DARING YOUNG MAN

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Category: Opinions

Bennett Cerf, "Try and Stop Me"

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William Saroyan's calculated whimsicality and instinctive urge to plunge into action whenever there is the remotest chance to get his name into print have annoyed some our more conservative and puritanical critics to a point where they deny him the homage that is his just due. They will not—or cannot—recognize that beneath Saroyan's cheap-jack shenanigans there throb an abundant and original talent and an imagination and love of life that have already made a rich contribution to American literature and drama. Meanwhile, with a Pulitzer Prize play and two successive choices by the Book-of-the-Month Club to his credit at the advanced aged of thirty-four, Mr. Saroyan, product of the vineyards of Fresno, California, self-educated son of simple Armenian parents, had done right well for himself.

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Saroyan attended a Fresno public school until he was fifteen. He began selling newspapers in his spare time at the age of eight, and became a telegraph messengers at thirteen. At harvest time, he pruned vines with Mexican and Jap laborers in his uncle's fields. He observed much and forgot nothing. He loved every minute of his work and every person he encountered in the doing of it. This

is the quality that has illuminated every line he has ever written. He knew, at an early age, that he was going to be a writer. The first story that he sold was **The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze**. Whit Burnett, of **Story Magazine**, accepted it in 1934. Saroyan's only surprise was that it had taken so long for the literary world to discover his talents. He made a package of all the other stories he had written and dispatched them to a publisher. This publication was an unqualified success, and Bill has been flying through the air with the greatest of ease ever since. The day he received his six author's advance copies, he boarded the Oakland-San Francisco ferry, and descended upon reasonably startled passengers with a jubilant shout. "I'm the man who wrote this book," he cried. "Yes, sir, I'm William Saroyan himself. Don't you want to buy an autographed copy?" The books went so fast that the author suggested that the publisher send him a hundred additional copies for similar exploitation.

Rejection slips did not destroy Saroyan's ebulliency for too long a period. He changed the author's name atop a sheaf of unpublished stories to "Sirak Soyan" and submitted them to the late Edward O'Brien, high priest of the short story in Britain. "These tales," he wrote, "are different in substance from the stories of my cousin, William Saroyan, but, I believe, are rather related to his work." O'Brien announced his discovery of a new major talent to the editors of **Story** just as they were writing to tell him how they had found Saroyan. O'Brien stoutly maintained that his Armenian discovery was the more important; Burnett defended his man with equal vehemence. The argument continued for several months, until Saroyan could stand it no longer, and admitted he and his "cousin Soyan" were one and the same. O'Brien's and Burnett's laughter did not ring out so heartily as Saroyan's.

Saroyan came East the following spring, and delighted columnists, reviewers, and lion-chasers speedily discovered that here was a young man who manufactured his own copy and distributed same with prodigal generosity. Reference to him or his work in the most obscure periodical evoked a four-page reply, banged out on his ever-ready typewriter even while he was being interviewed by somebody else. His love-life was conducted with similar reticence. I had introduced him to a pair of beautiful sisters at a cocktail party. He addressed the elder of the two (she was twenty, I believe) in front of a half-dozen of us and blandly suggested that she accompany him on a trip to Philadelphia. Her indignant refusal startled him somewhat, but he rallied bravely, and called her back. "How about your sister?" he asked.

I took Bill to the very first play he ever saw on Broadway. I think the year was 1935. It was a play about the Newark Airport called Ceiling Zero and it starred that superlatively good actor, the late Osgood Perkins. "So that's New York theatre," said Bill at the end of two acts. "Why, for the love of Mike, I could write a better play than that in twenty-four hours" And, by golly, he did. His first play, My Heart's in the Highlands, was produced as an experiment by the Group Theatre in April 1939. It was uneven and unpolished, but astute dramatic critics, notably George Jean Nathan, recognized that their prayer for a fresh and original talent in the theatre had been answered. His next play, **The Time of Your Life**, which was presented by the Theatre Guild on October 25, 1939, won both the

Puritzer Prize and the New York Drama Critic's Award, the first play ever to receive both honors. Saroyan created a national furor by refusing the former prize. He claimed that wealth had no right to patronize art. The resultant publicity was worth not only five times the amount of the prize to Mr. Saroyan, but it took the high and mighty Pulitzer Committee down a number of pegs as well.

Saroyan's subsequent plays have not been successful, but he has found ample compensations in other fields. **My Name is Aram** was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1940. A year later, he sold an original script to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for $60,000. It was called **The Human Comedy.** He promptly distributed the bulk of this money among his relatives in California, retaining something less than ten thousand dollars for himself to finance a season of Saroyan repertory that he proposed to institute in New York at the beginning of the current theatrical year. The repertory survived for exactly one week, and accounted not only for all the money he had left, but for several thousand dollars more. This did not faze Mr. Saroyan. He promptly declared the entire New York theatrical season a wash-out, and sat down to transform his motion-picture script into a novel. The result was a book that became his second successive Book-of-the-Month selection. It was a leading best-seller for months. The picture also was a whopping success. Saroyan is back in the chips again and also in the United States Army, at the present writing in Europe with the Signal Corps. What the Army will do to William Saroyan and vice versa is anybody's guess. The last time I saw him, Army discipline had not weighed too heavily upon his ebullient spirit. Our phone operator announced, "A man who says he is the world's greatest author is here to see you." "Send Private Saroyan in," I answered.