



C H A P T E R 26

THERE IS ONE GREAT TROUBLE ABOUT WRITING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY and that is the numerous and varying ideas that offer themselves when you sit down and are ready to begin. Sometimes the ideas come flooding from twenty directions at once and for a time you are almost drowned. You can use them only one at a time and you don't know which one to choose out of the twenty—still you must choose; there is no help for it; and you choose with the understanding that the nineteen left over are probably left over for good and lost, since they may never suggest themselves again. But this time the words are forced upon me. This is mainly because it is the latest idea that has suggested itself in the last quarter of an hour, and therefore the warmest one, because it has not yet had a chance to cool off. It is a couple of **amateur** literary offerings. From old experience I know that amateur productions, outwardly offered for one's honest cold judgment, to be followed by an uncolored and honest opinion, are not really offered in that spirit at all. The thing really wanted and expected is praise. Also, my experience has taught me that in almost all amateur cases praise is impossible—if it is to be backed by honesty.

I have this moment finished reading this morning's pair of offerings and am a little troubled. If they had come from strangers, I should

not have given myself the pain of reading them, but should have returned them unread, according to my custom, pleading that I lack an editor's training and therefore am not qualified to sit in judgment upon anyone's literature but my own. But this morning's harvest came from friends and that alters the case. I have read them and the result is as usual: they are not literature. They do contain meat but the meat is only half cooked. The meat is certainly there and if it could pass through the hands of an expert cook the result would be a very satisfactory dish indeed. One of this morning's works does really come near to being literature, but the amateur's hand is exposed with a fatal frequency and the exposure spoils it. The author's idea is, in case I shall render a favorable opinion, to offer the story to a magazine.

There is something about this childlike daring that compels admiration. It is a reckless daring which I suppose is exhibited in no field but one—the field of literature. We see something approaching it in war, but approaching it only distantly. The untrained common soldier has often offered himself in a hopeless cause and stood cheerfully ready to encounter all its dangers—but we draw the line there. Not even the most confident untrained soldier offers himself as a candidate for a generalship, yet this is what the amateur author does. With his untrained pen he puts together his unskilled efforts and offers them to all the magazines, one after the other—that is to say, he proposes them for posts limited to literary generals who have earned their rank and place by years and years of hard and honest training in the lower grades of the service.

I am sure that this happens in no other trade but ours. A person untrained to shoemaking does not offer his services as a shoemaker to the man in charge of a shop—not even the rawest literary hopeful would be so unintelligent as to do that. He would see the humor of it; he would recognize as the most commonplace of facts that an apprenticeship is necessary in order to qualify a person to be a tinner, bricklayer, printer, horse-doctor, butcher—and any and every other occupation whereby a human being acquires bread and fame. But when it comes to doing literature, his wisdoms vanish all of a sudden and he thinks

he finds himself now in the presence of a profession which requires no apprenticeship, no experience, no training—nothing whatsoever but conscious talent and a lion's courage.

We do not realize how strange and curious a thing this is until we look around for an object lesson whereby to realize it to us. We must imagine a similar case—someone who is ambitious for operatic distinction and cash, for instance. He applies to the management for a place as second **tenor**. The management accepts him, arranges the terms and puts him on the payroll. Understand, this is an imaginary case; I am not pretending that it has happened. Let us proceed.

After the first act the manager calls the second tenor to account and wants to know. He says:

“Have you ever studied music?”

“A little—yes, by myself, at odd times, for amusement.”

“You have never gone into regular and laborious training, then, for the opera, under the masters of the art?”

“No.”

“Then what makes you think you could do second tenor in *Lohengrin*?”

“I thought I could. I wanted to try. I seemed to have a voice.”

“Yes, you have a voice, and with five years of hard training under a skilled master you could be successful, perhaps, but I assure you you are not ready for second tenor yet. You have a voice; you have a presence; you have a noble and childlike confidence; you have courage that is immense. These are all essentials and they are in your favor but there are other essentials in this great trade which you still lack. If you can't afford the time and labor necessary to acquire them, leave opera alone and try something which does not require training and experience. Go away now and try for a job in surgery.”