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BEN AMES WILLIAMS AND ROBERT H. DAVIS: THE SEEDLING IN THE SUN

By RICHARD CARY

WHEN the stout and florid Editor first saw the Tyro and his wife, he grinned genially, extended his hand, and said, "I'm Bob Davis." Years later he roared with laughter as he recalled the scene. "I found myself facing the youngest, the most frightened pair of kids I had ever seen, and, so help me, they were holding hands!"¹ His impression of the eager, uncertain, emergent author, "weighing 280 on the hoof and broad as a roll-top desk,"² was one he never let Ben Ames Williams forget.

Born twenty years and a thousand miles apart (Robert Hobart Davis on March 23, 1869, in Brownville, Nebraska; Ben

¹ Florence Talpey Williams, *All About Da* (Portland, Me., privately published, 1962), 72. This is Mrs. Williams' informal biography of her husband, "written for my grandchildren."

² Fred S. Mathias, *The Amazing Bob Davis* (New York, 1944), 7.

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Ames Williams in Macon, Mississippi, on March 7, 1889), their lives traced dissimilar route-lines before, inevitably, they conjoined in a publishing office in New York City on June 19, 1916. It was a fertile meeting for both men: the novice whose reading audience was to become the widest of his time in America and the veteran whose knowledge and influence were the widest in the field of popular magazine fiction.

From the two hundred and fifty Davis letters to Williams, now at Colby College, and the eighty Williams letters to Davis in the collection of his papers at the New York Public Library,³ it has been possible to recreate the evolution of their professional relationship and to chart the pulse of their personal reactions to each other. Davis's letters range from 1914 to 1941, Williams' from 1919 to 1941. A diminution of frequency occurs after 1923, but it is not until the Thirties that they failed to communicate several times during any given year. Of the two, Williams was the more conservative of phrase and sentiment. They began with the formalistic "Mr.," soon dropping this salutation in favor of "Dear Ben" and "Dear Bob." In this mode Williams continued without variance. Davis shifted playfully to Williams' two front initials, to the full "Benjamin" (which was *not* his name), and sometimes to the nepotal "Benji." The tenor of their expression was in accord with these respective propensities. Their gathered letters constitute a vital chronicle of two men parallel in principles but diverse in demeanor.

I

Bob Davis came by his dramatic flair honestly. He was the son of a New England minister who went west as a missionary among the Indians and eventually counted Sitting Bull as one of his parishioners. Bob was desultorily educated in the public schools of Carson City, Nevada, later became a compositor on the local *Appeal*. In the Mark Twain tradition, he moved farther west and in time served as reporter for all three of San Francisco's major dailies. Then as now New York City was the cynosure of all enterprising newspapermen. At 26

³ The Davis letters are a recent gift to the College by Mrs. Williams. Quotations from both sets of letters are made through the kindness of Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Madge Lee Davis, and the cooperation of the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library.

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Davis arrived in the metropolis. He made his mark in a succession of journalistic coups, the most spectacular of which were his exposé of the so-called Beef Trust which was shipping putrefied meat to our soldiers in the Spanish-American War and his graphic recital of the Corbett-Fitzsimmons heavyweight championship fight. In less than ten years, after passing employment on three other papers, he was appointed managing editor of the *Sunday News*. At such a high plateau most men would have been content to solidify a reputable career. Not so Bob Davis.

His public triumphs and his influential position brought him happiness enough, for he was irrevocably gregarious. But it must have been during his stint on the *Sunday World* in 1903 that he caught a glimpse of his native vocation. It was then that he met O. Henry, then that he savored the fascination of discovering unfledged writers and encouraging them to accomplishments beyond their own dreams. In the following year Davis, now editor-in-chief of the Munsey magazines,⁴ signed footloose O. Henry to a life-saving five-year contract.

O. Henry was one in a long chain of writers Davis recognized initially or rescued from the doldrums. To skirt the risk of tedium, herewith is only a partial list of those who acknowledged Bob Davis as their literary godfather: Edgar Rice Burroughs, Zane Grey, Edison Marshall, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Octavus Roy Cohen, Max Brand, Fannie Hurst, Israel Zangwill, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Sophie Kerr, Frank L. Packard, Montague Glass, Arthur Somers Roche, Faith Baldwin, James Oliver Curwood, Rex Beach, Louis Joseph Vance, Charles Van Loan, and Ben Ames Williams. On one of his trips to London in search of publishable novels Davis induced Joseph Conrad to rewrite a script which he later printed in *Munsey's* as "Victory." Sam Hellman, another Davis protégé, could think of no editor who had "graduated more writers from pulp to prominent pay." More than sixty authors dedicated books to him.

⁴ Frank A. Munsey, born in Mercer, Maine, created an empire of newspapers and popular magazines around the turn of the century which rivaled Hearst's for a couple of decades. Davis not only controlled *Munsey's Magazine* and *Argosy* but also launched and edited seven other Munsey periodicals. In 1926 he became a columnist on the *New York Sun*, a Munsey newspaper.

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For years Bob Davis read an estimated million words per week and thought of himself as a conduit for American fiction. But Arnold Bennett cherished him for more than that. After their first meeting, Bennett spoke of Davis as an "immense personal magnetic force," and rated him, to boot, as "certainly one of the most dramatic and enthralling letter writers alive."⁵ It took no special perceptivity on Bennett's part to make these statements; both are indisputable. Mary Roberts Rinehart carefully preserved "those brilliant and sometimes incredibly funny letters," while Max Brand vowed that Davis letters "always make me happy, because even if the news is disastrous you put such a punch behind the words that you make a fellow glad to be a living human."

As to Davis's "force," it had two salient strands: first, his philosophy of friendship; second, his tremendous versatility. Making friends was his principal hobby; "Know lots of people" his favorite slogan. He was intrigued by the potentialities in human relationships and the values accruing therefrom. He felt that "Every important advancement you ever made was . . . due to some acquaintance,"⁶ and he wasn't talking about opportunism. Because his own capacity to give was inexhaustible he believed that everyone had within him the spark to brighten derelict spirits or to ignite lagging talents. In this respect he was generous to a fault, though it must not be presumed that he was "a male wandering Pollyanna." Upon "the corrupt, the prurient, the bogus" he heaped the "blistering language of Fisherman's Wharf." He was "plain as an old shoe" to his biographer, and the New York *Sun* obituarist recalled him as "never jaded, satirical, highbrow or radical." Davis harbored no stainless illusions about himself. To an interviewer he declared, "I do not object to the truth."

The aptitudes of Bob Davis were astonishingly multilateral. He wrote successfully in disparate genres of verse, fiction, and drama. He composed songs and subtle photographic studies. A famed gourmet and a prizefight promoter, he also reveled in his reputation as a fisherman (Sam Blythe called him "the Compleatest Angler"). As a journalist he scaled several

⁵ Arnold Bennett, "Robert H. Davis," *American Magazine*, LXXVI (August 1913), 34, 36.

⁶ Fred C. Kelly, "Be Sociable," *American Magazine*, LXXXI (March 1916), 33.

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Everests, none loftier, however, than his panegyric, "I Am the Printing Press." A Biblical recitative in form and tone, it appeared in some sixteen hundred newspapers, was printed separately in millions of copies, paraphrased over two thousand times, translated in every civilized enclave of the world, and ultimately cast in bronze. "No novelist could hope for such a circulation or such permanency," sighed Arnold Bennett. Towering above even this was his expertise as an editor, the facet of greatest import to this account.

Much of what is relevant about Ben Ames Williams before he became aware of Bob Davis has already been told by Mrs. Williams in the first pages of this issue and need not be repeated here. Suffice it to observe that Williams lived at his Mississippi birthplace for a year and a half, was moved to Jackson, Ohio (where his father was editor of the *Standard-Journal*), then came east to school in Massachusetts, spent a year in Cardiff (where his father was U. S. Consul), attended Dartmouth College, went to work on the Boston *American*, married, and settled in the environs of the Hub.

By 1910 he was bending over a typewriter almost every night, tirelessly turning reams of blank sheets into short stories which, as he said, "failed to interest anyone but myself." There was a stubborn streak in Williams. Disregarding the gale of rejection slips, he persisted for four rewardless years. Calmly he assayed his situation. "I had early proof that I possessed no inborn ability as a writer. . . . A man who works that hard and doesn't get anywhere for that long is no born writer."⁷ Quite as calmly he laid out his future course. On his twenty-fifth birthday Mrs. Williams gave him a notebook in which to record his daily progress as an author. On the first page he wrote: "I have vowed that if five years shows no real success at writing I will lock this book in my deepest drawer and forget it."

Before the first year of this pentad elapsed, however, Charles Agnew McLean accepted "Wings of 'Lias" for *Smith's Magazine*, paying Williams \$50 for this story based on his southern background. There were explosions of joy back at the homestead, but Williams pondered the news with sad ambivalence.

⁷ New York Times (February 5, 1953), 23.

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It seemed "a small recompense for the more or less back-breaking work which I had crowded into my so-called leisure hours over the preceding three years. And the worst of it was that I recognized even in that moment, that the incident was closed. . . . There is nothing so completely in the past as a story after it is sold."⁸ In the order of writing, this was his eighty-fourth story. He was assuredly entitled to his psychic frustration, the sense of flabby revulsion which afflicts every creative artist when his creature no longer is *his*.

There were other rejections and other acceptances before Bob Davis rose as a dominant factor in Williams' literary fortunes. From the point of view of calendar and map they had meandered along converging sides of a scalene triangle, the tip of which they now approached.

II

Williams tried for at least fourteen months to land a story in one of the Munsey magazines. Davis read all his contributions and refused all of them with jolly aplomb—not, however, without furnishing incisive comments about their shortcomings. In his first letter of record (December 10, 1914), he returned "Cell Number 6" with the decree that it "seems to be a much-ado-about-nothing story. . . . Sorry, Colonel Williams, but you are reaching out an endless arm to seize coincidence." By now Williams had written over a hundred stories and had met almost as many rebuffs. But this was not just another routine rejection. The man had taken time to diagnose, and there were twinkling implications in that "Colonel."⁹ Williams sent him more.

On December 28 Davis demonstrated the sensitivity to public taste which had sustained him for a decade in his current position. He found "A Police Petruchio" rather funny, but declared, "I am afraid it would create adverse criticism. No matter how offensive the spud-throwing female happened to be, there is no reason why Tim should have pinched her. Every-

⁸ *All About Da*, 69.

⁹ Williams wrote apropos this letter: "Here was something new. A letter with a real criticism, and a real suggestion . . . And this was the first time any editor ever told me, in words of one syllable that I could understand, why my story had failed to sell. This was the first of a series of letters, all specific, all definite." In Wainwright Evans, "Bob Davis—Maker of Literary Geniuses," *National Pictorial Brain Power Monthly*, I (November 1921), 54.

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body isn't as broadminded about these matters as authors and editors." To soften the negation he added, "I expect to be forgiven for sending this story back." Ben Ames Williams, struggling toward a formula which would not leave "the people cold," could only be grateful.

Bob Davis sometimes enheartened new writers by buying their stories with no intent to publish them. There is no indication that he favored Williams with such largesse. He continued to revert the stream of manuscripts to its source with unmitigated frankness. In January 1915 he said of "The Squealer": "You go too far in this story. It is sordid and repellent." In November: "The son of the major [in 'The Rutherford Shows'] is an almost impossible person, and I am afraid he will not get by with the reading public."¹⁰ Williams began to feel that his "deadly facility" of writing eight to ten thousand words a day, acquired through reportorial exigencies, was a distinct handicap.

Abruptly the tide turned. On February 12, 1916, Davis wrote: "I can use 'Glissez, M'Sieu Kellee, Glissez' at \$50.00." On March 9: "Your nautical bronco-buster ['The Whale Buster'] is rather an agreeable person. I will send you a check next week." On April 5 he expressed some reservations about "Worth a Leg"—"compared with your whaling yarn, it doesn't start"—but he bought it for a slightly lower price. Precisely two months after first acceptance by Davis, Williams was electrified by his offer of \$350 for "In the Redbrush." The letters of May 4 and 15, however, sharply reminded him that authorship is at best a chameleon profession. Said Davis in the old vein: "Even if ['The Fluctuating Woodlot'] were not puzzling and unconvincing, it would fall down on the fact that you can't sympathize with any of the characters." He condemned "The Sob Story" as "pretty obvious. . . . We have had an overdose of old reporters, bright managing editors and sobarines lately."

The most crucial dilemma of Williams' career arose when Davis paid a stately sum for the next story submitted, a serial

¹⁰ "Busy as he was, he always had time to help along young people who were trying to break into the fiction field. He would give them plain talk, so plain that even the most obtuse could get its import. But it was helpful and encouraging." *New York Times* (October 12, 1942), 17.

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called "The Whaler." Should Williams resign his job and wager everything on fiction? Could he earn enough to support his wife and two sons? His editor at the Boston *American* predicted he would go far as a newspaperman and advised caution. But the lure of the muse was such that it impelled Williams to seek more accordant ears. He decided to go to New York and consult with Davis. The editor was delighted. He invited the Williamses to a lunch of "some perfectly well-cooked grub . . . served by a waiter who doesn't speak German," at which they could discuss literature "as a business, as an art, as a pastime, and as a scourge."

They met at his office, broke the ice, and then—in Mrs. Williams' words: "We walked to a restaurant, the Beaux Arts, for lunch, and we were not only awed by the tall buildings and the broad avenues of New York but by the fact that Mr. Davis seemed to know everybody. Instead of the crowding and hurrying of today, our progress was leisurely, and Mr. Davis had a charming way of pointing things out to us and saluting his acquaintances, making us feel that we really did this every day. And at lunch he talked and talked, and we sat and listened, and I drank only half of the first cocktail I had ever seen! He advised Ben to quit the paper and write fiction, and when I timidly asked him how I could help the most, he exclaimed, 'Spend the rest of your life letting this overgrown pup have his own way!' And he turned to Ben and said, 'You look big and strong and healthy! I think you ought to be able to write!'"¹¹ That was all the mandate Ben Ames Williams needed.

He hurried back to his tranquil Boston suburb and engaged his typewriter with renewed intensity. If he assumed that Davis's personal approval would lead to any softening of his crisp impeachments, he was quickly disabused. Within the year following their meeting Davis shot these barbs at him:

July 7, 1916: Regarding "Received Payment"—It's well written, and although it has a lesson and a moral, neither of them leads anywhere in particular.

July 13, 1916: Regarding "Eastward into Eden"—Seems to me to have all the characteristics of a woodpile. . . . It isn't worthy of you, and

¹¹ *All About Da*, 72.

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you're throwing good time away, into the bargain. . . . I think these bad breaks of yours are the result of inexperience.

September 18, 1916: Regarding "Lese Majesty of the Law"—My Gawd man! This isn't a story. . . . It is entirely too durn rough. . . . Go back to your old style.

March 13, 1917: Permit me to intimate, my fat Welsh friend, that 85,000 words a month is too much for any man to write. I don't care how strong a man he is. I will lecture you a little more violently to your face.

June 19, 1917: Yes, I do like "Where Your Treasure Is," but the first 67 pages don't develop very much except gas.

Had he not known his man, Williams might well have desisted thereupon. Fortunately he saw behind Davis's screen of punitive quips the deft mentor guiding him past inconspicuous pitfalls. In the middle of this beleaguered period, reassured by a subsidy from his mother, Williams resigned from the *American*. Davis interposed needed moral sanction. "I am glad you are going into the fiction game. I'll do everything I can to make your experiment a success. . . . My best wishes to Mrs. Williams. Tell her that she is a noble and brave woman to encourage you in the legitimate occupation of writing for a living, and I don't think she will regret it."

Shortly, a new note gained ascendancy in Davis's critiques. Although he continued to castigate with his old zest (of "Deeds, Not Words" he wrote: "I had scheduled this story to open the *Railroad Man's Magazine* as a weekly, but, honestly, I haven't the nerve to hand it to them"), he began to qualify the harshness. Words of approbation appeared more and more frequently. The first hint of this new tune came on July 13, 1916: "When I slang your suggestions, I do it with a double purpose. First, and back of it all, is a real interest in you. If I didn't feel sure of your stroke, I wouldn't ask you to take an oar. But I like you and believe in you, and I am quite sure that you and the little wife will some day forgive me what in this instance will seem to be unwarranted violence."

Thereafter the harmonic of praise, instigation, and augury dilated perceptibly:

October 15, 1917: I have no fault to find with your fiction. It is satisfactory to me in every way, and if the public fails to write as many letters as it ought to, disregard their indifference because in time you

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will arrive at the top. Have no fear about that. I will bet money that Ben Ames Williams will be as well known as any writer in this country in three years; and then of course I will lose you but I will not cease to admire you.

January 31, 1918: I want you to always feel that you have got a quick market here, and I will go a long ways off the beaten path to be of service to you. But what's the use; you know that.

June 12, 1918: As I said before, it hurts me to write this letter, . . . I don't want you to mistake me for a moody, temperamental old man who doesn't know his mind. . . . If anything in this letter irritates you, forgive me. I don't mean to do that. . . . I have no diplomacy. I prefer the plain truth all the time. I think it is better for both of us.

April 10, 1919: As I said before, Benjamin, I never make mistakes in the prophecy business—well, hardly ever. And never in relation to you.

February 17, 1920: I didn't take a chance when I prophesied your future.

May 11, 1920: I'm not a prophet; but I do know a writing guy when I see him and when I announce that a new star is rising in the east, by the jumpin' gods of war, a new star *is* rising in the east.

Davis's usefulness to Williams was not confined to such tonic generalities. Notwithstanding the strain of his multiple responsibilities, Davis took time to read each of Williams' manuscripts attentively and assess it minutely. Most notable are his extended suggestions for revision of plot, characterization, tone, and length of "After His Own Heart," and his three-page, single-spaced typewritten analysis of "Deeds, Not Words." He steered Williams away from gauche, oblique, or divulgent titles, warning him that they would repel readers or betray his dénouement. (He rejected, for instance, "Deep Waters," "Spindrift," "Sea Wrack," "Salt of the Sea," "Wrack of the Sea," and "The Harsh Salt" as possible titles for *The Sea Bride*, the final name of Williams' second published book.) He prodded Williams about atmosphere and continuity in "The Whaler," the derivative quality of "A Monstrous Little Voice," the lack of dramatic pace in "Where Your Treasure Is." On March 7, 1922, he expostulated against themes regarded as verboten by the American public. "Ben, the whole thing is a fine and magnificent piece of writing, but you might just as well throw kerosene on a black cat, touch a match to him and turn him loose among the tenement houses as to hurl this story into the pages of a magazine. . . . You can bet your

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sweet socks I would print it in one minute if I had the nerve." No other publisher on this side of the Atlantic dared either. *Sangsue*, a then "dangerous" treatment of miscegenation, achieved only an English edition.

More often than not Williams accepted Davis's judgments and instituted proposed changes. Wisely, Davis tempered his objections with comedy and consideration. "It is entirely up to you," he would say; or, "Yell 'no!' and I will subside and slap it to press as she is writ"; or, "I don't want to force a title upon you that's not agreeable"; or, "Will you 'stand aside, sir' and let me sail this ship out of the harbor? . . . My whole heart is wrapped up in it." Out of unlike temperaments they had evolved an amalgam of understanding and mutual respect, the younger man earnestly assimilating the injunctions of superior experience.

Very early in the game Davis sensed that he would lose Williams to the "high class periodicals." And here emerged the elemental generosity of spirit which made him friend as well as editor to so large and contrastive an assortment of personalities. He was clearly reluctant ("I hate to let one of your manuscripts out of this office"), but by September 1916 he was already telling Williams that one of his stories was "sure-fire" for the *Pictorial Review*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Delineator*, or *Ladies' Home Journal*, "so take my tip and shoot it to one of them." When Williams sold his first story to the *Saturday Evening Post*¹² Davis wrote with lucent sincerity: "Yes, I do congratulate you with all my heart. . . . I am not surprised at your success. I guess it is good-bye Ben so far as I am concerned. . . . Well, old sport, you have my blessing." After decrying and returning "The Squealer," Davis nevertheless cheered when Williams rewrote the story and placed it with *Collier's*.

There are many comparable instances but that of *The Great Accident* eclipses all others as an illustration. Late in 1917 Williams broached it as a serial. Davis responded ardently, "You bet your life I want a crack at [it], but I won't be irritated if you sell it to another high priced editor for a boxcar full of money. . . . When prosperity comes to you I shall not be de-

12 "The Mate of the Susie Oakes," CLXXXIX (April 14, 1917), 71.

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pressed.” He persevered on the same high scale after reading the first installment. Subsequently it turned out rather too long and wound up in another precinct. Two paragraphs by Bob Davis attest the reciprocity of confidence, the unsubtle loyalty of each man for the other. The first is from his letter of May 19, 1919:

You need not feel a bit sorry about *The Great Accident*. I knew the moment I read it that if the right editor could be found, you would get some real money for it. My offer was a guarantee of faith and while I saw in your eye a willingness to accept right then and there, I made up my mind I wouldn't let you accept it, although I wanted the story just as bad as Lorimer wants it. I couldn't however print it serially in a monthly magazine. It would have taken twelve numbers to get it to press, and only an absolute, downright, blown-in-the-bottle ass would have had the nerve to cut it. Its appearance in the *Post* will give you national fame. From now on your reputation is made. Nobody can stop you. All the editors in Christendom cannot retard you another day.

On the editorial page of the *New York Sun* (November 26, 1932) he summarized the incident in “Recollections as to the Behavior of the Writer Folk”:

Thirteen years ago Ben Ames Williams brought me a manuscript of a novel entitled *The Great Accident*. I told him that for my purpose it was too long by 30,000 words, but that if he would cut it down I would pay \$2000 for the first serial rights, volunteering the information, however, that it was worth more in its original form and should be offered to one of the weeklies. He insisted upon making the cuts and closing the deal. “Try it on one first-class weekly,” I urged, “and if it comes back it's mine.” Reluctantly, but with no assurance of success, he took my advice. Inside of two weeks *The Great Accident* had been read and accepted by the first weekly editor to get his hands on it, and Ben was richer by exactly \$6000.

They exulted together over Williams' rapid rise through the economic strata of periodical publication. He told Davis about the *Saturday Evening Post's* offer of ten cents per word for serials and, although it meant that Williams was irretrievably lost to the “pulp” thereafter, Davis retorted: “Don't put lead in your shoes, Ben—let yourself go up in the air where you can soar around and look down on the 5c a word squads.” Adding impishly, “Don't forget I am holding out some of your best stuff to spring later on when you get famous. I am a cagy Welshman.” Seven months later the new rate was

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doubled. Williams wrote happily (May 9, 1920): "You're a great man; and I am beginning to think you're a prophet."

Only two slight swirls marred the surface of their deep-running friendliness in these pristine days. In the case of Williams' second appearance in the *Post* (November 24, 1917) Davis's pique was directed at himself. "I will be honest with you, Ben—I am not going to read 'Steve Scaevola.' I haven't the time. I lost the lobster originally, and now he can go to hell." The second case bore a faint accusation of benefits forgot. Davis had asked to read a newly completed story and was informed that the *Post* had already purchased it. "If 'The Road of Casualty' is to appear in the *Post* I will read it there. Don't bother Paul to send me the manuscript." Williams' agent, Paul Reynolds, nevertheless sent it. In due time Davis returned it, remarking with understandable grumpiness, "Why don't you offer me a story as good as this once in a while?"

In 1920 Davis established his own agency for sale and distribution of fiction, plays, and motion picture rights. In this capacity he pushed Williams toward lusher pastures, opening up prospects for publication of his novels while delicately avoiding conflict with Williams' regular representative—"I think I can get very fine terms for you, but I don't want to appear to be butting in, and I shall not butt in." He also multiplied opportunities for movie contracts, after having conscientiously forewarned Williams: "Don't let your mind dwell on the motion picture end of the business of writing or your work will suffer. . . . Do one thing or the other—a moving picture king or a literary guy—one of the two. Don't try to be both at the same time." Williams had of course to learn this lesson on his own. After one thirteen-week stretch as a Hollywood scenario writer in 1929 he saw the sagacity of Davis's dictum.

One might pause here to recite the saga of Davis, Williams, and Samuel Goldwyn, but the details of their negotiations—so complex and irresolute—demand a chapter of their own. There is room only to note that this interchange did not terminate in typical Hollywood style, with all parties heartily reviling each other. After the breakdown of expectations Goldwyn wrote Davis, "I appreciate your position and am wholly in sympathy with you"; Davis wrote Williams, "A noble, kindly, big-hearted, generous performance"; Williams wrote Davis

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about Goldwyn, "He's a good fellow. May his tribe increase."

Long after they had severed professional relations and Williams had made an unshakeable place for himself, Davis maintained his role of chief chider and laudator. In his diary for 1924 Williams observed: "Bob Davis says I no longer write good stories, that I am a slave to my interest in character." This he excused as being "deliberate on my part." In 1927 he sent Davis a copy of *Splendor* with the bantering entreaty that "If you are not pleased with it tell me; if you are, tell the world!" On December 7 Davis dispatched a lengthy audit of the novel, visibly striving not to be captious, and concluding ambiguously: "*Splendor* will not sell many copies because the few people who understand the excellence of the book borrow—and keep—the literature that appeals to them." Williams rejoined on the 12th: "I must confess that from your letter I can not tell whether you enjoyed *Splendor* or not. I am inclined to think that you did not, which will always be a source of regret to me." Davis complained about *Come Spring* (1940) being somewhat "long in starting" and scored the epilogue as "the worst anti-climax that ever came under my eye." Yet he pronounced the book in toto "the swellest pre-revolutionary record ever penned." In the midst of reading *The Strange Woman* (1941) Davis effused, "It's the liveliest thing you've produced."

Williams was no longer psychically dependent upon Davis. He altered approved objectives *deliberately*; he questioned dispraise. Change what might, however, the influence was indelible, the gratitude unfaltering, the homage instinctive. To Davis's reproof of *Come Spring* he conceded: "I was myself in some doubt about the postscript." And, inversely, he was elated over Davis's acclaim of *The Strange Woman*: "There's no one from whom I would rather have had it." The seedling had sprouted foliage of its own but could never forget the sun that had graced the spring of its time.

III

Davis and Williams were brought together by their ruling concern with the formulation of fiction. Without delay they discovered in each other affinities of character and avocations which admitted access of feelings far more profound than those

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usual in business. They were both born in the month of March, a fact which Davis cited owlshly. Both were totally devoted to their wives, who inveterately accompanied them on their long-ranging travels. (Mrs. Davis saw all the exotic ports and quarters depicted in his many volumes; the Williamses stopped in every one of the forty-eight states over the course of five motor trips and had planned to visit Alaska and Hawaii upon their admission to the union.) Williams was addicted to his children, and the childless Davis often romped with them, taught them to fish, remembered their birthdays, wrote them letters.

Two traits in particular Davis seized upon and continuously joggled at Williams with the assurance of a friend who can say anything with impunity. The first was their national patrimony—both were of Welsh descent. Davis was sometimes serious on this score. “Having descended from an imaginative race, you shouldn’t weaken the structure of your future by dealing in the obvious present. . . . The fact that you come from a nation which remains to this day unconquered does not mean that it’s inadvisable to conquer yourself. Get away from those old plots” (July 13, 1916). In the next year (July 19) he said to Mrs. Williams: “Ben is Welsh; so am I. And for that reason I can write frankly to him.” At other times he chaffed—“Don’t forget to tell your son that a certain well known editor is a Welsh gentleman” (December 28, 1916)—or prefaced his designation of “Welshman” with a scurrilous adjective. In his staidier way Williams fended off these thrusts with talk about Welsh memorabilia, and blithely defined his tormentor as “darganfyddodd Robert H. Davis, Golygydd y Munsey Magazines” (February 2, 1919).

The second trait which Davis airily expounded was their physical similitude—both were on the portly side. Here Davis minced no words, addressing Williams as “fatty,” “Mr. Fat Man,” “you big fat Welsher.” (Neither, however, combined the two attributes to suggest that they were both sons of W[h]ales.) “A fat man like you lying around in low temperatures,” jibed Davis in September 1918, “has got about as much chance of surviving as a pumpkin in a corn furrow.” At their first meeting he charged Williams with “weighing 280 on the hoof,” later compressing his estimate to 260. Williams

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disowned marginal quantities of this embonpoint, describing himself coolly as "about thirty-five per cent above the normal weight for age and height." Once he groaned: "One of my friends here says he saw [Irvin S. Cobb] in Washington recently, and that Irv is getting thin. Have you noticed it? Ask him to send me his prescription. I've gained three pounds" (January 19, 1923).

They had a common passion for sports and games, at which both were highly proficient. Adopting the elaborate ritual of men who value each other's skill, each bragged unconscionably about his own prowess and pretended that the other was completely inept. As usual, Davis was the more emotive.

Bridge appealed, but games of greater virility enslaved them. Boxing they enjoyed as a spectator sport. After gleefully predicting that Georges Carpentier would annihilate Jack Dempsey, they sat in the stands and watched the reverse take place. Archly they notified each other of long drives and low scores in golf. Following an oppressive accident in 1930 Davis prattled with characteristic grit and humor: "The leg is just as good as new and I can whack off thirty-six holes without halting. There is no sign of the hitch or hike in my step. Moreover, I am now dancing. My next imitation is to go into the lion taming business and the running high jump."

Curling, however, stirred him only to profanity. Williams was an adept, having participated in several international matches. When he tried to inveigle Davis with accounts of astounding performances, Davis merely sniffed, "As for curling, I enclose a column showing what I think of the God damn game." The kindest comparison he mustered therein was: "A curler who begins to tighten up in the larynx and lose his powers of articulation is worse off than a gigolo stricken by hardening of the arteries."¹³

Hunting and fishing were their paramount diversions. In letter after letter they forsook matters of basic business for the fascinating minutiae of trout and moose and guns and rods and lures. They swapped audacious stories about the weight of bass and the span of antlers which had fallen to their wiles,

¹³ The letter was written on March 21, 1940; the column, "Bob Davis Reveals," appeared in the editorial page of the *New York Sun*, February 19, 1935.

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none of which either seemed to put much stock in. "Ben looks upon me only as a fisherman and, confidentially, a bad fisherman at that," complained Davis to Mrs. Williams (May 6, 1918). "He never believes anything I tell him. When I talk about trout and bass Ben looks out of the window and smiles." Fishing, most effectually, released the lurking boyishness in both men. Temporarily removed from the frenetic demands of daily occupation, Williams would recall the days before he was ten, "walking open-eyed in the out-of-doors" under his father's tutelage, shooting his first feathered game in Mississippi, catching his first fish in a southern Ohio creek. Davis would detonate alliteratively at the prospect of some good Maine angling. "Oh, boy! wait until you see me bashing the bass up in the Belfast backwaters."

For the most part Davis camouflaged their infatuation with woods and waters by pulling Williams' leg. He expressed sadness over Williams' primal ignorance about fishing and declared it was he who had initiated the Williams boys in the art. "Any attempt on your part to pose as the pater-familias piscatore will be met with a lawsuit." With deadpan benevolence he wrote out involved instructions about elementary procedures, concluding: "Ben, you will be the death of me. I have tried to make an outdoors man of you but you haven't an eye for it." He challenged his veracity: "I expect you to do a little lying, but not much"; "You're either stalking an elephant or a whale all the time. There's no twilight zone, no minimum with you. Maximum room only." And when Williams sent photographs to substantiate his alleged fantasies, Davis hooted: "I told [Mrs. Davis] those fish were taken out of a hatchery, gassed, laid out on a small plank and photographed for the mere purpose of deceiving the populace. I told her I couldn't understand how Mrs. Williams, the mother of two fine big boys, could live with a man who caught such little fish." Once in a while, for a trice, he stepped out from behind the mask of Thalia. "Even if the fishing in Lakeport appears to be indifferent, I'd rather spend a week with you in a flat-bottom boat than any other living guy; hot or cold, fat or lean" (August 11, 1927). When all was said, external nature was only a canal to the inner man.

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All this badinage Williams parried according to his lights. Casually he catalogued his hits and misses in forest and stream. With controlled bliss he descanted upon the incomparable gunning or fishing that was to be had in Belfast and Searsmont, Maine, in Lakeport, New Hampshire, in Nova Scotia, dropping invitations for Davis to join him—which Davis did, often enough. Once Williams went off on an hilarious tack, but the joke was on himself; he had shot a duck decoy.

Davis liked to organize rod and rifle junkets or to include Williams in parties organized by others. Two of these had instant literary consequence for Williams. In the summer of 1922 Davis suggested "a ten-day trout and bass trip" up the Allagash River in Maine, with Irving S. Cobb and two other cronies. After some confusion about local nomenclature was dispelled (Davis snorted, "Most of the names of the lakes up there look as though they were devised entirely by drunks"), the expedition was led to its destination by a seasoned game warden, David Brown. During their stay at the wilderness camp Brown told Williams a tale about the murder of a warden while in pursuit of poachers. On his return Williams wrote "The Road of Casualty," basing the plot on this episode. By weird coincidence Brown disappeared on the very day the first installment of the story was published.¹⁴ His body was discovered in a pond the following spring. Although no evidence of foul play was adduced, Williams felt "all cut up and blue as indigo," as Davis put it. "I wouldn't be disturbed by the suggestion of prophecy in your story," he consoled Williams. "It only shows that you sense in advance the things about which you write. It is a great gift. Don't deplore it."

The second jaunt engendered no melodrama but more copy. It began with Davis's note of November 5, 1928: "A convention of the world's leading intellects will be held at Sea Island Beach, Georgia. The party will be made up of magazine editors, publishers and distinguished authors. The group cannot be complete without you. . . . All kinds of game, salt and fresh water fishing, to say nothing of wild turkeys, and politicians upon whom the law goes off November 6th. Come and kill a candidate." Williams went and was captivated by the atmos-

¹⁴ *Saturday Evening Post*, CXCIV (November 11 & November 18, 1922).

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phere of palm trees, oaks, and Spanish moss. He spent "from one to four months of each of the next six years in that region" with his family. The impact upon his creative consciousness resulted in two books with Georgian setting, *Great Oaks* in 1930 and *Pirate's Purchase* in 1931.

A fine paradox inheres in outdoor sports: they contain just enough crudity and egotism to permit a man to demonstrate affection toward another man without appearing to be effeminate or sentimental. Fishing and hunting were routes by which Williams and Davis approached levels of deepest understanding. While Davis was baldly ironic in his utterances, Williams inclined toward connotation:

He plays golf in two languages and catches bass in three. He's the only man in the United States who knows why a bull bass tries to eat a four inch wooden plug painted blue and white. . . . He will stop a game of golf at the seventeenth green, with the score all even, to go catch a bass; he will stop fishing with a seven-pound bass hooked and dancing a fandango about the boat, to go ashore and eat dinner. He will leave the finest dinner uneaten to go into the kitchen and cook; and his idea of heaven is a spotless kitchen full of onions, garlic, chives and capers, in which he is permitted to cook as much as he pleases.¹⁵

Tone to the contrary, they were saying the same thing: "My friend, you're priceless."

IV

From the beginning they fortified each other's souls. In 1919 Davis asserted that "[I was] twenty years ahead of you, and now I am a thousand years behind you." Later he told Williams: "Do whatever you think right, Benny, always; and do it with the full conviction that I ratify, applaud, and approve everything you do and the way you do it. . . . Nothing is going to make any difference between you and me"; and "I am yours to command, order about, kick, maltreat and abuse. Nothing you can do will make me love you less—or even more." When Williams effectuated a lucrative movie sale and was promoted to a higher per-word scale by the *Saturday Evening Post*, he turned instantaneously to Davis. "Do you mind my blowing about these things to you? I've got to blow to somebody; and I've a notion I can count on your sympathy. Sympathy is the word. I feel as though you and I were about the only

¹⁵ Evans, 54.

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sane men left in the business of letters.”¹⁶ At the request of a magazinist, Williams drew this portrait: “Davis is a wonderful companion and a devoted friend. . . . He is as wise as a serpent, as simple as a child, as profane as a mule-driver, as gentle as the old family doctor, as loyal as a wife, and as understanding as a mother.”¹⁷

They exhibited devotion in many other concrete ways. When either published a book he sent a copy to the other, duly inscribed. Davis’s comment upon receipt of Williams’ second novel typified his response. “Any book from your hand to mine is sufficient dedication for all time. . . . *The Sea Bride* which comes from your pen is one aspect of your power. Those things which come from your heart, the which I hold closest, are all the rest” (October 18, 1919). Williams proffered Davis the compliment supreme on his last book, *Hawaii, U.S.A.* “Your books more than those of any writer I know carry in every line the flavor of the author, and to anyone who knows the author, that is sufficient recommendation” (October 20, 1941).

Although Williams published forty volumes, he was extremely chary about formal dedications, confining these to his father and mother, his wife and daughter. He made only one departure from his immediate family. *Thrifty Stock* (1923) was chastely assigned “To Robert H. Davis.” Davis, recipient of some threescore dedications, “was very much touched. . . . All we need now is a conversation in Welsh.”

They exchanged ideas freely and donated plots to one another. After bandying the manuscript of “Deeds, Not Words” between them for several months in 1918, Williams, wearied of revisions, volunteered to release his right to it. “I wouldn’t think of giving the plot to any one else,” answered Davis. “I gave it to you first and it is yours to have and to hold and whatever revenues you gather are yours likewise.” Eleven years later, wearing the shoe himself this time, Davis rhapsodized: “Wait till you see what I have done with the story of the mother who lugged her son under the freight train. Good God,

¹⁶ The two Davis quotations are from his letters of June 21 and December 22, 1921; Williams’ from his letter of October 28, 1919.

¹⁷ Evans, 54.

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that is a beaut, Ben! . . . With you, no man can talk without receiving some benefit."

With decent constraint they purveyed each other to the public. Davis included a Williams photograph in *Man Makes His Own Mask* (1932),¹⁸ reprinted a Williams anecdote in *The More I Admire Dogs* (1936), "biograph-ed" him in the *Saturday Evening Post* for April 3, 1920, and gave him liberal space in several of his New York *Sun* columns. Williams featured Davis in a number of his sports articles, prepared special commentary for Wainwright Evans's interview, but most distinctly verified his feeling for Davis in the spring of 1930 when the latter sustained an excruciating mishap. En route from Florida after recording his impressions of that area for the *Sun*, Davis broke his ankle and twisted his knee while trying to avoid a fall. Congestion set in and what at first seemed a run of the mill injury veered perilously close to a fatality. Badly incapacitated, Davis had to forego all writing for a spell.

Swiftly his brigade of friends moved into the breach. Fannie Hurst sent a flurry of telegrams soliciting essays to fill Davis's thrice a week space in the *Sun*. Williams immediately pledged "at least one column of stuff," as did everyone who was asked.

The first of twenty-four guest columns appeared on June 3, entitled "Fannie Hurst Recalls." Irvin S. Cobb, Mary Roberts Rinehart, Rex Beach, Booth Tarkington, George Ade, William Lyon Phelps, Ring Lardner, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, H. L. Mencken, Albert Payson Terhune, and other devotees of Davis followed. Topics ranged from Fisher's irrelevant plaint on the difficulties of a translator's task to Mencken's irreverent recollections of Davis as a gastronomic prodigy. Williams'

¹⁸ Davis took great pride in his camera character studies. Expectably, Williams belittled his accomplishments. On May 6, 1919, Davis said to Mrs. Williams: "Once I told him I was a good photographer. That upset him completely. He burst into laughter." Davis thus describes a photo he had sent her: "The side view shows Ben in an Ibsenian mood. The shock of hair, the strong, firm chin, the eagle eye, the vast jowl, are Benjamin at his best." This might well have served as caption to the portrait of Williams which Davis used in *Man Makes His Own Mask*, a volume of his "psychographs" of 130 celebrities. On unnumbered page 231 is a profile of the right side of Williams' face. (On May 1, 1931, Davis had written him: "I am quite aware that you wish beautification and not realism. But I do want your notorious mug in my book.") On facing page 230 is a brief biographical sketch in which Davis iterated his perennial jests about Williams' size ("He is more than twice the weight of his wife."), his penchant for "dashing through the spruce jungles" with his annually discarded flippers, his clumsiness, his gentility, his love of sports outdoor and in, and his Welshness.

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piece came out on June 10, a sensitive exposition leading from Davis's bosom qualities to his overt demeanor. Nicely apportioning sentiment, sincerity, and wit, Williams described Davis's "rich gusto" in word and act, his "Gargantuan capacity for enjoyment," and his "positive and unequivocal" opinions. Merging statement into illustration, Williams deftly climaxed his column with accounts of Davis's first fishing venture in a Maine lake ("the most contemptible body of water in the northern hemisphere" with "the most timorous, weak-witted, supine and flabby of all fishes"), and his celebrated fishing escapade with Williams' son Chuck on Penobscot Bay, about which Davis wrote this quatrain in "Feeding the Fishes":

In all my days of angling,
My keenest single joy
Was handing clams to cunners—
With Ben Ames Williams' boy.¹⁹

Despite the glittering competition, Williams' screed excited highest appreciation from Davis. On June 16 and again on September 24 he avowed in effect that "nobody can ever write a better column than you wrote for me in the Pinch Hitters contest. Everybody I know speaks about it." Moreover, while Davis recuperated, Williams amplified the length and frequency of his letters, one of them the most loquacious and diverting in his entire correspondence.

Bob Davis took immense satisfaction in the epithet Fannie Hurst coined for him—Christopher Columbus of American Letters. About so many authors, including Williams, he could rightfully say, "I pulled your frying fat out of the burning before you became carbon," and he put a strict premium on gratitude. Once, after twenty-seven years, their friendship teetered on this uncertain wire. Apropos Williams' *The Happy End* Davis wrote on June 12, 1941: "I can't say that I am crazy about the last paragraph on page 10, being as how I helped in a small way to keep alive your confidence in yourself. . ." He reminded him of "the reorganization in hopes and fears that took place in my office one afternoon when I told you to chuck journalism and come with me." Then he cited with some bit-

¹⁹ An inscribed copy of these verses (*Field and Stream*, May 1920), framed with a photograph of Davis and Chuck Williams fishing from a rowboat, hangs in Williams' studio at Hardscrabble Farm.

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terness the defection of another writer he had discovered, but before the end of his letter he was contritely imploring Williams not to "be cross with me."

The offending paragraph referred fleetingly to Williams' resignation from newspaper work "without serious misgivings." Surprised that this should be taken as a slight, Williams hastened to answer the following day: "I'm . . . sorry to hear you expected me, in the space of a short introduction, to do justice to your part in my doings. In my as yet unpublished (and uncompleted) autobiography, you're down in black and white to the tune of several pages, with quotes from various of your letters and other specifications." Williams did indeed give Davis full credit in at least two places in this manuscript, as he did intermittently in letters, in Edward J. O'Brien's *Best Short Stories of 1918* ("Like a good many others, I owe a debt to Robert H. Davis of *Munsey's* for the encouragement that kept me going"), and in Kunitz & Haycraft's *Twentieth Century Authors* (1942). No alienation developed. Davis soon regained his equilibrium and by October 21 was again crowing over the fact that "years ago I picked a man from an obscure Boston newspaper who could write so great a book [*The Strange Woman*]."

V

Roads fork. No two people of congruent ability persist in identical paths together unless one forfeits faith in himself and merely tags along. Neither Davis nor Williams was by nature a vassal. It was inevitable, therefore, that their possessive interests should propel them into separate ways. As Davis settled pleasurably into his niche in the *Sun*, the copious correspondence of the first dozen years slackened. By this time Davis was busily ferreting out dramatic slices of life in every colorful corner of the world and Williams had fixed his sights on history and the novel. There was less occasion, less opportunity now. In the Thirties more letters began with "In the absence of Mr. Davis . . ." and were signed by his secretaries. By 1936 the exchange trickled down to three letters, two of them Christmas notes:

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Williams, December 21: Our paths cross not very often; but our thoughts cross constantly; and your place in my contemplations has been a big one now for twenty years. I only wish it were bigger.

Davis, December 23: Despite the long intervals of silence between us, there has never been any wavering of our affection for you, Florence or the kids. . . . I suppose when I am an old man with white whiskers and your kids have all got long beards, that we will run into each other some day.

There is no record of another letter until three years later.

An elegiac note pervades their sentiments hereafter. Caught in the spiral of *tempus fugit*, they strove to revoke the painful finality of Robert Frost's "Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back." They tried to touch the dormant strings to music again. "As Irv Cobb would say, [we'd] tear our pants to have a glimpse of you," wrote Williams. Davis answered in kind. "Recently I saw a portrait of you in the act of wearing a mustache. What are you trying to hide?" But in the same letter he fretted, "Ben, you make me homesick. Despite my long life of touring, I am allergic to wandering." They proposed meetings which were abrogated by Davis's having to dash off to India or Los Angeles or Puerto Rico or Honolulu. On May 5, 1941, Davis jubilantly informed Williams that he would be in the Bucksport, Maine, region on an assignment—wasn't this ideal for a nostalgic reunion? Conflicts and commitments on both sides nearly wrecked this plan too, but Mrs. Williams confirms that it was consummated to their infinite gratification. On June 12 Davis murmured fervently, "Pray God we all meet again."

This was not to be. Davis died sixteen months to the day without seeing the Williamses again. Termed "the most lovable figure in American literature today" at an honorific luncheon attended by such as Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser. Davis had grappled a legion of friends to his soul with unceasing goodwill. Mrs. Williams commemorates his "colorful, beloved, picturesque" image and his unrepayable service to young writers. The sun gone down, Williams intoned with soft reserve: "His death left sincere and lasting grief in the hearts of hundreds of people," not the least of whom was Ben Ames Williams.

A large, commodious room for a large, commodious man, Williams' den is virtually the same today as when he was using it to read, to think, and to write in.

On the facing wall are photographs of his family and friends, including (the large one just to the right of the rocker) the snapshot of Bob Davis and Chuck Williams in a rowboat, with inset of "Feeding the Fishes," mentioned on page 323. The map of the United States indicates in black crayon the routes of his several cross-country drives. Above the door, to the left, are evidences of his passion for Colt revolvers.

Along the right is his ample work desk, a double bed occasionally used for guests, a bookcase, and a homemade chair with two "writing-arms" which he sometimes utilized.

Higher up on the left and right walls (unseen here) hang the original paintings of illustrations to his stories, the most notable being N. C. Wyeth's adornment of All the Brothers Were Valiant, and of the dust jackets of his books, such as The Sea Bride, The Strange Woman, and Time of Peace.

Chuck Williams adds: "One small light at the desk is a comment on the fact that he was a daytime worker. Up at first light the year around, he was well into his day's work before most men had finished their second cup of coffee. By noon, he was usually exhausted, and through with creative work for the day. If he worked in the afternoon, it was usually casual reading or correspondence. Never worked at night."



BAW'S WRITING STUDIO AT HARDCRABBLE FARM