

SHOULD HOPE FAIL AT TWENTY-TWO?

BY HELEN DARE



CAMERON A. OWENS

gently dealt with. Their poems and plays and stories are returned to them with the kindest of refusals—printed letters of refusal, to be sure, but so cleverly printed to imitate typewriting that the kindly fraud is discovered only in the third or fourth or fifth letter, when the shock is not so great. Even the great artists in various branches of art are kind enough to receive their visits and answer their letters and to be very graciously encouraging or discouraging as the case may require.

How could they be otherwise? Even wayfarers who have traveled only a little way along the road to the goal of their ambition soften with sympathy, for they know how much their hopes mean to them.

I realized it afresh only the other day when a high school boy came to me—a studious, sensitive boy I have watched growing into fine, clean manhood—with the manuscript of a story hugged to his heart in his inside pocket.

Would I let him read it me? Would I give him my professional opinion of it?

It was a matter of tremendous import to him.

Would I? Of course I would, and I know as you know that it was not opinion he hoped for, but confirmation of his own opinion, for if he hadn't thought it was good he would never have read a word of it to any one.

He read it with a catch in his voice, a tremulous anxiety for the darling of his mind, that would have made me lie with my last breath and say it was good if it hadn't been.

Without shame or penitence I confess it.

But it was good and surprisingly good at that and I was so glad that it was—because of that catch in his voice—that I could have cried with joy.

It isn't so much the things in life that matter as what they mean to us; and I for one wouldn't cast a little child's rag doll in the fire just because it is a rag doll.

I have among my friends a cheerful, common sensible man—no nonsense about him, no slushy sentiment and foolishness, you may be sure—whose company is sometimes pleasant, except on the first of the month, when he seems to radiate an odious and unreasonable prosperity with his glib talk about new houses and automobiles showing an offensively complacent disregard of the significance of the date.

He is just the practical sort of man who would bring your Snow Image into the house, set it by the fire and reduce it to a puddle to prove your folly to you.

When the staring headlines told the story of poor Cameron Owens' rash deed he said, like the practical man that he is:

"Pooh! Pooh! Disappointed ambition! Wanted fame! No one ever killed himself on that account, let me tell you. Why the boy had a good position and a good home. He was getting along. There was something else—some REAL cause. Just take my word for it that there was."

But there wasn't—inconceivable as that may be to my friend, the practical man.

No boy could have stood better or had a cleaner record with his employers than this poor boy.

And in the story that his mother tells—a story of boyish life so simple that it is pathetic—there is no waywardness, no folly, none of the miserable madcap ventures that bring boys even in their boyhood to the end of the thoroughfare, nothing but the most earnest, painstaking devotion to high ideals.

Poor, sorrow-stricken little mother! She is asking herself every hour of the day if anywhere in her mother love and mother care and anxiety there was a flaw that would put upon her the responsibility of her boy's desperate deed. And in this she is doing only what every loving mother in her place would do.

I sat with her in the pretty, cozy, tasteful room that was "Cameron's den" and read over with her the few manuscripts so carefully and elabor-

ately prepared for the editorial eye, that he left unburned, manuscripts that show the boy's bright, observant mind and sympathetic nature, that carry even in their amateurish crudeness and inadequacy of experience a real promise, an unmistakable evidence of capacity.

How high his aim was you can read between the lines of ambitious passages which he had lovingly and laboriously polished, trying the effect of one word and then another with the instinct of the true craftsman.

We read these, the sad little mother and I, and we turned the pages of his books in which he had marked passages, and every one that he marked, every marginal note that he made, points to the summit of his hopes as straight as does the needle to the pole.

Through all his books—from his well thumbed Shakespeares with the little penciled criss-cross of admiration lifting up passages on ambition, on achievement, on work well done, down to the tiny volume of Robert Beverly Hale—it is plainly to be seen that he was on the hunt for help to make himself a writer, for suggestion, encouragement and consolation.

Let me give you one of his favorite passages from Hale, in which he heard, perhaps, kind calling to kind:

The saddest songs blithe songs with tender words
And cares for naught but harmonizing chords;
The genius feels the warm tear seek his eye
Because he hears a mother's lullaby.

To strengthen his own fainting spirit he thumbed the pages for the self-encouragement and self-accusations of writers who were so happy as to have their writings printed; who had won the blissful triumph of having a book published "to occupy an inch of space upon a dusty shelf."

Where he found such thoughts he marked them, and among them I found this that seems like a cry from his own troubled heart:

Oh shame! Shall I give up my high endeavor?
Shall I pretend my store of strength is gone?
Shall I claim peace and joy and bliss forever
And take my rest while God goes toiling on?

I think that you will think with me that the mind that responds to and finds expression for itself in the lines that I have quoted is not a common nor an ignoble mind.

"Cameron loved his books," his mother tells me as she takes them from me and lays them down gently, with that strange, futile tenderness with which we handle the belongings of the dead. "Sometimes I thought he cared too much for them, that he was too absorbed in them, more than was good for him. He was always a good student from the time he was first sent to school. I have an unbroken succession of honor certificates from his very first term up to his last."

"I have," she says.

Sad-eyed little mother! Of course she has; not only the honor certificates that little boy in knickerbockers brought home so proudly, but in the same drawer with them the first little shoes he wore, the first little tooth he lost, the curl from his baby head—all those little treasures that are more to the mother heart than the most splendid jewels in royal caskets.

The meanest thief is not so mean that he would rob her of her treasures.

"Cameron's one ambition, his only desire in life it seemed, was to be a writer. He always wanted to do his work well at Vanderslice's, he always wanted to be on time, because that was his duty; but when he was through with his work he would write long and late into the night, and then he would tear up what he wrote and say that he wasn't satisfied with it. He would wish that he could write like this writer and like that, that he admired, and he'd be impatient and say that he never could, that he didn't have it in him."

"Whether he sent his stories away and they came back I don't know for a certainty. I think he did, for he was always writing until recently. "I noticed before—before he did this—that he was burning a good many papers. He would bring them into the kitchen and put them in the stove, and I told him to be careful and not burn anything he might want again."

With his mother one may only guess that the boy was going through that Slough of Despond that ninety-nine out of every hundred writers, actors, artists have to flounder through, on their way to success, and the way seemed long and very dark to him.

"He was always very sensitive—too sensitive for his own happiness, I am afraid," the little mother tells me to ex-

clude him, to ward off all blame or harsh criticism. "He was slight and small, a delicate boy, and he was sensitive about his size. He was just about my height, and knowing how sensitive he was, I used to be careful when we went out together at night to always keep just about half a step behind when we walked under a street lamp, just enough to throw his shadow a little longer than mine. Then I would call his attention to it and say, "You see, Cameron, you're not so VERY small. You're taller than I am; just look for yourself."

"He never said anything about it, but I'm afraid he saw through me, he knew what I did and why I did it. Innocent, loving deception. How sweet and beautiful a place the world is when there is love like that in it."

What self-centered son or daughter would willingly wound a heart so tender? Surely not her own gentle boy, wild and hopeless as his melancholy was, if he had known—or remembered.

I wonder how many boys and girls who think the world is cruel to them have the impulse to do what poor Cameron Owens did, an impulse half formed and quickly smothered, to be laughed at later from the serene poise of maturity.

More, I fancy, than any gathering of statistics will ever show, for youth, high-strung and untried, takes its sorrows poignantly.

The Spanish have a proverb about patience, more patience and yet more patience, and this is what one who would do must learn.

I think if I were of an introspective and despondent mind instead of so cheerfully busy that I never have time to turn back to correct yesterday's mistakes I would cure myself by searching out the troubles of other people who have lived through obstacles they have overcome.

I would think of Flaubert whittling and sandpapering Salaambo for twenty-five years—a quarter of a century, my dears of tender years—until at last it dazzled the world a perfect gem.

I would think of our own dear Robert Louis Stevenson in sickness and poverty still writing on the beautiful thoughts that made all the world love him. I would dwell on his friendship with Simonsen, the old tumbler man of Monterey, who kept him from being hungry for a little while—Simonsen, poor, humble and old, but so true a friend that no money can buy from him the letters Robert Louis so faithfully remembered to write to him from all parts of the world.

I would think of Balzac, in his dirty nightcap and dressing gown and garret, writing in a frenzy for endless, unbelievable hours and hoping fiercely that fame and love and riches will come to him while he still has the youth to enjoy them.

I would think of Frances Hodgson Burnett, an ambitious little girl in Tennessee, going out in a sunbonnet to pick blackberries to get the money to buy paper to write her first stories on and postage stamps to send them to editors—and more postage stamps to send them again when they came back. Mrs. Burnett told me between tears and a smile, "There were snakes in the berry patches; and, oh, how I feared snakes!"

I would think of one of the bravest spirits I ever knew, a newspaper writer here who was ill and dwarfed and painfully deformed into a grotesque, twisted little mannikin, who had to fight his way on the same terms—no favors given nor odds asked—with the big, strong, hearty men in his calling. And he did it, too, and got pretty well to the top, and was the mainstay of a family and the cheeriest grin in the office at that.

It is always safe to believe—what the poor lad who gave up forgot—that even the longest lane has a turning.

Those who have their doubts about that always remind me of a spirited, willful young horse I used to ride. In the Presidio he particularly disliked going through the wood that borders the golf ground. Ordinarily he was the best of company, sharing my moods like a twin, but from beginning to end of the gloomy wood he would sulk and behave his unprettiest. When we came out into the open on a high point where the full panorama of the bay broke upon us he would come to glad life all over, prick up his ears, make a little bound and gallop away like a boy let out of school.

Many of us are not unlike my whimsical steed. We sulk in discontent along the dull and tedious ways, yet if we persevere, plodding on step by step over the hummock and hollow, we may reach at last the open space where the prospect is wide and beautiful.



HERE is something inexpressibly sad and touching in the death of young Cameron Owens, the boy who turned on the gas and lay down to die, alone and as a stranger, in the Occidental Hotel just a little while ago because, forsooth, he had not achieved literary fame at the age of 22 years.

Because his melancholy, his desperate dependency, the poignancy of his disappointments, are not unusual with youth; because this boy's story is not singular, but repeated day after day in all but its tragic denouement, perhaps in your home or your neighbor's, or to mine, I have asked the Sunday editor to let me write about it.

The Sunday editor, you must know, has to look to the variety of his Sunday supper menu as carefully as the best chef in the best club must look to it in his menu for a holiday dinner, and he cannot take chances on giving you an overdose of Helen Dare any more than the chef can risk his reputation by serving you twice with roast or salad or soup in the place of pliant entrees, but I have wheedled him into being indulgent to me and indifferent to his readers just once.

And I have done so because I want very much to say a word—a helping and comforting and warning word, if I can make it so—both to and for the ambitious boys and girls that have hitched their wagon to a star, that, like poor Cameron Owens, live in a world of hopes and ideals. There are so many of them soaring and dreaming their dreams and in constant danger of being cruelly bumped into consciousness on the cobbles of reality.

The plain, practical people who write for the newspapers and magazines for a living—whose names appear with perhaps tiresome frequency upon the printed page, for the public, alas, is a fickle public, and with conferring regularly on the pay roll—are always receiving letters and manuscripts and confidences from them, and are being importuned in their busiest moments for advice by them.

So are the clever, pepped people who act or sing or play the piano or the violin or cello or compose the operas and oratorios, who model the beautiful statues and paint the wonderful pictures that we hear about.

There are so many of them, palpitating between hope and fear, now confident, now limp with the falling of courage, like fledglings fluttering on the edge of their nest.

They should be very gently dealt with, these aspiring boys and girls, for youth is so buoyant, so tremendously, unboundedly hopeful, so extravagant if you will, and yet so tender and unguarded, so easily abashed and cast into the depths.

It is to the credit of a busy, self-seeking world that they are usually

