

A Cell in Etruria

Frank Lillie Pollock

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Title: A Cell in Etruria

Date of first publication: 1908

Author: Frank Lillie Pollock (1876-1957)

Date first posted: Apr. 14, 2022

Date last updated: Apr. 14, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220440

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines

[Source: Munsey's Magazine, June 1908]

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BY FRANK LILLIE POLLOCK

I watched Kernahan as he slept profoundly, his head on the back of the chair, where it had fallen when he stopped eating and talking. Among the litter of the studio table were the remains of the lunch I had rummaged together for him. He was damp, draggled, shabby, and his face told tales of hard straits, but at that moment Maurice Kernahan seemed to my dazzled eyes a very magician.

For I was still under the enchantment of the story he had told me—the plot of his novel, "The Fountain of Youth," which was to be a masterpiece. It would be nothing less, I was certain, if I was not over-intoxicated by the skill with which he had unwound the thread of his tale, from its brilliant beginning to its rounded end, often reciting whole passages, for he always elaborated his material very fully in his mind before he touched paper.

Not a word of the book was written, but from his previous work I knew how it would come out—strong and smooth as

silk, and rich with the colors of his exuberant Celtic fancy. The setting was unreal; the Etruria of his plot was as vague as the Forest of Arden, but there were living passions in it, and human problems, and a vein of keen irony that no one would see who ought not to see it. Besides, it would just hit the popular taste of the moment, though I was so charmed by the fire and beauty of the story that this last consideration scarcely occurred to me at the time.

Meanwhile the man who had devised all this slept soundly in my chair, without a dollar in his pockets. The always active pendulum of his fortunes had swung a little farther than usual. His trunk was held for room-rent, he had told me. He had even pawned his typewriter. He had not eaten all day, and I had found him sitting at the top of my stairs in a kind of collapse.

Kernahan needed quiet and freedom from anxiety to do his best work. He had seldom had them, and that was why he had done nothing but the witty and graceful magazine trifles by which he was slightly known. And the worst of it was that I could not help him; I was struggling in the shoalest of waters myself. But I was so much excited over his inspiration that I presently woke him up to talk about it.

"When are you going to write it?" I demanded.

"When? Now. The question is where," he returned.

"You know this joint is always open to you," I said.

"No, I won't let you feed me, old fellow. There's three or four months' work in this, and you're carrying all the ballast you need, I know."

"What a pity a man can't realize on an idea!" I groaned.

"Why, so he can. There are several publishers who would grub-stake me while I wrote the book, if I told them my plot. But then they'd charge me about ten thousand per cent interest on their advance when it came to dealing for the manuscript. No, I want to walk in with the book all finished and demand fifteen per cent royalty on the retail price, for it's worth it." He laughed frankly. "You know I appreciate a good thing when I see it."

"Oh, you're right to be enthusiastic. But couldn't you do newspaper work while you were writing it?"

"I couldn't write that story unless I was dead to the world, shut away in some cloister where I wouldn't be worried about money, and where nobody would speak unless spoken to. I wonder if there is such a place anywhere! Oh, yes, I forgot the most essential requisite—where I could live for nothing!"

He leaned forward on the table, caught sight of something on the spread newspaper, and pushed aside a plate to read it. He reread it carefully, began to laugh, cut the paragraph out, and put it in his pocket.

"What is it?" I inquired.

He got up and took his hat. In his eyes was a sparkle which I knew always meant some reckless impulse.

"You're staying here to-night, you know. Hold on, where are you going?"

But he was already out and going down the stairs three steps at a time. I ran after him; but I heard the street-door slam when I was half-way down the four flights. I went out after him, but could see nothing of him. The Twelfth Street asphalt glittered wet in the drizzly November night. To the west, a Sixth Avenue elevated train flared past like a roaring comet through the mist.

After wandering vaguely about for ten minutes. I went back to my studio and waited for Maurice to return. Meanwhile I examined the newspaper to see what he had clipped, but it appeared to have been merely an item from a column of police-news.

Maurice did not come back. The winter passed; I heard nothing of him, and no one whom I knew had seen him. But early in April I received a letter. I could not decipher the postmark.

The manuscript of the "Fountain" will reach you in a day or two. Please have it typewritten, and hold it for me. I'll see you in a fortnight.

The manuscript came the very next day, by express. It was written in lead-pencil on a very poor quality of paper, but the

book was all there, in Kernahan's neat hand—a perfect copy, without corrections or erasures.

Before sending it to be typed I read it, and I found that my expectations had not risen too high. Kernahan had made the most of his inspiration; he had written a great book. The extreme delicacy and elaboration of the style bore witness to much meditation and much labor with the file, and I wondered what place of happy seclusion he had found for the six months' work. I awaited his appearance impatiently.

It was three weeks before he came, and at the first glance I saw that he was thin, that his face had an unhealthy pallor, and that his hair was cut shorter than I had ever seen it; but he was in exuberant spirits, and more enthusiastic about his book than ever.

"Where on earth have you been?" I asked. "You look as if you'd been overworking heavily."

"I've been in Etruria," he returned deliberately, but with the old reckless sparkle in his eye.

"And where is that?"

"Oh, if you want me to teach you geography—"

"Oh, if you don't want to tell me— But how did you make a living in Etruria?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Oh, yes; I made brooms."

"But you can't make brooms!"

"Can't I? Just try me! But the 'Fountain.' Wasn't it worth brooms—even Etruscan brooms?"

That was all I could get out of him, and he persisted in talking about his book, which he carried off that afternoon to a New York publishing-house. This concern did not accept it, however, but a rival firm did, and "The Fountain of Youth" appeared in September.

Its success justified our expectations. It sold eight thousand copies in the first month after publication, and continued to sell with even greater rapidity. Kernahan was launched.

I was still extremely curious to know where the book had been written, for a peculiar idea had sprung in my brain. I did not see much of the author that autumn; he had risen somewhat into fame, he was busy, in much demand; but when at last I found him at home, in his apartment on Forty-Seventh Street, he seemed unspoiled by success.

"By the way," I ventured, as I was leaving, "do you know if prisoners are allowed to have writing-materials in the jails hereabouts?"

He met my eye imperturbably.

"Usually, I believe, if they are good-conduct men."

"Quite right, too," I remarked. "Good-by!"

Kernahan took a small, crumpled newspaper clipping from his card-case, and gave it to me.

"You can keep this," he said. "If I hadn't seen that paragraph in your studio that night, the book wouldn't have been finished now. Good-by! Don't tell anybody that I know how to make brooms," he called down the stairs after me.

The clipping, which I read on the street, appeared to be a bit of police-news:

The usual number of winter applicants are seeking admission to the local jails, and a feature of the metropolitan police-courts has been the number of prisoners asking for long sentences to get them through the winter. Such voluntary prisoners are usually treated with some laxity, not being likely to escape.

A month later I read in a literary weekly:

Mr. Maurice Kernahan sailed last week for Genoa. He will spend the rest of the winter at his villa on the Italian Riviera, where "The Fountain of Youth" was written.

I pinned this clipping to the other.

[The end of *A Cell in Etruria* by Frank Lillie Pollock]