

THE AFFABLE STRANGER

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649038992

The Affable Stranger by Peter McArthur

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PETER MCARTHUR

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STRANGER**

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BY
PETER McARTHUR
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BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge

1920
Xc.

Public Library

875.549

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TILDEN FOUNDATION

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PREFACE

To make clear the purpose of this book and to suggest possibilities to the reader the author offers the following article which was published in the *Toronto Globe*. Most of the chapters first appeared in the same journal.

EKFRID, July 28. — This morning I got up feeling singularly cheerful and care-free. And no wonder. Yesterday I got even with the world — said everything I wanted to say about it right down to the last word. This morning I feel that I am making a fresh start with all scores paid, and I don't care whether school keeps or not.

The explanation of this unusual state of mind is quite simple. Yesterday I finished writing a book, in which I said just what I wanted to say — said what I have been aching to say for years — about the world and things in general. No matter what happens to

Houghton 10 Nov. 1911

the book, it has already served its purpose. It has rid my mind of "the perilous stuff, etc.," that accumulated during the war and since. And the result has been so refreshing that I have no hesitation in recommending the book cure to every one. Nowadays any one can write a book, and most every one does. The mistake is in regarding the book as a literary venture. What you should do is to make a pad of paper and a lead pencil your father confessor and ease your mind of its worries. When the book is done, you can send it out into the wilderness as the Israelites sent the scapegoat — bearing your sins with it. Then you can make a fresh start. If you don't want to publish it — though publication seems necessary to complete absolution — you can tie a stone to it and throw it into the lake, or do it up in a parcel and leave it for some one to find, just as boys used to do with neat parcels in which they placed pebbles on which they had rubbed their warts — hoping in that way to rid themselves of warts. I know there are some old-

fashioned people who will be shocked at this levity in speaking of books, but they should waken up to the fact that since the coming of the wood-pulp era no particular merit attaches to writing a book. And if books can be given a medicinal value to take the place of their old-time literary value, why should n't we recognize the fact? Anyway, the writing of a book put me in the frame of mind to parody Sir Sidney Smith and exclaim:

“Fate cannot harm me, I have had my say.”

I have told all this merely to explain the joyous mood induced by the writing of the book. Having finished my task, I felt not only up-do-date with my work, but up-to-date with life. It is the ambition of every man — whether he confesses it or not — to get even with the world. The world is forever defeating us and defrauding us of our hopes. So let us have our say about it, turn over a new leaf, and make a fresh start. When I got up this morning

“I moved and did not feel my limbs,
I was so light — almost
I felt that I had died in sleep
And was a blessed ghost.”

There was no feeling of responsibility about anything, and I could go to work in a care-free frame of mind. That made me realize how care-free all nature is, and how care-free life might be if we did not allow ourselves to become so much entangled with its affairs. Just because I had arranged to free myself from all other responsibilities while doing my task, I suddenly found myself free from responsibilities and in the only true holiday humor. It is true there was work to do, but I did not feel any responsibility. My first chore was to churn, but I was not responsible for the flavor and texture of the butter. It was my part to make the barrel churn revolve with a rhythmical “plop! plop! plop!” and when the butter came I had nothing more to do with it. By that time the heavy dew had dried from the sheaves, and the business of hauling in the

wheat was commenced. Though I had an interest in the wheat, I was not responsible for it, and could pitch the sheaves without worrying. The mood left by having poured all my problems into a book was apparently the same as that enjoyed by Kipling's devil when he "blew upon his nails, for his heart was free from care."

Along in the forenoon a thunderstorm began to gather in the west, and I was in the right mood to realize what a care-free and irresponsible storm it was. Even though it was harvest-time, this storm was not obliged to take any thought about what it was doing. It did n't have to pick the just from the unjust and distribute the rain as a reward — or punishment. It rained on both alike. Though it was such a care-free storm, I confessed to a feeling of relief when I saw it sheering off to the south. There are all kinds of just and unjust men living down that way, and though they may not have wanted rain any more than