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## A NOTE ON SAROYAN\*

BY H. E. BATES

SAROYAN irresistibly recalls the market place. He is the Eastern carpet seller in a foreign country armed with the gift of the gab, a packet of psychological conjuring tricks and a bunch of phoney cotton carpets from which, unexpectedly, he now and then produces a genuine Ispahan. He is too good a salesman not to be interested in everything that interests the customer: love, horses, women, little children, hunger, heart-ache, beauty, hope, money, poverty, God, and all the rest of the big bad crazy world; and these subjects, plus Mr. Saroyan, are the patter from which his stories are made.

Saroyan arrived in the early thirties with *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*. A young American-Armenian, living in San Francisco, Saroyan proceeded to unfold a range of very dazzling carpets of tricky design and, while displaying them, talked the heads off the American public. Saroyan even then had nothing to learn technically. He arrived with every gag worked out, smooth, efficient, attractive, humorous, full of the cheek that gets on. Every story was a carpet that had to be sold, and talk would sell it:

'I hadn't had a haircut in forty days and forty nights, and I was beginning to look like several violinists out of work. You know the look: genius gone to pot, and ready to join the Communist Party. We barbarians from Asia Minor are hairy people: when we need a haircut, we *need* a haircut. It was so bad, I had outgrown my hat. (I am writing a serious story, perhaps one of the most serious I shall ever write. That is why I am being flippant. Readers of Sherwood Anderson will begin to understand what I am saying after a while; they will know that my laughter is rather sad.) I was a young man in

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need of a haircut, so I went down to Third Street (San Francisco), to the Barber College, for a fifteen cent haircut'.

Most of Saroyan is in that paragraph: the slick, arresting, straight beginning, the wise-crack (putting the audience in good humour), the touch of personal history and racial loyalty ('we Armenians', &c.), the diversion (generally literature, art, politics), and the final touch of narrative realism, just sufficient to move the scene from one point to another. There is no nonsense here about self-effacement, pure objectivity, &c. Saroyan is up in the front, talking; he is about to try to bamboozle you (and will succeed) into listening to a series of reflections, some serious, some saucy, some ironical, mostly deliberately irresponsible, on the state of the world as it seems to a man having a fifteen cent haircut in San Francisco in the year of the depression, nineteen-thirty-five. It might just as well be Chicago, a ten cent plate of soup and the year nineteen thirty-six. Scenes, places, and time itself do not matter very much, since nothing much is going to happen except that at the end of the story Saroyan will still be talking. There are characters, as such. People pop in and out of the scene as they pop in and out of a shop; they are met on the side-walk, in the barber's chair; they talk and Saroyan discusses what they have to say. Saroyan talks very fast, with colour, with many diversions, and with slick and entertaining knowledge of many subjects. Finally, as you turn to say something yourself, to seek elucidation perhaps on the value of the goods, it is suddenly to discover that Saroyan has folded up and discreetly departed, leaving you after a very engaging entertainment with something you never intended to buy.

What you have bought, if you intended to buy a story, has no value. As a narrative, measured by conservative standards, by the rule of Kipling, Bret Harte or even Hemingway, it is ludicrous. As a sequence of trivialities of which the deeper significance is subtly implied it leaves Tchegov himself looking very old-fashioned. There is no plot, no heart-stirring action, no dénouement. The world is crazy enough, Saroyan thinks, without these things: there's a ready-made plot in any barber's

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chair that never can and never will be unravelled; let's investigate *that* and see what it looks like. It's a strange, crazy, disorderly affair, true, when you put it down on paper—but why should literature attempt to rob life of its disorderliness? By putting down the craziest, most chaotic, bits of life we may discover some truth—on the same principle that it often comes out of the mouths of drunken men. Generations of writers have been tying life into neat bundles and putting these bundles on to shelves where they now lie forgotten under dust. I, says Saroyan, object to tying up life into bundles; on the contrary I want to release it, to ferret it out, to knock the conventional, literary stupid dust off it and set it free. Let's have done with pretentiousness, neatness, good manners, order, seriousness and so-called sanity. Nothing in this world of contradictory values, of sublimity and rottenness, beauty and cynicism, kindness and hatred, adds up to any sense anyway, and who knows but what, after all, the lunatic may not be the sanest man alive? Who knows but what lunacy may not be the clearest, calmest, most beautiful kind of sanity?

All this is very salutary and very refreshing; every generation needs a writer who puts his tongue out, and among other things Saroyan has shown yet one more phase of the short story's limitless possibilities. But Saroyan's method creates its own dangers. The first of these is monotony, Saroyan's stories being very short and capable of swift, easy and frequent repetition; the second is exactly that which confronted Hemingway and which Hemingway himself has become increasingly aware of and has, in later stories, done something to avoid—the danger that unpretentiousness, if deliberate enough and studied enough, may itself become a pose. Saroyan's revolt is the revolt of the young man who, hating the bowler-hats, butterfly collars and pin-stripe trousers of convention, himself puts on the green shirt, scarlet tie and amber trousers of a new and brighter simplicity. Saroyan cannot escape the charge of being something of a poseur and, at times, something of a phoney, which for him may mean the same thing. Once in twenty times his goods are genuine and joyously good (*Our*

*Little Brown Brethren the Filipinos* is a classic example), but after eight volumes the Saroyan method shows no sign of change and appears to be incapable of further development.

Yet Saroyan is, I feel, important—not so much for what he has done, as for what he has indicated can be done. Saroyan has shown that the short story can be stripped of every shred of convention, turned inside out and upside down, and yet remain the short story. He has shown that it can exist not only without plot, which we knew already, without characterisation and without carefully created atmosphere, but without any of the other rules by which fictional life is projected through imagination. Saroyan's stories are the result of a kind of imaginative reportage; they are an embellished running commentary made by a man who stands at a street corner with a microphone in his hands and says, with pertinent or impertinent improvisation, what he feels about the life going past him. In his hands the method seems to have reached the limits of its immediate development; but it is possible that one day a writer will take that method, as Hemingway took the Stein method, and graft it on to a method more traditional and more exacting in its demand for imaginative form, and so produce a greater story.