, I must admit. I was at a boarding school, up the Hudson, and for some infraction of the rules was being kept in. It was beautiful weather and I wanted to be out. The teacher in charge of the room knew this, and, calling me over to his desk, he proposed a plan whereby I might regain my freedom.

"You write a lot of verses for the school paper," he said. "Do you think you could write one about the school that I could make into a song? I should write the music. If you will do this, I'll release you for the rest of the day."

I went to my desk and knocked the verses out rapidly. They suited the teacher, who was something of a musician, and he kept his word by letting me go out with the rest of the boys. They are still singing that song up at this school, though it was twenty years ago.

I was looking the song over the other day. It is not so bad. All the lines scan, the rimes are passable, and there is some sense in the idea. But I knew no better then; so I must be pardoned. It is a fact that in writing certain styles of song a versifier must be careful that his English is not too lofty, or his rimes too perfect. The so-called "popular seriocomic ballad" must have "baby" rimed with "lady," and the verse must lead into the refrain with some variation of "And these words to him once more again she said." This is absolutely essential.

However, I had not intended laying down the general rules for song writing quite so early. I wanted to say something about song writers, their habits, their methods, personalities, and so forth, and how songs are published and "made popular."

They Are Made, Not Born

TO begin with, song writers are made, not born. Of course, the versifying attribute "comes natural"; but just because a person is a poet it does not follow that he will be a song writer. Some of

the greatest poets that ever lived could not write a real song; that is, a song to reach the popular heart and "make a hit," as the technical phrase goes. "La Marseillaise," taken as a poem, is pretty bad stuff; "The Star Spangled Banner" is worse. The man who wrote "Bedelia" could not pen an epic; but, by the same token, neither Edwin Markham nor Percy Mackaye could turn out a "Bedelia" or an "I'm Afraid to Go Home in the Dark."

An illustration to witness the difference between writing songs and poems: Last season one of the most prominent theatrical managers, in arranging for the lyrics of a musical comedy, decided that he would have them written by a man who ranks exceedingly high among the lighter poets of the day. This man's verses have been exceedingly popular, and in point of brilliance and cleverness they are gems. A man who can write such good stuff as this, argued the manager, must be able to make fine lyrics for the stage. So he got this brilliant poetaster to write the songs for the musical comedy. One day the manager of the comedy showed me these lyrics. He read them to me with difficulty, his elocution being retarded by the frequency with which he burst into shouts of laughter at the clever lines.

They were, indeed, splendid little poems, humor-