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by Edmond Hamilton



The Mind Digger

by Winston Marks

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The Mind Digger

By Winston Marks



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[Sidenote: There was a reason why his scripts were smash hits--they had realism. And why not? He was reliving every scene and emotion in them!]

It was really a pretty fair script, and it caught me at a moment when every playwright worth his salt was playing in France, prostituting in Hollywood or sulking in a slump. I needed a play badly, so I told Ellie to get this unknown up to my office and have a contract ready.

When she announced him on the inter-com, my door banged open and a youngster in blue-jeans, sweatshirt and a stubbly crew-cut popped in like a carelessly aimed champagne cork.

I said, "I'm sorry, son, but I have an interview right now. Besides we aren't casting yet. Come back in a couple of weeks."

His grin never faltered, being of the more durable kind that you find on farms and west of the Rockies. His ragged sneakers padded across my Persian, and I thought he was going to spring over my desk like a losing tennis player.

"I'm your interview," he announced. "At least I'm Hillary Hardy, and your girl just told me you'd see me."

"You--are Hillary Hardy?"

"In the morbid flesh," he said jamming out five enthusiastic fingers that gulped my hand and jack-hammered until I broke his grip with a Red-Cross life-saving hold.

"Spare the meat," I groaned. "I have to sign the contract, too."

"I did it! I did it! They said I was crazy, but I did it the first time."

"Did what?"

"Sold the first play I wrote."

"This--is--your first work?"

"My very first," he said, splitting his freckles with a double row of white teeth a yard wide. "They said I'd have to go to college, and then I'd have to write a million words before I'd produce anything worthwhile."

If he hadn't owned such an honest, open face I'd have thrown him out as an imposter right then. The ream of neatly typed pages on my desk would have fooled any agent, editor or producer like myself, on Broadway. The format was professional, the plot carefully constructed, the dialogue breezy as a May afternoon in Chicago and the motivation solidly adult.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Nineteen."

"And you'll sign an affidavit that you wrote this play, and it's an original work?"

"Certainly!" The smile faded a little. "Look, Mr. Crocker, you're not just kidding about this contract, are you? Is the play really okay?"

"That," I said trying to restrain my own enthusiasm, "is only determined on the boards. But I'm willing to risk a thousand-dollar advance on your signature to this." I shoved the papers at him with my fountain pen on top.

He didn't uncapped the pen until he had read the whole thing, and while he pored over the fine print I had time to catch my breath.

His play competed rather well with the high average output of most professionals I knew--not exactly terrific, but a relatively safe gamble, as gambles go on the street of bright lights. Well, I made a mental note to pass the script around a bit before I signed the contract myself. After all, he might have cribbed the whole thing somewhere.

He finished reading, signed the contract and handed it back to me with an air of expectancy. I stalled, "I, uh, will have the check for you in a few days. Meanwhile, you'd better get yourself an agent and an attorney and fix up that affidavit of authorship. Normally, I don't deal with free-lance playwrights, you see."

"But I don't need any agent," he protested. "You be my agent, Mr. Crocker--" He was studying my reaction, and after a moment he said, "You still don't quite believe that I wrote *Updraft*, do you, sir? Now that you've met me you want more time to check up, don't you?"

I said, "Frankly, yes, Hardy. *Updraft* is a mature piece of writing, and unless you are a genius--well, it's just business son."

"I don't blame you," he said smiling that fresh-air smile. "And I'll admit I'm no genius, but I can explain everything. You see, I've read 38 books on how to write plays--"

"Tut!" I said. "Format technique is just a fraction of producing an appealing play."

"Perhaps," he admitted. "But *I've memorized all 38 books*. What's more, I've been reading and memorizing plays, novels, poetry and history since I was 13. I have a storehouse of--"

"Memorizing?"

"Yes, sir. I'm a student of *mnemonics*, you know, the art of memory

perfection. My real ambition is to develop absolute recall. All my reading and memorizing have been just exercises to expand my power of complete recall."

"You mean that playwriting is just a hobby?"

"Not--exactly. I need money, lots of it, to continue my research. Psychiatrists come high."

Well, I suppose good plays have been written for screwier reasons, and I was in no mood to look a gift-author in the mouth. I did pass *Updraft* around to a brace of critics, and none of them could hang a plagiarism charge on Hardy. So I wrote out his check and started the wheels going on the production.

The boy prodigy dropped out of sight for the time being, taking no further interest in his brain-child. *Updraft* did all right in the sticks, but it was when we opened on Broadway that it began to coin money.

* * * * *

In ten performances we were playing to capacity crowds, and within a month we had to take in the S. R. O. sign. A lucky hit? I thought so at the time. *Updraft* had a dash of humor, a bit of adventure, a dollop of romance and a gentle little heart tug at the conclusion, but damned if the critics could put their fingers on its money-making essence. They gave it pleasant little reviews and mild compliments, but no more. The cash customers, however, came and kept coming and *kept coming!*

The morning after the 100th performance I told Ellie to hunt up Hardy and see what he was doing about another play. I could stand to have another hit ready when *Updraft* petered out.

"That afternoon my secretary reported, "He's in a sanitarium over in Hoboken."

"Nuts! I knew we should have held back on his royalties," I exclaimed. "I suppose he's drunk himself into a--"

"It's a mental hospital," Ellie said, "but Mr. Hardy told me he is just there for some experimental psycho-therapy. He sounded quite normal and cheerful."

Hillary Hardy showed up next morning at my request, and he did, indeed, appear in good spirits. I demanded, "What's this business of locking yourself up in a looney-bin? Don't you realize that's bad public relations?"

He chuckled. "I thought of that. So I'm going under an assumed name. Your girl said you had something very important to tell me."

"Sure. I want another play," I told him. "*Updraft* won't run forever, you know."

"Oh, I have plenty of money now, so I won't have to bother. The people at the sanitarium have become interested in my project, and all I'm spending is board and room there. Thanks to your royalty checks I've got quite a pile in the bank."

"Won't have to bother?" I yelled. "Here I launch you on Broadway, and that's all the gratitude I get. Now's the time to cash in on the reputation of your first play. It's setting attendance records."

"Sorry, Mr. Crocker," he said. "I'm in a critical stage of my experiments. I just can't afford the time at the moment."

"Experiments! Experiments! What is this business?"

He brightened. "Would you believe it? I've contacted memories back to three months after my birth. And at this rate I'll reach birth itself within a few weeks."

I shuddered. What a nasty ambition! "What's the percentage?"

"You don't understand," he said warming to his subject. "The further back I go the more nearly I approach total recall. At present I can contact any memory in my experience back to six months, day by day, minute by minute. I can run off these memories like colored movies, recalling every sight, sound, smell, feel and taste."

"So what happened earlier than six months that's so important?"

"Probably nothing of great interest," Hardy granted, "but the further back I go, the more intense is the reality of all my memories. For instance, right now I can return to the day, hour, minute and second I went to school for the first time. I can remember the look on the teacher's face and hear the screams of twenty-six kindergarten kids. I can smell the freshly oiled floors and the newly painted walls. I can feel the wart on my mother's finger, the one I was holding onto for dear life."

The almost fanatic glow in his eager, young face impressed me. Realism of memory! Could that be the essence of his successful first play? Did his down-to-earth touch account for *Updraft's* surprising audience appeal?

I pleaded, "Don't let me down now, Hillary. I gambled thousands of dollars on your first play. If you can repeat we'll both enjoy an even better pay-off. Besides, have you looked into what your taxes will be?"

"Taxes? No, I really haven't, but I'm sure I have enough to last another

year. Sorry, Mr. Crocker. Maybe later, but right at the moment--"

His broad-shouldered, lean athletic form drifted through my door and was gone.

Two weeks later *Parodisiac* arrived, typed on fools-cap, uncorrected, with pencil notations and coffee-spots on it, but it was by-lined, "Hillary Hardy," and after a single, quick scanning I was overjoyed to pay the expense of transcribing it to more durable paper. The play was powerful, witty and emotion-stirring. It was a work of art.

And on the last page was scribbled in the border: "I looked into my tax bill, and found you were right. I'm almost broke after Uncle Sam takes his cut, so here is the play you asked for. Hope you like it. (signed) H. H."

There was a P.S. "Expect to hit *birth* this week."

When I phoned him at the sanitarium, asking for Sam Buckle, the name he had left originally with Ellie, he refused to come to the phone. So I wired him. "Quit worrying about taxes. I accept your earlier offer to be your agent as well as producer. Good luck on your experiments."

Parodisiac was much too good to hold for the closing of *Updraft*. Indeed, the first play was showing no signs of weakening, so I began rounding up talent outside the original cast. This was a cinch. Meredith Crawley finished Act I, Scene I, and accepted the male lead without turning another page. So did Alicia Pennington, even though it meant giving up a personal appearance tour to publicize her latest Hollywood release that was supposed to win her an Oscar.

Not that I had to go after talent like this to put *Parodisiac* across. It was so potent I believe I could have made it a hit with a cast out of a

burleycue revue.

The season was getting late, so I did the unthinkable. I cut normal rehearsal time in half and slammed it at the big town without even a trial run in the back-country. Nobody connected with the show objected--not even Hec Blankenship, my publicity manager. In fact it was he who suggested the sleeper treatment.

With nothing more than last-minute newspaper notices we opened the box-office to a completely uninformed public, and did it knock the critics for a loop! Only a couple showed up for the first performance, along with less than a third-full house of casual first-nighters.

* * * * *

People wandered out stunned. A substitute drama-critic from the *Times* looked me up after the show, and there were tears of gratitude in his eyes. "My review of this play will establish my reputation," he told me. "If the boss had had any notion of what you were pulling, he'd have been here himself. But what about the author? I thought you were going to have to call the police when you failed to produce the author."

* * * * *

It had been rough. The skimpy crowd had milled about for a half hour screaming "Author, author!" Meanwhile, I was too choked up after the last heart-wrenching scene to get up and make a speech.

Everything had gone perfectly. Even the brief rehearsal time failed to leave any rough edges. Crawley and Pennington were so carried away with their parts that they easily doubled their considerable dramatic stature that first performance. The supporting cast caught fire, too, and, well--the likes of it is rarely seen anywhere.

The lines seemed to come out of the actors' hearts, not their mouths. Cue-lines blended with the dialogue interplay, the artificiality of stage-sets, costumery and make-up disappeared, and the simple, yet profound drama unreeled like a bolt of vividly printed silk, flowing smoothly, strongly, absorbingly to the tragic-comical climax that left the emotions reeling from the suspense and warm with relief.

Two days later I looked at the figures on advance ticket sales and could find only one conceivable complaint. *Parodisiac* would make Hillary Hardy so much money that not even taxes could force him to produce another for a great while.

What promised to be a major irritation, fending off the press from Hardy and protecting his anonymity, was converted into a master publicity-stroke by Hec Blankenship. He swore the few of us who knew about Hardy's youth and whereabouts, to complete secrecy, then he proceeded to build his publicity around the "mystery-author."

"But he's got a past!" I objected when Hec first presented the scheme. "Old friends and relatives will spill the beans."

"Have you really looked into Hillary's past?" Hec asked.

I confessed I hadn't. Hec said that he had. It developed that Hillary Hardy was not our boy's real name. In his passion for anonymity he had been changing his name every time he changed locations, which was often. Hec had traced his background through three moves that brought the author across the country, but the trail petered out at a ranch in Wyoming where Hillary had worked a month as a cow-hand.

The mystery-author gag worked. Inside of two weeks our promotion expense dwindled to almost nothing. Columnists were fighting for the privilege of pouring out free copy on both plays. Some of their

speculations as to Hardy's real identity were pretty fabulous--Winston Churchill, Noel Coward and even a certain, witty ex-presidential candidate for the Democratic party--but no one found him out, and the advance sellout began gaining a week every day.

Now, I have made and lost my share of theater fortunes, and I have learned a certain caution. At the moment I was quite content to ride with my two smash-hits and leave Hardy to his experiments. Strangely, it was he who called upon me for action.

A month after launching *Parodisiac* he showed up at my office, looking leaner and more intense than ever. His crew-cut was growing out, but it was from neglect rather than a sudden artistic temperament, I was sure.

After locking the doors and cancelling my morning appointments, I said, "Well, golden boy, what brings you to civilization?"

His smile was still strong and warm, but it was no longer youthful. There was a look of deep wisdom in his blue eyes that finally justified the magnificent play he had written.

"Money," he answered briefly.

"Haven't my checks been reaching you?" I asked in amazement.

"Oh, yes. Very gratifying," he said pacing a groove in the deep carpet pile. "But I'm moving into prenatal memory now, and I accomplished it by administrations of a new B vitamin derivative. I have a staff of biochemists working for me producing this substance, but it's fearfully expensive. I need more of it, larger lab facilities to produce it secretly. I want to buy the sanitarium."

"Buy the--"

"Lock, stock and personnel," he nodded. "I'm three months before birth, already. My goal is conception."

A big, brassy gong chimed in my brain. "That sounds like this *dianetics* business that was going the rounds awhile back."

Hardy nodded. "In some respects, yes. But I have a single goal, total recall, and I'm taking a more comprehensive approach. Psychotherapy helped a great deal, but I have traced-out every angle of mnemonics, improved on most and invented some new ones. The final problem is one of improving synaptic potentials and actual tissue tone in the brain. Biochemistry is giving me the answers. With enough of the new B vitamin derivative I'm confident I can reach conception--and a totality of recall."

"But Hardy, what have you got when you get there? I still say, what's the percentage?"

* * * * *

The look he gave me was puzzled but completely tolerant. "You raved to me about my last play, yet you don't see what I'm getting at?" He stopped pacing and sat opposite me with his muscular hands knotted into fists on my desk.

"George," he said with quiet intentness, "I will be the first man since creation to have the full potential of his brain at his creative disposal."

"How do you figure that?"

"The brain has three principal functions. It can store information for recall, it can analyze and correlate this information and finally it can synthesize creatively. Now the latter two functions are inherently dependent upon the quality of the first, or memory recall. As a truly

thinking animal, man considers he has reached some acme of perfection because his brain is so superior to the lower animals. Actually, the real gulf is between what man *has achieved* and what he *can achieve* with his brain.

"The key lies in perfecting his recall. What good does it do to keep pouring in information when most of us are forgetting old things almost as rapidly as we are learning new ones? Of course, we don't really ever forget anything, but our power of exact recall grows fuzzy through disuse. Then when we need a certain name or factual bit of information we can't quite dig it up, or it comes up in distorted approximations.

"The same holds for calling on experience to help us with new problems. We may grasp the general lesson of experience, but most of the specific incidents of our lives are dulled in time. The lessons we paid dearly to learn are largely useless. So we go on making the same mistakes, paying the same penalties over and over again."

I shrugged. "Everybody would like a better memory, I suppose, but I've never known anyone to go off the deep end over it like you have. What more can you gain?"

"Can't you visualize what it would be like to have even a short lifetime of knowledge and experience laid out in sharp detail of recall? Think of the new associations of thoughts and concepts that would be possible! Consider the potential for creating drama, alone! Every word ever read or spoken, every emotion ever conveyed, every gesture of anger, love, jealousy, pain, pleasure—all this raw material glittering brightly, ready to pour out in new conflicts, dramatic situations, sharp pungent dialogue--"

He made me sense his enthusiasm, but I couldn't quite feel it. Would such a tremendous ability necessarily be good? Something about its

immensity frightened me, and I didn't care to consider it for my own use at all.

I said, "Don't get me wrong. If this is what's going into your playwriting, I'm all for it. And what you do with your money is your own business. What do you propose?"

"Can you absorb more of my work?" he asked abruptly.

"I'm your agent, aren't I? I'll peddle it if I can't use it myself," I told him, not that I was so eager for the broker's 10% so much as I wanted to have the pick of his output for my own productions.

I didn't know what I was taking on. He turned out his third play in just ten days. *Ten days*, I said. I read to the bottom of page two and decided to hell with peddling this one. I'd produce it myself.

Before I got into second gear on *Beach Boy*, however, Hillary sends a messenger over with *Madame President*, a satire so sharp I knew it would make *Call Me Madame* look like *Little Women*.

What do you do? There are just so many legitimate theaters in the city.

While I'm pondering this and negotiating with a Hollywood agent to maybe take *Beach Boy* off my hands, along comes *Red Rice*, an epic novel of Communist China that out-Bucked Pearl a hundred heart-wrenches to one.

One phone call sold that one to McMullin, and when they got a look at the manuscript they raised the advance to \$10,000. This was not bad for a first novel, and I didn't resent my \$1000 agent's fee.

Before the summer was over I was about ready to give up show

business and become a one-author agent. Hillary was keeping four secretaries busy taking dictation and transcribing. He never researched, never revised, never even glanced at the copy. I've known some prolific writers, but none could grind it out like Hillary Hardy.

And it was good! Every piece was better than the last. His characters were strictly 3-D right on paper, and word pictures! When he mentioned bedbugs, you itched and bled; when the villain slugged the hero a low-blow, you felt it in your guts; and when boy got girl--brother, turn up the house-lights, quick.

I got so involved trying to produce five plays at once, making dickers with publishers and motion picture studios, fighting off television people and answering mail demanding a chance at foreign rights, that it was mid-November before I realized that it was over a month since I'd heard from the golden goose.

In fact Ellie drew my attention to it one morning. "Hadn't you better call the sanitarium?" she suggested. "Maybe he had a breakdown or something?"

The thought chilled me. Not only had I sold Hillary's complete output to date, but I had a file full of contracts for future novels and movie scripts worth a couple of million dollars.

I didn't phone--I went. To Hoboken.

In the outskirts I found his private hospital, demanded to see Sam Buckle and was told to sit down and wait. He was in therapy.

Two hours later they took me to him. He lay on a hospital bed in his shorts, staring at the ceiling and the sweat all over him like he had just stepped out of a showerbath.

"Hello, George," he said, still looking at the ceiling.

"Hi, kid! You sick or something?"

He smiled a little. "The surf at Monterey. The sun fading through the low morning mist, a golden ghost peering through the somber veil--and Julia, beside me, clinging to my arm, crying softly--"

"Hey, kid, I'm in New Jersey. Where are you?" I said nervously.

He blinked. "In California, George. Two years ago. I'm there. Do you understand? *I'm really there!*"

It was a little embarrassing. I felt like an intruder on a beach picnic. "Well, Hillary, that's just fine," I stammered. "I suppose that means that--that you've done what you set out to."

"That's right." He nodded slightly. "Total recall, George. Every instant of my existence re-filed under 'urgent'. Every vision, every sound, every sensation, laid clean and sharp like a sound film ready for running. I've done it, George."

"How long ago did you--"

"Three weeks ago I began heavy dosing with the vitamin. Today--just this last hour--I reached back into prenatal to the first instant of my cellular existence. And it was like ripping a curtain aside. I--I can't exactly tell you what it's like. Something like coming out of a black cellar into the noon-day sun. It's almost blinding."

He closed his eyes, squinting as though to shut out a glare. His blond hair had grown long, and it lay on the pillow like a woman's. He had lost some weight, and except for the heavy chest muscles and thick forearms, he had the appearance of a poet, a delicate soul dedicated to some ephemeral plane out of this world.

I figured I'd better provide a little ballast. "Congratulations and all that," I said, "but what about your work?"

"I'm done," he said quietly.

"Done? Are you forgetting that you bought a sanitarium?--some eight hundred grand worth? And it's only half paid for?"

"Oh, that. The royalties will take care of the payments."

"Hillary, you keep forgetting about taxes."

"Then let them take it back by default. I'm through with it."

"Dammit," I said, "I looked into this deal. People don't take back sanitariums like over-ripe bananas, especially when they got you on the hook for more than it's worth. They'll hold you to the contract. And you can't get your equity out if you don't protect it by keeping up your payments. You have a wonderful start, and if you just fill the contracts I have on file now you can pay it off and have plenty left to retire on. But right now you aren't so solvent, boy."

Well, he finally came out of his trance long enough to agree to fulfill the commitments I'd made for him, and I thought that once he got started there would be no holding him.

Just to make sure I did something on my own. I let his identity and whereabouts leak out.

It was a sneaky thing to do to him, but I figured that once he got a real taste of the fame that was waiting him he would never let go of it.

The papers splashed it: "Mystery Genius Is Lad of 19!"

They swamped him. They swarmed over him and plastered him with honorary literary degrees, domestic and foreign. They Oscared him and Nobelled him. They wine, dined and adored him into a godhead of the arts.

The acting, publishing, TV, radio and movie greats paid homage to his genius by the most hysterical bidding for his talents their check-books could support. I kept waiting for the Secretary of the Treasury to present him with the key to Fort Knox.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, I waited patiently--having no choice, since I started the publicity nightmare myself--for the earthquake to settle down. As his agent I was holding off all new commitments until he fulfilled the ones on hand.

Six months passed, and Hillary was still wallowing in glory, too busy sopping up plaudits to bother turning a hand.

Finally I sent a goon squad after him and dragged him to my office. He arrived in a four-hundred dollar suit and a fifty-dollar tie. Each cuff was decorated by a diamond link and a Hollywood starlet. I shoed out the excess and came to the point.

"Recess is over," I said gently. "Now we settle down for a few months of patty-cake with your secretaries. They're here in my offices now where I can keep an eye on things. Okay?"

He grinned his old happy smile, and some of the dewey glaze seemed to peel from his eyes. "You're right, George," he said much to my surprise. "I can't coast forever--and believe me, I never visualized what this would be like. It's wonderful. The world is at my feet, George. At my feet!"

I had pegged him right. But after all, who could resist the accolade he had received? For all his monomania on this business of mnemonics, he was a red-blooded boy with active glands and youthful corpuscles.

To my further delight he threw off his imported suit-coat and said, "I'm ready right now. Where do we start?"

* * * * *

I broached the file and studied my priority list. "First off, Oscar wants a play. That'll take a week or two, I suppose. Then I have an assignment for a serial--"

I outlined about three months work for him, or what would have been three months work last summer.

I moved him into my own penthouse apartment upstairs and herded him to work the next morning. My squad of strong-arms guarded all entrances, and Hec Blankenship finally convinced the public that we meant business in getting a little privacy for our tame genius so he could hatch some more immortal works.

I had lunch sent in to him in the next office and didn't see him until five that first evening. I went in without knocking. One secretary was filing her nails, and the other three were putting on their coats. The covers were still on the typewriters and Hillary was asleep or in a coma over in the corner.

I kicked his feet off his desk, and he rocked forward. "Come on upstairs, I'll buy you a steak," I said.

He smiled weakly, "I need one. It didn't go so good." In the elevator he added, "In fact, it didn't go at all."

"Take it easy," I assured him. "You're a little rusty, that's all. What about the total recall? Is it still working?"

He nodded, but he didn't say any more about it.

Next day I stuck my head in before I went to lunch, and I congratulated myself on not pushing him too hard the first day. Hillary was off in his corner again, but his mouth was moving and all four girls were doing the things that secretaries do when they are about two hours behind in their work.

Eight days later the thing dropped on my desk. I wet a finger with keen anticipation, but the spit wasn't dry before I was plowing into Hillary's office trailing loose sheets.

"Are you kidding?" I yelled.

He was out of his chair over by the window staring out. All he did was hunch up his shoulders. The girls were standing around trying to act invisible.

"Hillary," I said trying to laugh. "Don't be playing gags on old George. Where is it? Where's Oscar's play?"

"I--I'm afraid that's it," he said without turning his head.

"This--this fluff? This pabulum?"

"Well--I thought I'd try something light to begin with."

"Light? This is no play. This is Pollyanna. It's been done. Where's your conflict? Your problem? Your suspense? Dammit, where's your characters?"

"I'll get warmed up tomorrow," Hilliary said, but he didn't have much conviction in his voice.

He tried. He really did. I heard him thrashing around for a whole hour the next morning. By afternoon he was on his way to the hospital in an ambulance with two men holding him down.

All I could get out of the doctors was, "complete nervous breakdown." I finally found a hard-up intern and bribed him to spy for me. He reported that Hillary had the whole staff stumped. He was acting more like a dope addict with withdrawal symptoms or a drunk with the D.T.'s.

I got in touch with Hillary's sanitarium. The head psychiatrist was in Europe, so I cabled him and flew him back. He took over, and pretty soon I had the word I dreaded.

"Your wonder boy will recover," he told me, "but that's a wonder in itself. I presume he told you of his experiments to achieve total recall?"

I said yes.

"What he probably failed to tell you was that we all tried to dissuade him."

"That he didn't mention, but I worried about it."

"Yes, well you might have. When Hillary Hardy succeeded in stripping

away the last remnant of protective insulation in his memory he exposed himself not only to its full factual content, but also he lay naked every past emotional upset, every pain, fear, dread and sorrow he had ever experienced. It is no longer possible for him to recall an experience and ponder it objectively. *He relives it.*"

"Yes, I get that," I said, "but what's so--"

"Did you ever hit your thumb with a hammer?" the doctor with the traditional, gray goatee interrupted.

"Sure, a couple of times."

"Ever lose a sweetheart or have a loved one die?"

I nodded.

"Suppose that to even think about such experiences you had to endure all the actual physical or emotional pain of the original incident? The crushing blow of the hammer? The heartache and tears of your loss? And suppose further, that you were trying to write a play, and in order to bring genuine emotion to it you forced yourself to endure these pains and emotional stresses, minute after minute--"

"God!" I said. "But you said he'd recover?"

"In a few weeks, yes. Gradually we will reduce sedation until he can control his memories again, but never ask him to write another dramatic work. Another attack like this one could drive him irretrievably insane."

It wasn't too hard to understand. After all, what is creative writing but setting down little bits of yourself? And the demands of literature are for human problems, conflicts, struggles.

Young as he was, Hillary was no different from the rest of us. Sure, he was full of reading and second hand bits of business, but he dug deeply into his own private pot of pain for his genuine dramatic effects. And where others dig with a long-handled ladle, Hillary dipped with his bare soul--and he got scalded.

Getting him well and keeping him that way was a matter of putting the lid back on the pot, so to speak. Nobody ever invited him to write another word. I saw to that. He's still with me, because after he went bankrupt on the sanitarium deal he had nowhere to turn. After taxes and the rooking the real estate boys gave him, his royalties were tied up for years to come.

He did get better, though. And he even works a little. Turns out scripts for mild little comic books, the Honey-Bunney type that are approved by parent-teacher censors. They don't sell very well. No conflict. No guts.

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