

1946

A Practical Education

George Snell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Snell, George. "A Practical Education." *New Mexico Quarterly* 16, 1 (1946). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol16/iss1/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

A PRACTICAL EDUCATION

George Snell

WHEN I FIRST SAW TOM HARTER I thought he was swell—just the kind of person I wanted to become, even though I didn't think I ever could. The way I got to know him was this: I'd been camping on the doorstep of Crane, Higginson, Bostwick & Shotwell for over six months, and finally they gave me a job. It's a big agency. If you read *Variety* or *Tide* you know they handle some of the largest accounts in the country, including the big soap and flour people. Well, the first day I walked into the office, Tom Harter was sitting at the desk next to the one they gave me. He had that hard-bitten look veterans in the advertising game usually have. I remember especially how he gave me a quick once-over from under his green eyeshade, and then grinned sort of sarcastically and crouched closer to his typewriter saying, "Another lamb, eh? What's your name?"

That wasn't the friendliest way to greet a person, and I told him so. He just grinned some more and winked at me owlishly, keeping right on at his work all the time.

But I was impressed, because Tom Harter was an old hand at this ad-writing game, and that's what I figure I want to be, one of the best. Right away he began to take an interest in me and showed me the ropes around our part of the office, which was the radio writing department. Tom was really responsible for some of the best shows handled by CHB&S. He authored the "Ma Jenkins" scripts that had been running on NBC for over five years. Naturally I'd heard a lot about him, and he was different entirely from what I'd expected. He didn't shout or pose or show off, and I liked him but I was pretty scared of him too, for the first few weeks. It seemed like every time I'd look up he'd be staring at me from under his green eyeshade with owlish eyes, and then he would grin sardonically and ask me how I was doing. And if I

got stuck for an idea or a phrase he'd come over and give me a lift, and it was as easy for him as falling off a log. Well, you have to be pretty good to be as good as Tom Harter was. And he wasn't like most copy writers who are closemouthed as clams when it comes to giving anybody else an idea, acting like they're afraid they're giving away their patrimony with half a syllable.

I can say without fear of contradiction that to be working for a great firm like CHB&S is a real privilege. We handle the General Flour account and Porter & Handel soap. You ought to see the way the big shots from NBC and CBS come into our offices with their hats in hand. When Tom Harter is called in to an idea conference you can practically see them bow and scrape. It just goes to show that no other agency can touch CHB&S and that old Tom is the real brains behind it. By rights he ought to have his name tacked right on to the others. He told me he'd been working there for twenty years—even before radio was ever thought of as a medium.

I noticed he often left the office around two or three in the afternoon. He would come back about an hour later, more talkative than any other time of the day and smelling of whiskey. Soon after I noticed this, I discovered that he kept a bottle in his desk. Now, I know enough about the rules of success to realize drinking on the job leads only one way—down. I didn't have to wonder any longer why Tom never got farther up the ladder of success. After coming back from the bar he would sit down and prop his feet on the desk. When I'd look up he would wink owlshly, grin, and say, "Harry, you remind me of somebody I used to know quite well."

He had a deep voice, and I think he liked to hear himself talk when he was a little tight. I honestly always liked him better when he'd had a few. Other times, in the mornings especially, he'd be gruff and short and hardly ever had anything inspirational to say—and that's the one thing I always look for in my association with such renowned personages. Because you see I wanted to be like him, to learn as much as I could from him and be able to write important copy the way he did. I was disappointed, I'll have to admit, because he never did say very much that was encouraging to me. Unless he was feeling high. But when he was high I always had a peculiar feeling. I couldn't tell whether to take him seriously or not.

He could be terribly cynical at times, but I am sure he did not mean many of the sarcastic things he said. For instance, I remember

he made the statement that he hoped few people ever found out he created the moronic character of Ma Jenkins. And yet she is one of the noblest old ladies in radio serials today. He also said he supposed there was a special stratum in hell reserved for liars like radio copy writers. But I know he made these statements at least partially under the influence of liquor and so was not responsible.

As time went on he told me many things equally remarkable, and I am sure that he did not really mean them the way they sounded.

One afternoon he asked me to go out with him for a little refreshment, and I did so. We put on our hats and went down the elevator and next door to Charlie's and had a couple of glasses of beer. Then he had a whiskey straight, and another one. He invited me to join him, but I just had a beer. Well, I wouldn't think of criticizing Tom Harter in any way, but he did seem to talk more than ever. He seemed very interested in me and encouraged me to tell him about my ambition, which is to write a good book some day, if I can just get the time. I told him I thought my experience writing copy ought to help me. Also I told him I hoped some day to make a name for myself in advertising, the way he had done.

He smiled the same sardonic way, and he said, "I don't doubt some day you'll sell a lot of soap and flour for somebody. It all depends on how you get educated."

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"Oh, whether they keep the Indian sign on you."

He called for another drink, and I felt inclined to caution him about having so many, but I did not want to make him think I was interfering. After all, he was old enough to be my father and ought to have known better.

"You remind me of a young fellow I knew once," he said, twirling his glass and squinting at me as if he'd never seen me quite plain before.

I asked him to tell me about this person, thinking perhaps I might learn something useful in my own career.

"At the time I'm speaking of, he was about your age, an ad man, full of ambition. The kid had ideals. Had the itch to write. Yes, but at the time he was more interested in thinking up slogans to sell everything from evaporated milk to preparations for feminine hygiene.

"He had ideals, though, and so he began to look for significance in the work he was doing. The more he looked the less he found. He

kept thinking it over and finally came out with a Great Truth. He said his work was —immoral.”

Old Tom shot me an amused smile, but I couldn't see anything funny in what he had told me. He winked and snorted. “Think of it! Immoral. How do you like that?” He finished the whiskey in his glass. I was sorry to hear about this person.

“That's the way he carried on,” Harter said. “Took to making sarcastic remarks about the ad game. Like I say, he hankered to write, the Great American Novel, I guess. That hankering got stronger than ever. It seemed the more he praised laxatives and corn remedies the more he longed to write a good sound novel, probably exposing the ad racket.

“I remember the day he got fired. Well, he'd been working up to it for a long time—had it coming to him. It seems they gave him a certain account to handle, Peskin's Anti-acid Pep Pills. Epitome of all the fraud, he thought. He'd been worrying about it and kowtowing to old Peskin, who was a sort of Sam Goldwyn, as fatheaded as they come. So he thought it over, and an idea struck him.”

Old Tom chuckled. It made me uneasy to think I should have reminded him of this young man. It didn't seem too flattering.

“He went to work and prepared a full-page layout for one of the papers and had already got old Peskin's okay on the proofs. Then he went back to the office and recorrected the proofs in the light of his ideals. He made an honest ad out of it, said Peskin's Pep Pills were nothing but bicarbonate of soda that you could buy by the barrel for a few cents, whereas old Peskin asked four-bits for a box of twelve pills. Too many of them were bad for the digestion, and so on. Plain facts.

“Well, the ad came out. When Peskin saw it he nearly had a fit. ‘What God damned maniac wrote this?’ he roared. ‘I'll sue! I'll break this agency forever!’

“Our friend was called on the carpet right now. His boss couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the ad. ‘Take him away!’ he yelled. ‘Lock him up. He's off his nut!’

“‘I'll take this to court!’ Peskin hollered. ‘I'll get redress and relief! You can't do this to me!’

“Our friend was going to make a big speech and get a lot off his mind, but now the time had come, he saw it would be a waste of breath, so he put on his hat and walked out.”

Old Tom ordered another drink and lit a cigarette. He seemed a little excited.

"You should have seen the look on Peskin's face! That was worth plenty. But this is only the beginning of my—fable. The kid felt as if he was walking on air. He packed his toothbrush and went off to the mountains to write his magnum opus. He looked up a resort where it wasn't too expensive, figuring he could live on his savings just long enough to finish his novel. He'd tried to start it a number of times but something had always come up. Now he thought six months of good hard labor would make him famous and bring in plenty of quick money.

"But it turned out that he hadn't picked the best place for writing. Everything seemed to interfere. For example, he was as full of ideals about women as he was about advertising. He wasn't so bad looking in those days—a little skinny and neurasthenic, as naïve as they come—and I can see why a woman like, well, Julia, I'll call her, would make a play for him. Hell yes, I can understand it! But he couldn't then, and it was pretty marvelous to him.

"Hold on, though; I'm getting ahead of my story. The kid took his typewriter and a ream of paper and locked himself in his room. He went at the job as if he had to make a deadline. He'd gotten into the slapdash habit and couldn't break it overnight. He read his stuff over and saw it wasn't worth a hoot. He tore it up and started again. It smelled a mile off. He started again. That can get discouraging. He'd go out, smoke a cigarette, walk around, eat something, and generally waste time.

"He told himself he needed relaxation, to get his mind off his novel. A fresh outlook, renewed energy, and that sort of stuff. But actually he had met this—Julia, and he was only rationalizing. You see, he was having dinner one evening at the hotel. All the tables were full, and she swept up to him like a queen, took a seat, and gave him a dazzling smile.

"'Do you mind if I have dinner with you?' she asked. He didn't. Through the meal she talked of herself and got him to talk too. By dessert she knew all about him, even to the part about the novel. He found out, or at least she told him, that she was a widow, spending a few weeks there to get over her heartbreak, et cetera. But he didn't care what she was; he was already in her clutches.

"That same night he went with her to the little ballroom, they

had beer (didn't sell anything stronger to ladies in those days), and he danced with her.

" 'You're so different,' she said. 'You are so sensitive. I've always wanted to meet a man with brains instead of money.'

" 'Maybe you can imagine how he talked—'Why haven't we met before?' He had ideas already about what he was going to get out of this affair. 'Women always bored me until you came along. But you aren't like the women I've known. I believe you can appreciate what an artist is trying to do.'

" 'Why, of course,' she said. 'Let's never have a thing mar our friendship. You're so young and idealistic and good. I want our friendship to be something you'll cherish all your life, even if I can't ever be anything more to you than a casual friend.'

" 'But I want you to be more than that!' he said. 'We have so much in common. I have a lot of things I want to talk to you about.'

" 'If I can help even a little, you only have to ask,' she answered, in a way that would curl your hair. 'I want to be very dear to you.'

" 'Maybe it was the liquor, excitement of music, and her sex appeal, all combined. 'Then let's be as dear and close,' he said, 'as two people can.' So, they were. That night, in fact, she came to his room and didn't leave until early the next morning."

Tom blew a cloud of smoke like a sigh.

" 'She was beautiful,' he said. 'I wish I could make you see her as she was then. It looked as if he'd found the one woman. But the next day as he looked back on it, it did seem a little too easy. He decided to keep the affair in proper perspective and tried to plunge into his work. But when he finally sat down to his typewriter he was completely dissatisfied. First of all, he was beginning to see that he had to pay the price of seven years' slipshod copy writing. Composing a respectable paragraph of prose is quite different from dreaming up slogans to sell brassières. His mind wasn't clear and keen as it probably had been before grubbing in advertising. He was cynical, in a way, in spite of his idealism, and it takes a fresh perception to make a fine writer.

" 'He turned to Julia, even while he told himself she was only an interlude, that he was learning something from her that would be useful later. He thought he really hadn't any serious intentions about her. Actually, she provided him with a successful direction, gave him

a feeling of importance, and so on. So he put the cover on his machine and spent his time making love.

"One night they went boating. There was a fine lake, surrounded by firs that grew right down to the edge of the water, and the moon was yellow and bright. They got a rowboat, pushed off, and rowed 'way out. It was quiet—even the laughter and snatches of song that came from the hotel sounded far away and unreal. He arranged some pillows so that they could rest, and she took his head in her lap. He looked up at her in the moonlight, smelled her fragrance, and was happy. He was happy because he was successful.

" 'You've given my life meaning,' he said. 'I never knew what it was to be contented until I met you.'

" 'You've given me something to live for, too,' she said. 'But don't give me more of yourself than you wish to—you are going to be a great writer some day. That's more important than anything else.'

" 'There's only one thing important to me,' he said, not knowing for sure that he meant it, 'that is, to make you happy.'

" 'You're a darling, and you're my poet.'

Tom leered at me. "My God, the poor damned fool!

"It was like that night after night—on the lake, on moonlight hikes, and most of all, of course, in one or the other of their rooms. As I say, it was with uneasiness that he surrendered his time, his thoughts, and everything else to her—at first. But it got so that he wasn't doing anything else. It was increasingly pleasant. He found he could forget his inadequacy by submerging himself in her. And he didn't even know anything about her, really. She knew a hell of a lot more about him. You see, she'd been around. Being handsome, the boys had always played up to her. She was spoiled clear through, her tastes were extravagant, and besides all that, she was a woman of loose character. The first night should have told him that, but apparently it didn't.

"She led him around by the nose. 'My poet!' My God! Well, he persuaded her to marry him. And from that time on he wasn't a poet or anything else but a check-signer. What do you suppose he did? Crawled back on his belly asking for his old job—the only thing he knew how to do where money was. Well, he got it. He's still at it."

Old Tom stopped as if he was tired. "That's why I say," he went on after a minute, "it all depends on how you get educated." He pulled out his watch. "God, here I've been rambling on like—like the Ancient Mariner."

"Yes," I said, "we'd better get back to the office."

I couldn't help thinking of what he had told me as we rode up on the elevator. I was also afraid they'd notice he had been drinking more than usual when we walked back into the office. They might have missed us too.

There was somebody waiting for him. It was a lady wearing expensive furs—a woman who must have been a real beauty at one time, and she jumped right up and asked him where he had been. I was surprised at the way she talked.

"So there you are!" she said, quite loud. "You've been drinking again, I see."

Old Tom looked around and tried to get her out of the room. He took her by the arm and was making signs for her to speak more softly. It really was embarrassing to me.

"I should think you'd be ashamed!" she said. "Whenever I come to the office it's the same thing. Out with a young boy, too, and probably getting him drunk!"

Of course I left the office, pretending I had business elsewhere, because I did not want to embarrass them by being present at a family altercation. I really was surprised, when I thought about it, that such an imposing lady, dressed so expensively and more like someone in a play, should be the wife of a carelessly dressed and even shabby person like Tom Harter.

Now you can probably see what is bothering me. I have always thought Tom Harter a swell guy, and I've looked up to him as the kind of person I'd like to become. It should be fine to work for an important firm like Crane, Higginson, Bostwick & Shotwell. But I don't really know if there is such a great future in it for an ambitious person.