# The Plutonian Fire

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There are a few editor men with whom I am privileged to come in contact. It has not been long since it was their habit to come in contact with me. There is a difference.

They tell me that with a large number of the manuscripts that are submitted to them come advices (in the way of a boost) from the author asseverating that the incidents in the story are true. The des-tination of such contributions depends wholly upon the question of the enclosure of stamps. Some are returned, the rest are thrown on the floor in a corner on top of a pair of gum shoes, an overturned statuette of the Winged Victory, and a pile of old magazines containing a picture of the editor in the act of reading the latest copy of Le Petit Journal, right side up - you can tell by the illustrations. It is only a legend that there are waste baskets in editors’ offices.

Thus is truth held in disrepute. But in time truth and science and nature will adapt themselves to art. Things will happen logically, and the villain be discomfited instead of being elected to the board of directors. But in the meantime fiction must not only be divorced from fact, but must pay alimony and be awarded custody of the press despatches.

This preamble is to warn you off the grade cross-ing of a true story. Being that, it shall be told sim-ply, with conjunctions substituted for adjectives wherever possible, and whatever evidences of style may appear in it shall be due to the linotype man. It is a story of the literary life in a great city, and it should be of interest to every author within a 20-mile radius of Gosport, Ind., whose desk holds a MS. story beginning thus: “While the cheers following his nomination were still ringing through the old courthouse, Harwood broke away from the congratulating handclasps of his henchmen and hurried to Judge Creswell’s house to find Ida.”

Pettit came up out of Alabama to write fiction. The Southern papers had printed eight of his stories under an editorial caption identifying the author as the son of “the gallant Major Pettingill Pettit, our former County Attorney and hero of the battle of Lookout Mountain.”

Pettit was a rugged fellow, with a kind of shame-faced culture, and my good friend. His father kept a general store in a little town called Hosea. Pettit had been raised in the pine-woods and broom-sedge fields adjacent thereto. He had in his gripsack two manuscript novels of the adventures in Picardy of one Gaston Laboulaye, Vicompte de Montrepos, in the year 1329. That’s nothing. We all do that. And some day when we make a hit with the little sketch about a newsy and his lame dog, the editor prints the other one for us — or “on us,” as the say-ing is — and then — and then we have to get a big valise and peddle those patent air-draft gas burners. At $1.25 everybody should have ‘em.

I took Pettit to the red-brick house which was to appear in an article entitled “Literary Landmarks of Old New York,” some day when we got through with it. He engaged a room there, drawing on the general store for his expenses. I showed New York to him, and he did not mention how much narrower Broadway is than Lee Avenue in Hosea. This seemed a good sign, so I put the final test.

“Suppose you try your band at a descriptive article,” I suggested, “giving your impressions of New York as seen from the Brooklyn Bridge. The fresh point of view, the —”

“Don’t be a fool,” said Pettit. “Let’s go have some beer. On the whole I rather like the city.” We discovered and enjoyed the only true Bohemia. Every day and night we repaired to one of those palaces of marble and glass and tilework, where goes on a tremendous and sounding epic of life. Valhalla itself could not be more glorious and sonorous. The classic marble on which we ate, the great, light-flooded, vitreous front, adorned with snow-white scrolls; the grand Wagnerian din of clanking cups and bowls the flashing staccato of brandishing cut-lery, the piercing recitative of the white-aproned grub-maidens at the morgue-like banquet tables; the recurrent lied-motif of the cash-register — it was a gigantic, triumphant welding of art and sound, a deafening, soul-uplifting pageant of heroic and em-blematic life. And the beans were only ten cents. We wondered why our fellow-artists cared to dine at sad little tables in their so-called Bohemian restaurants; and we shuddered lest they should seek out our resorts and make them conspicuous with their presence.

Pettit wrote many stories, which the editors returned to him. He wrote love stories, a thing I have always kept free from, holding the belief that the well-known and popular sentiment is not properly a matter for publication, but something to be privately handled by the alienists and florists. But the editors had told him that they wanted love stories, because they said the women read them.

Now, the editors are wrong about that, of course. Women do not read the love stories in the magazines. They read the poker-game stories and the recipes for cucumber lotion. The love stories are read by fat cigar drummers and little ten-year-old girls. I am not criticising the judgment of editors. They are mostly very fine men, but a man can be but one man, with individual opinions and tastes. I knew two associate editors of a magazine who were wonderfully alike in almost everything. And yet one of them was very fond of Flaubert, while the other preferred gin.

Pettit brought me his returned manuscripts, and we looked them over together to find out why they were not accepted. They seemed to me pretty fair stories, written in a good style, and ended, as they should, at the bottom of the last page.

They were well constructed and the events were marshalled in orderly and logical sequence. But I thought I detected a lack of living substance — it was much as if I gazed at a symmetrical array of presentable clamshells from which the succulent and vital inhabitants had been removed. I intimated that the author might do well to get better acquainted with his theme.

“You sold a story last week,” said Pettit, “about a gun fight in an Arizona mining town in which the hero drew his Colt’s .45 and shot seven bandits as fast as they came in the door. Now, if a six-shooter could —”

“Oh, well,” said I, “that’s different. Arizona is a long way from New York. I could have a man stabbed with a lariat or chased by a pair of chap-arreras if I wanted to, and it wouldn’t be noticed until the usual error-sharp from around McAdams Junction isolates the erratum and writes in to the pa-pers about it. But you are up against another proposition. This thing they call love is as common around New York as it is in Sheboygan during the young onion season. It may be mixed here with a little commercialism — they read Byron, but they look up Bradstreet’s, too, while they’re among the B’s, and Brigham also if they have time — but it’s pretty much the same old internal disturbance everywhere. You can fool an editor with a fake picture of a cowboy mounting a pony with his left hand on the saddle horn, but you can’t put him up a tree with a love story. So, you’ve got to fall in love and then write the real thing.”

Pettit did. I never knew whether he was taking my advice or whether be fell an accidental victim.

There was a girl be had met at one of these studio contrivances - a glorious, impudent, lucid, open-minded girl with hair the color of Culmbacher, and a good-natured way of despising you. She was a New York girl.

Well (as the narrative style permits us to say infrequently), Pettit went to pieces. All those pains, those lover’s doubts, those heart-burnings and tremors of which be had written so unconvincingly were his. Talk about Shylock’s pound of flesh! Twenty-five pounds Cupid got from Pettit. Which is the usurer?

One night Pettit came to my room exalted. Pale and haggard but exalted. She had given him a jonquil.

“Old Hoss,” said he, with a new smile flickering around his mouth, “I believe I could write that story to-night — the one, you know, that is to win out.

“I can feel it. I don’t know whether it will come out or not, but I can feel it.” I pushed him out of my door. “Go to your room and write it,” I ordered. “Else I can see your fin-ish. I told you this must come first. Write it to-night and put it under my door when it is done. Put it under my door to-night when it is finished — don’t keep it until to-morrow.”

I was reading my bully old pal Montaigne at two o’clock when I beard the sheets rustle under my door. I gathered them up and read the story.

The hissing of geese, the languishing cooing of doves, the braying of donkeys, the chatter of irresponsible sparrows - these were in my mind’s ear as I read. “Suffering Sappho!” I exclaimed to myself. “Is this the divine fire that is supposed to ignite genius and make it practicable and wage-earning?”

The story was sentimental drivel, full of whim-pering softheartedness and gushing egoism. All the art that Pettit had acquired was gone. A pe-rusal of its buttery phrases would have made a cynic of a sighing chambermaid.

In the morning Pettit came to my room. I read him his doom mercilessly. He laughed idiotically.

“All right, Old Hoss,” he said, cheerily, “make cigar-lighters of it. What’s the difference? I’m going to take her to lunch at Claremont to-day.”

There was about a month of it. And then Pettit came to me bearing an invisible mitten, with the forti-tude of a dishrag. He talked of the grave and South America and prussic acid; and I lost an afternoon getting him straight. I took him out and saw that large and curative doses of whiskey were ad-ministered to him. I warned you this was a true story — ‘ware your white ribbons if only follow this tale. For two weeks I fed him whiskey and Omar, and read to him regularly every evening the column in the evening paper that reveals the secrets of fe-male beauty. I recommend the treatment.

After Pettit was cured be wrote more stories. He recovered his old-time facility and did work just short of good enough. Then the curtain rose on the third act.

A little, dark-eyed, silent girl from New Hampshire, who was studying applied design, fell deeply in love with him. She was the intense sort, but externally glace, such as New England sometimes fools us with. Pettit liked her mildly, and took her about a good deal. She worshipped him, and now and then ignored him.

There came a climax when she tried to jump out of a window, and he had to save her by some perfunc-tary, unmeant wooing. Even I was shaken by the depths of the absorbing affection she showed. Home, friends, traditions, creeds went up like thistle-down in the scale against her love. It was really discomposing.

One night again Pettit sauntered in, yawning. As he had told me before, he said he felt that he could do a great story, and as before I hunted him to his room and saw him open his inkstand. At one o’clock the sheets of paper slid under my door.

I read that story, and I jumped up, late as it was, with a whoop of joy. Old Pettit had done it. Just as though it lay there, red and bleeding, a woman’s heart was written into the lines. You couldn’t see the joining, but art, exquisite art, and pulsing na-ture had been combined into a love story that took you by the throat like the quinsy. I broke into Pettit’s room and beat him on the back and called him name — names high up in the galaxy of the im-mortals that we admired. And Pettit yawned and begged to be allowed to sleep.

On the morrow, I dragged him to an editor. The great man read, and, rising, gave Pettit his hand. That was a decoration, a wreath of bay, and a guar-antee of rent.

And then old Pettit smiled slowly. I call him Gentleman Pettit now to myself. It’s a miserable name to give a man, but it sounds better than it looks in print.

“I see,” said old Pettit, as he took up his story and began tearing it into small strips. “I see the game now. You can’t write with ink, and you can’t write with your own heart’s blood, but you can write with the heart’s blood of some one else. You have to be a cad before you can be an artist. Well, I am for old Alabam and the Major’s store. Have you got a light, Old Hoss?”

I went with Pettit to the depot and died hard.

“Shakespeare’s sonnets?” I blurted, making a last stand. “How about him?”

“A cad,” said Pettit. “They give it to you, and you sell it — love, you know. I’d rather sell ploughs for father.”

“But,” I protested, ” you are reversing the decision of the world’s greatest —”

“Good-by, Old Hoss,” said Pettit.

“Critics,” I continued. ” But — say — if the Major can use a fairly good salesman and book-keeper down there in the store, let me know, will you?”