The Strange Tale of a Type−Writer

Anna C. Brackett

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I HAD a favorite type−writer — I will not say of whose manufacture — with which, through much use of it, I became very intimate. That expression I use boldly, because everybody knows already that many among modern machines have a definite character, and that even individual character is observed in those of the same sort. The engine−driver, for example, will tell you that each locomotive of a lot made to be precisely similar will be found to have, so to speak, its own temperament and manner, and that he becomes attached to his own engine as to a person.

So my type−writer became to me individual, and even intelligent. It had moods, captious or sunny, and sometimes it seemed even humorous. And as for intelligence, even before the really wonderful thing happened that I am about to relate, I had from time to time a strange though slight feeling that the machine was acquiring that faculty; that the currents of thought passing through it were stimulating its powers, developing its slight individuality, and making orderly its fitful, irregular motions of quasi−intelligence. The machine, through much speaking, seemed to be learning to think. In what I may call its highest moments, it seemed to meet or even to anticipate my action; outrunning the pressure of my fingers, and recording sometimes, as I thought of its own motion, the next following letter — not always the designed one, but never, I believe, a letter which, taken with the preceding ones, failed to spell correctly some word, though, perhaps, not the word that I intended. These appearances I took for accident compounded with idle whimsies of my mind, since naturally I did not suspect the truth.

But at last, when the type−writer had been for a good period in very hard use, and had acted, I know, more than ever as if it had a daemon of its own, I was compelled to leave town for a few days. On my return, coming into my house with the comfortable feeling which possesses one always on getting again among his own belongings after any absence, it was, perhaps, the indulgence of this feeling, as I made my way after a few minutes toward my work−room, that at first hindered me from noticing a slight clicking sound, which, however, presently became clearly audible. Upon entering the first of two rooms, the second of which was the work−room, it was plain to me that some person was at work on my beloved type−writer — a vast impertinence, since the rule of the house was that no hands but mine should touch it. But my vexation did not make me incautious. I advanced across the room too quietly to afford notice of my approach, and looked through the half−open door into the interior apartment. I know myself to be very steady in face of danger — the presence of anything to be done or to be avoided is a tonic to me — and I am as far removed as most men from craven fear, but I should not like to feel again the cold sensation that came upon me when I discovered nobody in the room, and nothing peculiar, save the type−writer working diligently by itself.

I should mention, before I go any farther, that just before my departure I had been experimenting with an invention of mine which is intended to obviate the necessity of stopping to change the sheets of paper when one has reached the bottom of a page. It will be evident that I cannot go into particulars on this invention, as I have not yet secured the patent, and I might by so doing lose the reasonable certainty of becoming at least a United States Senator in a few years by a judicious use of the large fortune which I shall, no doubt, have poured into my hands when the patent has been once acquired. Suffice it to say, then, that before being summoned away, I had arranged a number of sheets of paper in my type−writer, all ready for a little novelette which I had planned after the old style of fairy stories, and I had already written the words, "Once upon a time," when the telegram which called me away was put into my hand. My papyro−positor, as it is to be called, was not attached to the machine when it began to write, and consequently the sheets had not been gathered up as they would have been had that been the case, but had dropped off as they were written, and were lying loosely scattered on the floor and the table, just

where they had happened to fall as they had reeled off from the type−writer.

As I fairly caught sight of what was going on in the room, I saw one of the sheets gradually slide off from the rack and fall slowly to the table. I have no idea for how long a time I stood, but at last another partly written sheet fluttered to the floor, and the machine ceased its motion. In time — some time; I cannot say how soon it was — I gathered up the scattered pages. They contained the following matter of the type−writer's own composing — a sketch, a story, a little fantasy — one may name it as he pleases; but there is nothing mechanical about it. It has little breaks here and there, as though for a moment the machine had been out of order; but as to the substance of it, it shows invention, constructive power, and delicate satire, with an airy audacity entirely charming.

When afterward, with some awe, I returned to use of the machine, I found in it a distinct change of manner. No less intelligent or tractable than before, it was more quiet, less impatient. I have not known it once since to outrun my own motions, nor has it ever again undertaken the task of original production. I think it is waiting to see its matter in print, and when that occurs, I shall look with keen expectation for another effort at composition, and shall give days and nights to watching for this. What now is troubling me is the question how, if the type−writer should produce perhaps a masterpiece of literature, could it get copyright, even in America?

Here is the story which I found on the paper:

"A TYPE−WRITER FANTASY.

"Once upon a time there lived in a little house on the edge of a thick wood an old woman who never had read any of Balzac's novels. It was not because she had not learned to read, for when she was young she had gone for five weeks to the public schools of New York; and that time, as everybody knows, is quite enough to gain any branch of knowledge, since the schools are, as one may say, absolutely perfect, so that even the children who try not to learn are really compelled to absorb knowledge through the atmosphere which has been successively diffused through all of them by the high character of the Boards of Edcation. I should have said 'Education,' but such a trivial mistake is of no consequence. The main reason why this old woman never had read Balzac's novels was, to tell the truth, because there were absolutely none in the country in which her house was situated. And the reason for this strange fact, which nevertheless was a fact, was that in the said country there was a high protective tariff, so high as to be really prohibitory. And the highest duty of all in this tariff was, strange to say, on French novels. But this old woman had a cousin on her mother's side who had been in France and Germany, and although he could not remember whether it had been in France or Germany that he had read Balzac, yet he was sure that it was in one of the two. The reason why he could not be sure was because he spoke and read both these languages perfectly, so that he never knew which he was reading or speaking. This is one danger in learning any language perfectly, even your own; and though this last remark may seem absurd, it really is not so. If we only reflect a moment, we shall readily see that the more difficulty any one has in saying anything the less likely is he to forget what he has said. This is why all good teachers always insist upon having a child hunt for the places mentioned in his geography.

"Though the young man could not remember, as I have said, whether he had read Balzac's stories in French or in German, yet he had been profoundly impressed by them; so profoundly, in fact, that he could talk of nothing else after his arrival at his cousin's house, and as the old woman was very anxious to make herself agreeable, being naturally of a kind disposition, she became convinced that if she was to maintain any part in the conversation she must know something about the famous French writer. But how to find out, in the first place, to what country to go in order to purchase the books? That was the great question. However, she considered that a man is more likely to dream in the language that he knows best, so she went to the police station and hired a policeman for a year. She did this because she knew that it is always dangerous to generalize too hastily, as men generally do, and that she should therefore be obliged to have reports from a large number of dreams. Moreover, her cousin being a thoroughly healthy man, and having no business, might not dream every night; and besides, she found she could get a policeman much cheaper by the year than by the day. (This is the reason why Tammany keeps the New York policemen in its pay all the year round.)

"The experiment began, and every night the constant policeman sat patiently at the bedside of the unconscious man, watching for his slightest utterance. At his side he had pen and paper, and every syllable was carefully taken down. At the end of the year all the utterances were carefully examined, but when they came to make out the required statistics, they could find nothing but English words, and even those were much confused and broken, so that it became necessary to send to New York for the services of one of the public−school teachers there, who was

accustomed to making sense out of nonsense, and to calculating percentages, in order to derive any benefit from the experiment.

"The teacher came, and for the space of about five weeks spent her entire time tabulating and calculating. At the close of her investigations she announced it as the profound conviction of her mind, fortified by a long experience in the schools, that under the supposition that the gentleman had spoken in German and French instead of in English, as he had, he would have used fifty per cent. of German words and fifty per cent. of French words. She had gone through this difficult calculation because the old woman had especially desired her not to leave out of consideration any possible element which might, under any circumstances, affect the outcome. There was naturally a little disappointment at this somewhat ambiguous result, and disappointment was by no means confined to the house where the experiment had taken place, for by this time the whole village on the edge of which was the above−mentioned thick wood had become interested in the solution of the question, so much so, indeed, that it had become necessary to engage the services of an additional person to write off a bulletin every hour as the calculation of the percentages progressed, in order to satisfy public curiosity. In fact, many of the wealthier citizens of the village combined together and sent to the neighboring city for the best electrician then known, and had him construct a telegraph line from the old woman's house to their homes in the village. In this way they kept themselves informed at every minute just how the calculations stood. Those who could not afford such a luxury used to send a special messenger at a given time, when they were sure to find a bulletin hung up on the door of the house, for the rings at the bell became so incessant that the whole time of the old woman's servants was occupied in going to the door to answer inquiries. After the bulletin became an institution, things grew a little better. The old woman employed a small boy whose whole duty it was to take care of the bulletin−board and to answer the questions of those who came to the door, and so the servants could go on with their work.

"Now, however, it had become evident that, if she was to find out about Balzac, she must employ some other way. She turned it over and over in her head, for the difficulties she had encountered had by no means diminished her desire to read the famous writer about whom she had heard so much. At last she said, 'I will go and find out for myself.' So she went to the city to buy a steamer ticket; but when she was obliged to tell the ticket agent her destination, she was not at all able to say where it was that she wanted to go. The ticket agent was polite but firm, so, in despair, at last the old lady exclaimed, 'I will take a ticket for both countries, and settle the matter that way.' At this happy solution of the difficulty the agent beamed with satisfaction, and the old lady went home in comparatively a comfortable frame of mind. When she came to get ready for the voyage, she began to wonder how she was to go on two steamers at once; or if not, how she was to decide. The whole matter seemed to be still involved in difficulties, and she began almost to wish that her mother had never been born at all, because then she never should have had a cousin on her side, and never should have heard of Balzac. But this thought seeming somewhat impious, she banished it from her mind, and confined herself to the milder wish that her cousin had gone to visit some other relative than herself. That did not seem so wrong.

"But as the interest on the two tickets she had bought kept mounting up, she decided that she must do something; so she went to see the agents of the two steamship lines, and at last succeeded in inducing them to start on the same day and at the same hour.

"The day came at last, and the two steamers swung out from their berths. The pier was black with people, among whom were all the newspaper reporters of the neighboring city, and many from other places in the country, who looked on with wonder, not unmixed with admiration, as the ponderous vessels slowly went on their way, bearing between them, suspended in a rude but strong steel hammock, the woman to whose desire for knowledge, persistence, and indomitable courage the whole idea was due. It was feared by some of those who are always ready to raise objections to any scheme, however desirable, that some difficulty might arise at the opening of the English Channel, where it would become necessary, according to the usual order, for the two vessels to separate; but by this time the community had acquired such abounding faith in the ingenuity of the old woman, and such admiration for her pluck, that they waited, not without doubt certainly, but without any real fear, the outcome of the arrangements which they were sure she would be able to make when the proper time should come. One result of the plans already carried out was that the old woman did not suffer at all from sea−sickness, for it was found, to the great astonishment of the passengers, that the motion of one vessel completely neutralized the motion of the other; so that while the other passengers suffered much from the tossing of the sea, which was unusually rough for that time of year, the indomitable old woman voyaged in the most perfect calm. At this sight

many of the more wealthy of them, who were also some of the more sea−sick, ventured to ask if she would not rent a few feet of her hammock to them, and as the old woman had more room than she absolutely needed for herself, except at meal−times, she gladly acceded to their request, and by that means gained more than enough to pay for the expenses of her voyage, laying up sufficient at the same time to purchase a complete edition of Balzac's works. There was one little difficulty here, because she was not sure whether to lay up this money in napoleons or in gulden. But she finally decided till she arrived at her destination before doing this, because, as she remarked to one of her tenants, 'You see, I don't really know positively where I am going.'

"As the ships approached the English Channel, expectation deepened into a state of feverish anxiety, and the steward found that the passengers did not eat so much as formerly. But they might have saved themselves any trouble, and the old lady had been quite right in waiting to change her extra money, for just as they sighted the Scilly Islands they perceived a large vessel bearing down upon them. The flag that she carried was unknown to the captain, who therefore regarded her with considerable anxiety. It represented, as well as they could make it out, a large eagle, hovering in a ground of different colors, and was of enormous size. The captain ran up a signal of distress, which was soon answered by the strange vessel's coming alongside. The excitement was at its highest pitch when an officer, dressed in a uniform like the flag, leaped from one deck to the other, and at once proceeded to the captain's state−room. Here he remained for but a short time, when both officers relieved all anxiety by returning with smiling faces, smoking amicably one cigar, which was lighted at the middle.

"After a short pause, full of an uncertain joy on the part of the passengers, the captain announced that France had been so impressed with the character of the young German Emperor that she had thought herself probably safer under his rule than under that of any Frenchman. She had accordingly made an offer of herself to the Germans, who had joyfully accepted the offer, and the two countries were formally united under the name of 'The Franco−German Republic.' Everybody was pleased at this news, especially the old lady, all of whose difficulties had thus been happily removed, and the wisdom of whose course in not changing sooner her spare cash was now fully manifest. Of course, as the two countries had become finally one, it made no practical difference to her whether Balzac had written in French or German, especially as now she happened to remember that she could read neither language. She returned safely home in the next steamer, much improved by her trip, and a full account of the whole affair was printed in a large octavo volume, which appropriately bore for its motto, 'Always read an author in his own language.'"