

- Besides literary thieves or plagiarists of whom there are many, even among the so-called great in the Philippines, there are also parasites as portrayed here.

LITERARY PARASITES

Few people realize the insuperable problems that meddlers, sycophants and parasites create for the average author. The rich and famous have always been set upon by parasites. "Poor but proud" people beg money outright from Edison, Ford and Rockefeller, while *soidisant* prodigies send manuscripts to successful authors for free criticism. There is not much to choose between these two evils: the first picks the philanthropist's pockets, the second the author's brains.

Intrusions by letter are the commonest impositions; verbal requests for various favors follow a close second, and there are a hundred other insidious forms. Once in a blue moon the author will receive an anonymous letter expressing delight at his latest book and asking for nothing in return. But such letters are rare as unexpected checks. Most let-

ters are not even worth the time required to open and discard them. Here is one. After a number of shallow compliments, the lady writer comes to her real motive:

Therefore, I would love to receive a personal reply from you, if you please. Of course, I realize that I am merely a stranger to you, but your answer would be doing me a very great honor indeed! Unless you consider them too personal, please answer the following questions: Which do you consider the greater influence — heredity or environment? Why? How can one face the death of a beloved one if reason forbids one to believe in immortality? What are the titles of your favorite books, and who are your favorite authors? Which of your own poems do you favor, and why? What are your hobbies? What is your philosophy of life? What do you consider the world needs

most in order to make it a better place in which to live? What would you say, is the greatest thing in life?

There are three chief reasons for these impositions on authors. The first is the patronizing attitude. The public is all too inclined to feel that the author is its toy, that he exists by its whim and tolerance. The second reason is the hero-worshipping attitude. The famous man always has been in the public eye and consciousness, and by some curious twist, the world elects him godfather. He should feel pleased at being made much of!

The third reason centers around the author's unsystematic life. Consider the average writer — he has no office, no office hours, no secretary. Why should his time not be at the disposal of you and me and our grandmothers? If he is without means — and poets are no longer supported by patrons of art — he cannot afford a buffer. All too easily taken in by the clamor of these "lost and distracted souls," he surrenders his time and services.

Consider the plight of the hapless author who sits down to breakfast and finds a mountain of letters. Why should he not grow perceptibly inhuman as he reads? He is swamped with requests for inscribed books from librarians in North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Maine. (Each state has libraries for colored people, sailors, consumptives. Old Ladies' Homes, convicts, for the newly converted, etc.) Requests come in to, write a preface for a hopeless book of verse; requests for his autograph, his photograph; his favorite poem, story or novel; requests to criticize a rejected manuscript; urgent notes to lend his name to charities, movements, causes, which publicity-stunt devotees assure him will bring great prestige. He is asked won't he please copy out his favorite work in longhand for Susie Bean's scrapbook; won't he please write letters of introduction to other celebrities in the interests of a prospective editorial job; he is asked to judge short story contests and award prizes — a privilege generally ending in polite massacre.

If he is an anthologist, so much the worse for him. His throat is cut by indignant champions of an omitted author. Why is Lydia Conchshell from Keokak, Iowa, omitted? Friends press him to do an obituary of a fellow poet, an assignment which by comparison leaves death itself without a sting. "Shy" literary acquaintances request him to review their first effort, which means favorably, of course; after which the review will be used as a publisher's blurb.

England can testify to what havoc autograph collectors have reduced banks. Creditors who received checks signed by Shaw, Galsworthy, Hardy and other notables, would neglect cashing them, hoping for a bullish autograph market. When a bearish market came along, hundreds of these checks would suddenly be dumped on the bank cashiers. To outwit these pests, such checks are now signed by the authors' secretaries.

Elsie Singmaster's mail staggers her afresh each morning. "Dear Madam," she read one morning, "Mr. daughter has written a very

good story which was published in her High School Magazine. She does not intend to pursue a literary life, having good matrimonial prospects. Do you want to make an offer for the plot of her story for your own use? Answer, stating price you will pay, and I will forward story if price is high enough."

Although Gamaliel Bradford insists he has not yet lost the zest that comes from having a charming woman (as to the charm he is willing to give her the benefit of the doubt) ask for his autograph or photograph, he is annoyed when the petitioner neglects to enclose postage. Booth Tarkington says that if he answered all the mail he receives, he would not have time to do anything

"My troubles as an author," testifies Thornton Burgess, "are nothing as compared with the flood of letters that come to me as a naturalist, because of my radio broadcasts. Apparently I am supposed to be a living encyclopedia. One correspondent says, 'I have a white albino, I would like your opinion of them.' An-

other lady asks me to send her a cure for rheumatism. . . ."

Arthur Stringer makes moan over an abomination that will find a large answering chorus: "A new and growing evil," he says, "which seems to be encouraged by English teachers in public schools, is the pest of school children writing for autographs and life sketches, because they are 'studying' a certain author."

Bertrand Russell writes: "In common with other authors, I suffer a good deal from persons who think that an author ought to do their work for them. Apart from autograph hunters, I get large numbers of letters from persons who wish me to copy out for them the appropriate entry in *Who's Who*, or ask me my opinion on points which I have fully discussed in print. I get many letters from Hindus, beseeching me to adopt some form of mysticism; from young Ameri-

cans, asking me where I think the line should be drawn in petting; and from Poles, urging me to admit that while all other nationalism may be bad, that of Poland is wholly noble. I get letters from engineers who cannot understand Einstein, and from persons who think I cannot understand Genesis, and from husbands whose wives have deserted them — not (they say) that would matter, but the wives have taken the furniture with them, and what in these circumstances should an enlightened male do? I get letters trying to get me to advocate abortion, and I get letters from young mothers asking my opinions of bottle-feeding.

Little wonder that an author comes to look upon these parasites as something worse than charity-seekers. They interfere with his work and embitter him into the bargain. — *By Clarico Lorenz Aiken, Condensed from the Bookman (June, '30)*