

## A Novelist of the Unsung

Emerson Hough was preëminently a pioneer, even though he was born after the first great hordes of home-seekers had pushed the frontier into the ocean. He was a pioneer in the sense that he gave to the country a new literature of the West — a literature which despised the sensational presentation of the “wild west” with a few well-known characters, such as Kit Carson, Daniel Boone, and Lew Cody figuring as the heroes. He rather aimed to preserve the “history of the unsung” and elevate the “woman in the sunbonnet” to her true place in the sun. His work consists of a long line of glowing tales which were written “to preserve the old pioneer traditions and to reawaken the old pioneer virtues that gave fiber to the American character.”

In blazing this new trail, Emerson Hough encountered many hardships, the heritage of the pioneer. Though he never trekked across the prairie in a covered wagon, he was confronted with circumstances which were sorely trying to the soul, if not the sinews. For years he slaved away at writing with no inducement but his own courage, and when his work was finally accepted it was constantly being judged by improper standards and bitterly assailed by critics who did not understand what he was trying to do. He did not, indeed, get well on the trail of writing



until he was past his youth, and his first successful novel was published when he was forty-five.

Born on the frontier at Newton, Iowa, on June 28, 1857, Emerson Hough came of a strong line of Quaker ancestors who, moving with the frontier, had helped to organize several States and Territories. His intrepid father, one of the early officers of Jasper County, thought nothing of shooting "an Indian and a buffalo on the first day of his journey from home with his baby." With such a father who had a passion for the open prairies, the woods, and the streams, it was only natural that Emerson should have been nurtured on nature lore and taught to handle a rifle while he was learning the alphabet. The trail of his love for the open spaces was thus deeply grooved before it swerved off to meet the companion path of writing.

The boy Emerson flourished in his rough Iowa environment, and grew to be as tough as an oak and lithe as a sapling. He bore no particular marks of genius "unless his preference for roving the town and the country alone" could be called such. Somewhere between childhood and maturity, however, was laid the foundation for that "meditation, introspection, visual memory and personal sensitiveness" which resulted in his "sustained, energetic and often saddening adventures for the twenty-five years between college and success among the natural and social phenomena with which thereafter he dealt."

His father wanted him to become a lawyer and



for that profession he was educated, graduating from the State University of Iowa in 1880. After being admitted to the bar, he located in a tiny frontier town in New Mexico, in the mountain region between the Rio Grande and Pecos rivers. It was a wild, rough place, "half cow-town and half mining camp", and the young attorney's eyes were forever open to an engrossing, historic pageant which somehow seemed to get into his mind in the form of plots and stories. The outdoors was forever calling him, and his "yearning for the open spaces, his crusades to save the last remnants of the buffalo and wilderness playgrounds for the new generations of Americans, and his love for shooting and fishing, all kept him moving about the earth too freely and constantly to leave much time for legal practice."

A sudden jolt came into his happy and unprosperous life, however, when he received word that his father had failed in business. Immediately he cast about for some sort of congenial and remunerative work, and found that his "perfectly good and perfectly worthless" university education was of mighty little value to him or his family back east. But instead of concentrating upon the legal profession, he remembered that in the course of his law studies he "used to snatch time for writing". The lure of his former pastime beckoned, and he decided to try writing in earnest.

This was the beginning of long years of disappointment and discouragement. If he sold at all,



he received no more than ten dollars for an article which later would have brought a thousand. His first accepted work of this period was a series of "Southwestern Sketches" which were printed in the old *American Field*. Soon after this he "did odds and ends and collected bad debts" on the Sandusky (Ohio) *Register*. He wrote sports articles on the side and did humorous stuff "at a time", in his own words, "when I was sadder than I have ever been since in my life." For all this labor and heartache the syndicates paid him the sum of five dollars a column — "when they paid it — which was always 90 days or so overdue." When, in 1889, he was offered the Chicago office of *Forest and Stream* at a salary of "\$15 a week — minus office rent" — he felt that he had graduated from the school of hard knocks into a rosy land of plenty.

But his long struggle was just beginning. His indefatigable energy and the crying need for money held him to the writing treadmill after office hours, and finally his first book, *The Singing Mouse Stories*, was published in 1895. In 1897 came *The Story of the Cowboy*, his first real success. Theodore Roosevelt was so impressed with it that he wrote the author a letter of praise, saying, "I always wanted to write this book myself. Now, thank God, it's done better than I could have done it." This was the first praise Mr. Hough had ever received, and he treasured the letter above all his possessions. The knowledge of a book well done must



have given him greater faith in himself, for in October of that same year he married Miss Charlotte A. Cheesebro of Chicago.

*The Girl of the Half-way House* appeared in 1900 and had only a fair sale. The author was not discouraged, however, in spite of its luke-warm success, for his "taste for historical subjects had begun to awaken, and he felt the urge to begin a story of this sort. So, dictating "direct to the machine in his office during the daytime, or penciling it after 10 o'clock at night, Mr. Hough wrote *The Mississippi Bubble* which in 1902 brought him national recognition. He had five copies of the manuscript made and sent them out to the leading publishers. To his consternation, two replied by telegraph and the others accepted by letter." The company that offered \$5000 advance royalties got the contract. "Of course this was more money than there was in the whole world, and more than I had ever seen," Hough explained. "It seems quite natural that I took that offer in preference to any of the others."

When the book began to attract considerable attention, the New York editors of *Forest and Stream* decided that their Chicago representative could not be a very good journalist or he would not have written the "Bubble". Acting on this hypothesis they immediately dismissed him, and left in the wake of their ultimatum "the worst scared man in the world" who had a wife and no visible or invisible means of support save "that ancient ambition to



write." Years later, however, Hough could say, "I wish the *Forest and Stream* had fired me ten years earlier. I could have paid them three times the salary they ever paid me." And then he went on, "Well, now, I began to write in earnest and to my surprise to make a very good living at it. Magazines began to take my stories. I began to sell short stories, then serials."

His first novels were written between midnight and four o'clock in the morning, after his regular work had taken toll of his energy. *Fifty-four Forty or Fight* was written in three weeks, "in the hottest July Chicago ever saw," and three nights in one week he never went to bed at all. He was then fifty-two years old!

Thus, after years of strenuous effort he suddenly arrived. But an earlier and more spectacular success, before he had mastered his craft and gained his stride, would never have satisfied a man like Hough. He would not have tolerated winning except by his own efforts. "I never wanted to get on in life through the work of anybody else; it would be no satisfaction to me to advance if I had to walk on hearts and faces to do that. Long ago I knew that if I did not beat the game out of my own hand it would have no satisfaction and no significance for me to beat it at all."

Almost forty years were required to become a consistent winner, but after the first trick his literary output grew and grew until it was probably "greater



than that of most American writers of his time." Even if what he thought worthless were discarded there would still be a bulk of "wordage" which would place him among the first ten writers of his period.

*The Mississippi Bubble* was published in 1902, with three books preceding it. After this appeared in succession, *The Way of the West*, 1903; *The Law of the Land*, 1904; *Heart's Desire*, 1905; *The King of Gee Whiz*, 1906; *The Story of the Outlaw*, 1906; *The Way of a Man*, 1907; *Fifty-four Forty or Fight*, 1909; *The Sowing*, 1909; *The Young Alaskans*, 1910; *The Purchase Price*, 1911; *John Rawn — Prominent Citizen*, 1912; *The Lady and the Pirate*, 1913; *The Young Alaskans in the Rockies*, 1913; *Young Alaskans on the Trail*, 1914; *The Magnificent Adventure*, 1915; *The Man Next Door*, 1916; *The Broken Gate*, 1917; *Young Alaskans in the Far North*, 1918; *The Way Out*, 1918; *The Sagebrusher*, 1919; *The Web*, 1919; *The Covered Wagon*, 1922; and *North of Thirty-six*, 1923. Besides this he conducted an "Out-of-Doors" section in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and wrote hundreds of short stories and articles. Few men could push themselves with such persistence at his time of life.

In everything Emerson Hough wrote there were two predominating, intertwining ideas — his love for the outdoors and his love for the pioneer. Concerning the first of these, he once analyzed the trend of his own career, and, as he put it, found that "the



boy was indeed the father of the man". Elucidating, he continued, "All my life I have adhered to my love for the out-of-doors, and I presume that the great bulk of all I have written has had to do with life in the open or with sports of the field. I have always found there the cleanest of experiences, the cleanest of ambitions and the cleanest of companionships." It was natural, too, that the pioneers should become his characters, for he believed that the "courage, patience, hardihood — the elemental virtues — of the men and women who won our West, were glorious things; and he believed, moreover, that our modern civilization will suffer mortally if these qualities die out."

In promoting this ideal, Hough spared time from his literary activities to conduct a lifelong crusade for the preservation of natural resources. To him "America was a great, all-embracing personage," a "benign goddess or a kind and glorious mother whom as a faithful son he served with instant loyalty." And as a son he felt that he had a right to enjoy the bounty of his country, and a duty to pass it on increased and unimpaired. For forty years he waged a tireless campaign for conservation. Due in a large measure to his influence, the few remaining herds of bison were given safe pasturage in Yellowstone, new national parks were established, and portions of the West and Southwest were preserved for their natural grandeur.

From the purely fictional standpoint, *The Missis-*



*sippi Bubble* was probably his most popular book. "In that romance he succeeded admirably in combining the historic and picturesque flavor of old American life with a personal story of adventure and love." *The Girl at the Half-way House* was perhaps his best as a charming bit of story telling. But the best known of all his novels is *The Covered Wagon*, "a stirring epic of the Oregon trail — the Westward Ho of 1848". A splendid moving picture based upon the book contributed to the reputation of the author. In the picture as in the book the fight with the Indians assumed no greater significance than the scene in which the "woman in the sunbonnet" steadfastly refused to part with the old bureau, because its drawers were filled with flower seeds; and the crossing of the Platte was no greater drama than the long lines of covered wagons snaking their way in endless procession across the treeless plains.

*North of Thirty-six* portrayed the beginning of the great cattle movement northward from Texas to the railroad. This and *The Covered Wagon* were to form parts of a trilogy about the American pioneer. The third book, to be called *The Tall Men*, was sketched out but never written. In it he planned to "celebrate those restless sons of Kentucky, of Virginia, and of Missouri who pushed our frontier forward to the Pacific and fought it south to the Rio Grande."

Almost every book which Hough turned out was



promptly assailed by meticulous critics. They complained that he described conditions inaccurately, they found discrepancies in names or dates, for they measured the historical novel by the same yardstick they applied to history. But the hue and cry of these matter-of-fact critics did not disturb the author. He kept steadily on, weaving his romances from truth and fiction with the ruggedness and virility of the marching pioneer. Within twenty-one years after his first success he produced twenty-five volumes, almost all of which were pervaded with the spirit of the frontiersmen who "stood shoulder to shoulder and waged battle with the elemental forces of life; those men who made the frontier a place of romance and action; those men who gritted their teeth, did their work and took their medicine."

As might be expected, he had little sympathy for the Greenwich Village type of literati. Upon one occasion he was introduced to an "intellectual", and afterward explained his feelings. "I shed tears over my inability to admire him as I was asked to do", he said, "but in good sooth I did not admire his conceit, his necktie or his nails. Neither do I admire the stilted self-consciousness and the smirking affectation," which constitute the "hallmarks of much of the 'new literature', the 'new culture' of our country".

Hough's own philosophy of life was as rugged as the nature of his characters. He was emphatic in his belief that the really great men in America al-



ways have come from "the old frontier stock of America", and it was that strain which he felt could be invariably "found in the saddle running things." He believed implicitly that when "this Republic shall have grown old enough to have a distinctive literature, it will be a literature of our people, for our people — and by our people."

PAULINE GRAHAME