CHAPTER III

Why a Renaissance Nobleman Wrote Sonnets

Now perhaps the thoughts, "There is no money in it," and "It may never be published," you find dry up all the springs of energy in you, so that you can't drag yourself to a piece of paper.

I have experienced this often. I have cleared it up for myself in this way:

At the time of the Renaissance, all gentlemen wrote sonnets. They did not think of getting them in the Woman's Home Companion. Well, why write a sonnet at all then?

Now one reason is (and this is very fine and commendable) the hope of getting it in the Woman's Home Companion. But there are many other reasons more important. And incidentally unless you have these other reasons, the sonnet won't have much vitality and the Woman's Home Companion will send you a rejection slip.

A Renaissance nobleman wrote a love sonnet for a number of reasons. A slight and very incidental reason may have been that he wanted to show people he could do it. But the main reason was to tell a certain lady that he loved her: (although they also wrote beautiful sonnets then about all sorts of things: sonnets that were
prayers, that were indignant business letters, that were political arguments).

But say the nobleman wrote a sonnet to tell the lady that he loved her. His chest was full of an uncomfortable pent-up feeling that he had to express. He did it as eloquently, beautifully and passionately as he could, on paper.

And although his sonnet was never published in any magazine, and he never got a cent for it, he was not unrewarded any more than a person who sings a beautiful Bach choral is unrewarded and needs to be paid for it—any more than the little ten-year-old girls who produced the plays had to have fifty cents an hour and the regular union rates.

One of the intrinsic rewards for writing the sonnet was that then the nobleman knew and understood his own feeling better, and he knew more about what love was, what part of his feelings were bogus (literary) and what real, and what a beautiful thing the Italian or the English language was.

If you read the letters of the painter Van Gogh you will see what his creative impulse was. It was just this: he loved something—the sky, say. He loved human beings. He wanted to show human beings how beautiful the sky was. So he painted it for them. And that was all there was to it.

When Van Gogh was a young man in his early twenties, he was in London studying to be a clergyman. He had no thought of being an artist at all. He sat in his cheap little room writing a letter to his younger brother in Holland, whom he loved very much. He looked out his window at a watery twilight, a thin lamp-post, a star, and he said in his letter something like this: "It is so beautiful I must show you how it looks." And then on his cheap ruled note paper, he made the most beautiful, tender, little drawing of it.

When I read this letter of Van Gogh's it comforted me very much and seemed to throw clear light on the whole road of Art. Before, I had thought that to produce a work of painting or literature, you scowled and thought long and ponderously and weighed everything solemnly and learned everything that all artists had ever done aforetime, and what their influences and schools were, and you were extremely careful about design and balance and getting interesting planes into your painting, and avoided, with the most stringent severity, showing the faintest academical tendency, and were strictly modern. And so on and so on.

But the moment I read Van Gogh's letter I knew what art was, and the creative impulse. It is a feeling of love \(^1\) and enthusiasm for something, and in a direct, simple, passionate and true way, you try to show this beauty in things to others, by drawing it.

The difference between Van Gogh and you and me is,\(^1\) or it can be a feeling of hate and abhorrence too. Though the work of the men who have worked from love seems to be greater than those who have worked from hate.
that while we may look at the sky and think it is beautiful, we don't go so far as to show someone else how it looks. One reason may be that we do not care enough about the sky or for other people. But most often I think it is because we have been discouraged into thinking what we feel about the sky is not important.

And Van Gogh's little drawing on the cheap note paper was a work of art because he loved the sky and the frail lamppost against it so seriously that he made the drawing with the most exquisite conscientiousness and care. He made it as much like what he loved as he could. You and I might have made the drawing and scratched it off roughly. Well, that would have been a good thing to do too. But Van Gogh made the drawing with seriousness and truth.

This is what Van Gogh wrote about people like all of us, whose creative impulse is confused (and not simple as his was) and mixed up with all sorts of things such as the wish to make an impression (not just to tell the truth) and to do what critics say artists should do, and so on.

He said:

"When I see young painters compose and draw from memory, and then haphazardly smear on whatever they like also from memory,—then keep it at a distance and put on a very mysterious, gloomy face to find out what in Heaven's name it may look like, and at last and finally make something from it, always from memory,—it sometimes disgusts me, and makes me think it all very tedious and dull.

"They cannot understand that the figure of a laborer,—some furrows in a plowed field, a bit of sand, sea and sky,—are serious objects, so difficult but at the same time so beautiful, that it is indeed worth while to devote one's life to the task of expressing the poetry hidden in them."

To show that the creative impulse of Van Gogh, a great genius, was simply loving what he saw and then wanting to share it with others, not for the purpose of showing off, but out of generosity, I will tell you a few things he said. I want to show you that what he had in him is just what you all have in yourselves and should let out. For I must remind you again and again that that is the whole purpose of this book.

Van Gogh said:

"My only anxiety is what I can do... could I not be of use and good for something?... And in a picture I wish to say something that would console as music does."

He said:

"We take beautiful walks together. It is very beautiful here, if one only has an open and simple eye without any beams in it. But if one has that it is beautiful everywhere."

He said:

"Painters understand nature and love her and teach us to see her."
And this:

“When we drove back from Zundert that evening across the heath, father and I got out and walked awhile; the sun was setting red behind the pine trees, and the evening sky was reflected in the pools; the heath and the yellow and white and gray sand were so full of harmony and sentiment,—see, there are moments in life when everything within us too is full of peace and sentiment, and our whole life seems to be a path through the heath, but it is not so always.”

And this:

“What has changed is that my life was then less difficult, but as to the inward state that has not changed. If there has been any change at all, it is that I think and believe and love more seriously now what I already thought and believed and loved then.”

This:

“Oh, while I was ill there was a fall of damp and melting snow, I got up at night to look at the country. Never, never had nature seemed to me so touching and so full of feeling.”

And this:

“In a few years I must finish a certain work. I need not hurry myself; there is no good in that—but I must work on in full calmness and serenity, as regularly and concentratedly as possible, as briefly and concisely as possible.

“The world only concerns me in so far as I feel a certain debt and duty towards it and out of gratitude I want to leave some souvenir in the shape of drawings or pictures,—not made to please a certain tendency in art, but to express sincere human feeling.”

You can see how Van Gogh’s simple impulse is in all of us. But in us it is clouded over and confused with notions such as: will the work be good or bad? or would it be Art? or would it be modernistic enough and not academical? and would it sell? would it be economically sound to put the time in trying to do it?

Well, Van Gogh was one of the great painters. During his life he made only 109 dollars in all on his paintings. They are now worth about two million dollars. He had a terribly hard life—loneliness, poverty and starvation that led to insanity. And yet it was one of the greatest lives that was ever lived—the happiest, the most burningly incandescent. And see, a few words he has written in his letters, these many years after his death, have changed my whole life!

And one of the most important of these intrinsic rewards is the stretched understanding, the illumination. By painting the sky, Van Gogh was really able to see it and adore it better than if he had just looked at it. In the same way (as I would tell my class), you will never know what your husband looks like unless you try to

8 The italics are mine. And you see he worked from love and generosity. Yet the world treated Van Gogh about as badly as it could treat anyone. As the result of poverty and starvation he went insane and died. A pseudo-artist who worked for fame to impress the world, would have felt very much aggrieved indeed.
draw him, and you will never understand him unless you try to write his story.

I tell you these things because of my own difficulties. One great inhibition and obstacle to me was the thought: will it make money? But you find that if you are thinking of that all the time, either you don't make money because the work is so empty, dry, calculated, and without life in it. Or you do make money and you are ashamed of your work. Your published writings give you the pip.

Another great stumbling block and inhibition to me was the idea that writing (since I wanted to make a fortune and dazzle the public) was something in which you showed off, were a virtuoso, set yourself up to be something remarkable.

But at last I understood from William Blake and Van Gogh and other great men, and from myself—from the truth that is in me (and which I have at last learned to declare and stand up for, as I am trying to persuade you to stand up for your inner truth)—at last I understood that writing was this: an impulse to share with other people a feeling or truth that I myself had. Not to preach to them, but to give it to them if they cared to.

*Remember though that any motive that makes you feel like writing is fine. Use it. Start. If you want to dazzle the public, try it. Good luck to you. In my case it was an inhibition and resulted in nauseous work and I just want to explain that after a while the public-dazzling motive may give out and your results disappoint you. But if egotism and exhibitionism started you working I am grateful. It was the greatest of blessings. For by working you will pass through it and tap a greater and more exuberant motive.*

When I learned all this then I could write freely and jovially and not feel contracted and guilty about being such a conceited ass; and not feel driven to work by grim resolution, by jaw-grinding ambition to succeed, like some of those success-driven business men who, in their concern with action and egoistic striving, forget all about love and the imagination, and become sooner or later emotionally arthritic and spiritually as calcified and uncreative as mummies. (I understand these things because I have experienced them, though on a small scale. I try not to rail against what I have not experienced myself.)

Yes, it has made me like working to see that writing is not a performance but a generosity.

I find that I wrote this to someone three years ago:

"Forgive me, but perhaps you should write again. I think there is something necessary and life-giving about

*They will be uncreative in business as well as in everything else. For of course the creative power is expressed in business as well as in other things. I know a business man whose every sentence has more life, creative vision and generosity in it than those of many artists.

But the trouble with business expressing the creative power freely and prodigally as Art does, you cannot be recklessly generous in business, giving higher and higher wages and all your products freely and lovingly to the public."
'creative work' (forgive the term). A state of excitement. And it is like a faucet: nothing comes unless you turn it on, and the more you turn it on, the more comes.

"It is our nasty twentieth century materialism that makes us feel: what is the use of writing, painting, etc., unless one has an audience or gets cash for it? Socrates and the men of the Renaissance did so much because the rewards were intrinsic, i.e., the enlargement of the soul.

"Yes we are all thoroughly materialistic about such things. 'What's the use?' we say, of doing anything unless you make money or get applause? for when a man is dead he is dead.' Socrates and the Greeks decided that a man's life should be devoted to 'the tendance of the Soul' (Soul included intelligence, imagination, spirit, understanding, personality) for the soul lived eternally, in all probability.

"I think it is all right to work for money, to work to have things enjoyed by people, even very limited ones; but the mistake is to feel that the work, the effort, the search is not the important and the exciting thing. One cannot strive to write a cheap, popular story without learning more about cheapness. But enough. I may very well be getting to raving."

And so now I have established reasons why you should work from now on until you die, with real love and imagination and intelligence, at your writing or whatever work it is that you care about. If you do that, out of the mountains that you write some mole hills will be published. Or you may make a fortune and win the Nobel Prize. But if nothing is ever published at all and you never make a cent, just the same it will be good that you have worked.

6 To say the word "creative" has always embarrassed me. So many unctuous people have over-used it. But I have to use it. It is what I mean.