

THE AUTHOR OF THE EAGLE'S SHADOW

BY

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

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Done for Don Bregenzel, January 1924, by James Branch Cabell

Most writers, for their sins, are used to the incursions of the literarily-inclined young man (with, as a rule, quite dreadful manuscripts hidden about his person) who wants advice as to his life-work. But that <sup>especial</sup> this ~~young~~ young man should be calling upon me for that purpose, or for any other purpose, did, I confess, astonish me....

For he dropped in the other evening. He was fat, remarkably fat for a lad of twenty-two or thereabouts; and he had, as I noticed first of all, with some fanfaronade in the way of capillary flourishes. He most enviably thick hair, sleeked down and parted "on the side" ~~with~~ <sup>too,</sup> was rather curiously dressed, <sup>too,</sup> I considered: the lapels of his coat were so small and stiff; they were held in place, I deduced, by a coat-spring; and he wore a fawn-colored waistcoat, and his rigorous collar towered, incredible in height, above a sky-blue "Ascot tie", which was respendently secured with a largish sword-hilt asparkle everywhere with diamonds. It must have been, in fine, a good twenty years since I had seen anybody appareled quite as he was....

"I have just sold three stories to magazines," he announced, "and I was wondering, sir, if you would advise me to become a regular writer now."

To that I gave my customary, sage and carefully considered reply. "Of course," I informed him, "there is a great deal to be said upon both sides."

"I wrote five, you see: and I mailed them all out together. And The Smart Set took one; and The Argosy took the one I sent them, too; and Mr. Alden wrote me a real nice letter about the one I sent Harper's, and said they would be very glad to use it if I would let them say 'paunch' where I had written 'belly'. That's all right, of course, though you do sort of think of Falstaff as having one. But the other two came back, although I can't see why, when you look at the stuff those very magazines--!"

"You will see, by and by," I assured him: "and then you will wonder about the stories that did not come back."

"Anyhow, I got a hundred and five dollars for the lot of them. Yes, sir, not a cent less! And to have three out of five stick, the very first time, is pretty unusual, don't you think?"

To that I assented. "It is the bait in the trap, it is the stroke of doom, it is the tasted pomegranate of Persephone."

"Then I have the notion for a book, too. It's about a young man who is in love with a girl--"

"That now is a good idea. It is an idea that has possibilities."

"--Only, he can't ask her to marry him, because she has lots of money, and he is poor. Of course, though, it all comes out all right in the end. His uncle left another will, you see."

"Now was that will, by any chance," I wondered, "discovered long years afterward, in the secret drawer of an old desk? and did it transform your high-minded but impoverished hero into a multi-millionaire?"

And the young man asked, "Why, how did you know?"

"It is not always possible to explain these divinations. Such flashes of imaginative clairvoyance just incommunicably come to me sometimes."

He considered this. He said, with a droll sort of awe, "Probably you do think of things quicker after you have been writing so long--"

I shook my head morosely. "Quite the contrary."

"And of course you have written so many books that-- You see, I naturally read them, on account of our similarity in names--"

"You liked them, I hope?"

Very rarely have I seen any young man counterfeit enthusiasm less convincingly. "Why, how can you ask that, I wonder! when everybody knows that your books, sir--!"

"Come, come!" I heartened him, "I have been reviewed a great deal, remember! The production of articles as to my plagiarisms and obscenities ranks as a national industry. Only yesterday Dr. Leonard Doughty exposed me to all Texas as a chancre-laden rat whose ancestry had mixed and simmered in the devil's cauldron of Middle Europe. And, besides, since Professor Fred L. Pattee let the news get out, in perfectly public print, that I am dead and my soul is already in hell, there does not seem much left for any moderately optimistic person to be afraid of."

"Well, but," the young man pointed out, "I'm not unbiased. There is so much about me in your books, you see, sir; and you do make me seem sort of funny. You sort of keep poking fun at me."

"I know. But I cannot help it. For you appear to me, I confess, the most ridiculous person save one that I have ever known. I am the other person."

"Well, I am afraid I don't entirely like your books, sir," he conceded.

And I sat looking at him, both amused and saddened. For never until to-night had it occurred to me how unutterably would this especial young man dislike my books if ever he could know of them. And he was trying, too, so hard to be polite about it.

"Why do you do it, sir" the boy asked now, almost reproachfully. "You get a plenty of pleasure out of life, don't you? and what did you want, anyhow, that you never got?"

"Yes: and I don't know," I admitted, seriatim.

"Well, then, why don't you write some books that will make people see the world is a pretty good sort of place after all?"

"But surely it does not require two persons to point out such an obvious geographical feature? Cannot posterity <sup>rely</sup> ~~repe~~ upon you, by and by, to diffuse that truism single-handed?"

"I certainly do hope so," he replied. Now his voice changed. "For I

would like to write the very nicest sort of books,-- like Henry Harland's and Justus Miles Forman's and Anthony Hope's. They would be about beautiful fine girls and really splendid young men, and everything would come out all right in the end, so they could get married, and not be sort of bitter and smart-alecky and depress people the way"-- he coughed,-- "the way some people do."

"Young man," I started out, severely, "it is quite evident you are not married--"

To which he countered, now I think of it, rather staggeringly. "But you, sir, are not in love. You never will be, sir, not ever any more."

I said: "Yes; that does make a difference. I remember." Then I said: "Stop talking bosh! and stop calling me 'sir'! I'm not your grandfather. It is rather the other way round. And, besides, we were talking about books. Well, you may try, if you like, to write the ~~romantic~~ <sup>blithering</sup> kind of novel you describe. But, somehow, I don't think you will ever succeed at it."

"You ought to know best, sir, of course, about my abilities. And so, if you would honestly advise me-- Still, I would certainly like to be a real author--"

He was looking at me now, across that most remarkable blue tie and shiny sword-hilt, with very touching deference, and with, of all conceivable emotions, envy. I understood, with the most quaint of shocks, that I possessed every one of the things which this preposterous young fellow wanted. I had written and published, sometimes even with commercial extenuation, at least as many magazine stories and books as he hoped by and by to have to his credit: I could imagine how my comfortable-looking large home, and my ownership of actual stocks and bonds, and my acquaintance with a number of more or less distinguished persons, would figure in his callow mild eyes: and

I had tasted, too, if not of fame, most certainly of all the notoriety he ever aspired to. Why; but what does it not seem to this pathetic boy, I reflected, actually to have one's picture in the papers! For I could well remember certain ancient glancings toward that awesome pinnacle of being a celebrity.

I was, in fine, by this boy's standards, a success. I had to-day each one of the things he had ever consciously desired. That really was a rather terrible reflection.

But he was speaking. "Then you would honestly advise me, sir, not to take up writing as a regular thing?"

"I don't see how I can advise you that,-- not honestly, at least. For you will get out of the writing all-- heaven help you!-- that you hope to get."

"Why, then--" He was abeam.

"You simply wait until you have got it! You can attend to your grinning then, if you feel like it. For you will get every one of the things you think you want. Only, you will get them by the, upon the whole, most philanthropic process of not ever writing any of the mush which you now plan to write."

"But I don't understand--"

"Nor do I, either. But from the start there will be tugging at your pen a pig-headed imp that will be guiding it his way instead of the way you intended. And with each book he will be growing stronger and more importunate and more cunning, and he will be stealing the pen away from you for longer and longer intervals. And by and by that imp, full grown now and the very devil of a taskmaster, will be dictating your books from beginning to end,-- not to speak here of his making you sweat blood when you revise, at his orders, all the earlier ones."

"Come, now,"-- and the young fellow was looking at me rather like a troubled cow,-- "come, now, sir, but you don't really mean I am going to be possessed by a devil?"

"Some people will put it that way, only ~~rather~~ <sup>a bit</sup> less politely. But I would say, by a daëmon. Socrates had one, you may remember."

"Yes, but this one--?"

"You," I replied, "will call him the desire to write perfectly of beautiful happenings. Other persons will call him quite different things. Anyhow, with time, you will fall into a sort of bedrugging daëmon-worship, and you will go the way he commands you, without resisting any longer. It will be most deplorable. So Professor Henry A. Beers will have, after all, to dismiss your literary claims from the pale of serious consideration, because you are not of Colonial stock--"

"But, sir, my father's people came in 1727, and my mother's in 1619--!"  
Facts are but reeds in the wind of moral indignation.

"That will not matter. And Maurice Hewlett must become very cuttingly sarcastic about your being a Jew brought up on the Talmud--"

"Me, sir?"

"Most

~~Among~~ certainly, you. And a transfigured Richard le Gallienne, purified by his intellectual death and descent into the helotage of reviewing, will be compelled to unmask you as a moral and spiritual hooligan with a diminutive and unkempt and unsavory ego. Altogether, you perceive, you will get, through this daëmon-worship, into some trouble."

Very rarely have I seen any young man more unaffectedly appalled. "But look here, sir! I don't want to get into any trouble. I simply want to contribute to the best magazines, and write some wholesome and nice entertaining books, that will sell like The Cardinal's Snuff-Box and The Prisoner of Zenda."

"I know. It is rather funny that you should begin with just those goals in view. You will not ever attain them. That will not matter so

much -- after a while. But what will very vitally matter -- to you, anyhow, -- is that, having once meddled with the desire to write perfectly of beautiful happenings, you will not ever be able to ~~forswear~~<sup>forswear</sup> your daëmon. And such folly is, of course, enough to set every really well-thought-of person in America braying. So that ~~in~~ time -- who knows?-- you too may come to be a chancre-laden rat, and a German Jew with a soul in hell and a notoriously unkempt ego, and ~~will~~<sup>may</sup> otherwise help out with the week's literary gossip."

Whereon the young man rose; and he remarked, with a perhaps not wholly unwarranted uncertainty, "Then you advise me, sir--?"

"I cannot advise you the one way or the other. I am merely forewarning you that, if you insist ~~on~~<sup>upon</sup> writing books, you will get what you wanted."

He smiled now, brightly, intimately, strangely. "I see: but isn't that, also, in the one way which matters," he demanded of me, "true?"

And I smiled back at him. "Yes," I admitted, "it seems true in the one way which matters, also."

"Why, then," said he, "I reckon I had better keep right on with The Eagle's Shadow."

And after that he went quite suddenly away. He returned, I imagine, to 1902 or thereabouts.

I hope he did, for his sake. There was a rather nice girl awaiting him, back there in 1902. ~~Then, in addition to her,~~<sup>Then, in addition to her,</sup> he would have the facile, false inspirations of The Eagle's Shadow to play with, I reflected, as I resumed my sober pruning of over-frequent "that's" from the last proof-sheets of The High Place.

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