

## EMERSON HOUGH: "MERRY CHRISTMAS. SUED YOU TODAY."

By JOHN H. MILLER

"I LEFT THE Bobbs-Merrill Company in 1913, suing them at that time for breach of contract. They are a strange bunch down there—having no earthly regard for their spoken or their written word. They will put any author in the poor house who sticks to them." So wrote Emerson Hough to John S. Phillips, editor of *The American Magazine*, four years after his break with Bobbs-Merrill (June 15, 1917, Phillips collection, Lilly Library). The first ten, however, of the twelve years Hough spent on the house list of the Indianapolis firm had been profitable and mutually cordial. Hough's quarrel with Bobbs-Merrill, which began in 1912 after his *John Rawn* died a quick, expensive death in book store windows, was primarily the result of a physical, financial, and psychological crisis in Hough's life. It made him change both his purpose in writing and his publisher. On the other side of the quarrel stood a firm gradually losing faith in Hough's ability to create profitable manuscripts as he became a personal nuisance.

If anything, the fact was that Bobbs-Merrill found Emerson Hough close to the poor house and put him in a Surf Street apartment. *The Mississippi Bubble* (1902), his first and most successful Bobbs-Merrill (then Bowen-Merrill) title, was partly written at home between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. and partly dictated at the Chicago office of *Forest and Stream*, where he had worked since 1889.

Hough was already forty-five years old and was filling out his \$15 a week salary with newspaper work and syndicated articles on conservation and the outdoors. Although he had published three books which made no money, *The Story of the Cowboy* had received the public praise of Theodore Roosevelt. The three books were *The Singing Mouse Stories*, New York, Forest and Stream Publishing Co., 1895; *The Story of the Cowboy*, New York, Appleton, 1897; and *The Girl at the Halfway House*, New York, Appleton, 1900.

## I

Hough had two reasons for bringing *The Mississippi Bubble* to Indianapolis instead of to his former publisher, D. Appleton and Co. of New York. The first was the advance against royalties Bowen-Merrill was offering promising authors. This advance was to become the sore point of his later law suit against the Company in 1913. The second reason was the extensive illustrated newspaper and periodical advertising Bowen-Merrill was pioneering. Such publicity would not only sell books but also spread his reputation, helping him to sell short stories and sketches in the periodical market.

*The Mississippi Bubble*, which out-romanced the other famous historical romances of the time, was a smash hit. A reviewer in the *New York Evening Sun*, June 13, 1902, wrote: "Mr. Emerson Hough only followed the prevailing fashion when he selected a historical personage and a great historical event around which to build his romance. . . . But, unlike the run of such novels, this one has for a hero a personage whose career was more wonderful and whose personality was more interesting than could be imagined by those who rely simply on their imagination for plot and incidents and characters." It placed fourth on the best-

seller list of 1902 and earned Hough \$11,640.15 in its first year, \$16,597.93 in all. He was never to do so well again, although two other successes in the same genre brought Hough over \$6,000 each—*54-40 or Fight* (1909) and *The Purchase Price* (1910).

When sales of *The Mississippi Bubble* promised to establish Hough as a best-selling author, the publicity department at Bobbs-Merrill compiled his biography. After boasting of his hunting prowess and his having read over three hundred volumes as background for his book, the staff writers described their subject: "Mr. Hough is five feet nine in height, weighs about 160 pounds, is nervous in temperament, emphatic in opinions, and a very fair exponent of the strenuous life. He is a business man as well as writer, and gravely regrets that he did not either remain a cow puncher or learn to be a worker in iron." Hough's nervous temperament was to bring him to the verge of a breakdown in ten years. And emphatic in opinions he certainly was, as his novels began to show. His central dogma was that nature is the source of American democracy, religion, and heroic character. He glorified the West, especially the frontier, to which he returned continually as a setting for nostalgic, idealized historical romances. Such cultural primitivism made Hough critical of a society which he saw as flabby, corrupt, and undemocratic because it was either ignoring or destroying nature. The public was eager for Hough's sugar-coated pills, especially when they idealized the past of America and implied a not too specific condemnation of the present. After all, this was the era of Theodore Roosevelt, Hough's avowed political hero, who had captured the popular imagination as an exponent of conservation and the strenuous life.

For ten years the management at Bobbs-Merrill cajoled, flattered, and coaxed Hough through brief spats over money. When he visited Indianapolis, it paid his hotel bills. It purchased the rights to his first book, *The Singing Mouse Stories*, and brought out a fancy edition with almost no hope of recovering its investment except through good will. Hough and William C. Bobbs, President of the Company, developed a friendship beyond the jovial camaraderie Bobbs-Merrill habitually cultivated with authors. Bobbs helped Hough with business investments, advised him on the stock market, and tried to sell off certain worthless books of abstracts Hough owned in Chickashaw, Oklahoma.

Emerson Hough could not write a big-selling book again until early in 1909, when he repeated the formula of *The Mississippi Bubble in 54-40 or Fight*, the first of a projected trilogy on American democracy to be dedicated to progressive political leaders. When advertisements appeared for the new book, Bobbs-Merrill ran bold face type through the centers of its displays: "Dedicated to President Roosevelt." The main idea, that it is the manifest destiny of our country to expand over the entire North American continent, was obviously Rooseveltian.

That Hough took the theme of these novels seriously was still more evident in his next book, *The Purchase Price*, published in the fall of 1910. Dedicated "To Hon. Albert J. Beveridge—A Progressive in the Cause of Actual Freedom," this second part of the trilogy came out only a few weeks before Beveridge, supported by the Roosevelt faction of the Republican Party, was defeated in the Indiana senatorial election. Its thesis that the Compromise of 1850 was an injustice because it sacrificed principle to party was clearly applicable to the split in the Republican ranks. *The*

*Purchase Price* remained good romance, not sermonizing; its reviews and advertising ignored all but the broadest of political implications. But when Hough wrote to Beveridge, October 4, 1910, to thank him for permission to use the dedication, he emphasized his purpose and method:

I am tickled down to the ground to have your hearty telegram this morning. I only wish my book were better, just as I wished that "54-40" was better when President Roosevelt was good enough to let me dedicate that book to him. I am sure that both you and he, however, would realize that novel writing is not much good unless it has novel reading connected with it, and to get readers you must sometimes sacrifice a part of the very sermon you really want to preach . . . .

Indeed—although I and a good many others may seem rather youthfully radical—I don't believe that the split in the Republican party can be or ought to be patched up. I believe it ought to be widened, and that the break ought to be permanent. I believe we need and must have a new party before we can achieve any actual victory. We have got to break the eggs, but by the Lord Harry! we have got to have this omelette made. There is as much need now for the birth of a new party as there was at the time in which the scenes of this novel are laid. Compromise today is just as hopeless and as ruinous as it was in those days.

Hough proposed that the writers of America establish a periodical, call it *The Insurgent*, and get out "on the stump." Beveridge might have smiled to read that writers with much bigger names than Hough's were actively supporting him in a losing fight. Novelist Winston Churchill, whose historical romances with political overtones topped the best-seller lists for over a decade, was actively campaigning. David Graham Phillips and Robert W. Chambers were friends and supporters.

It is not clear how much Bobbs-Merrill encouraged Hough in these covertly political novels. When Hough sug-

gested the Beveridge dedication, they approved it without much comment. It is true, however, that Beveridge became a Bobbs-Merrill author shortly after his defeat, developed a close friendship with William C. Bobbs, and ran for the Senate once again in 1922 at the urging of members of a "militant organization" that sometimes met in the office of the President of Bobbs-Merrill.

## II

Thus, at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Hough was making good money, not only from novels but also from investments in stocks and land. He tended to be smug about money and his ability to get it without compromising his ideas. In an autobiographical piece for promotion of *The Purchase Price*, he wrote:

Money does not seem to mean success or to bring happiness, so far as I can see. Each Fellow ought to want to do something, and money ought to mean only the opportunity to work out one's own personal equation to the last figure. A few dollars more, and I will have a hundred thousand, and that latter is all I want, because then I can take time and write one book or so, which I cannot write now.

In 1910 that was a lot of money.

In spite of wealth, Hough complained about royalties; he threatened that he could "go to practically any eastern publisher that I like." Hewitt Hanson Howland, the chief editor, usually explained that the firm's regular rate was 10 per cent and that good business policy did not permit higher royalties, but not always. Businesslike, dapper, cajoling Howland sometimes got tired of complaints. On May 11, 1913, Hough wrote to Bobbs, "Two years ago Hewitt,—when I was complaining about royalty receipts, as usual!—told me the time would come when discontented authors

would not find it so easy to get their books printed; and last January, when I brought all my stuff down to you, he said, rather grouchy as it seems to me, that we would get the stuff all together so I could take it all to another house if I liked." However, as Hough kept pointing out, bickering was between businessmen and ought not affect friendly relations. Howland still closed his notes "Affectionately yours"—albeit rather lamely when he rejected a Hough manuscript in March, 1913. That one book Hough yearned to write when he had made his hundred thousand was probably *John Rawn* (1912). The last volume of the trilogy, it sacrificed very little sermon to attract readers. Hough was sure it would not sell. Instead of being set in the romantic past, *John Rawn* told of a corrupt Chicago tycoon of 1912. The primary issue between Wilson and Roosevelt, both progressive candidates in that presidential year, was monopolies, and *John Rawn*, which concerns the attempt of a financier to monopolize the power sources of the United States, is clearly pro-Wilson propaganda. So no one could miss the point, Hough dedicated it "To Woodrow Wilson, One of the Leaders in the Third War of American Independence." This book said what he really thought. "I presume the novel would sell better if it had a pleasanter ending," Hough wrote to Laurance Chambers of Bobbs-Merrill. "I told you, however, that I intended to let this book write itself for once, and it did." And a day later he wrote Elia W. Peattie: "Your letter is very welcome to me and makes me feel as though I was paid in writing a book which possibly will not be a financial success. . . . Mostly, documents do not sell as novels."

Howland and Chambers were less pessimistic. Their letters spoke praise as ever, and they sent Hough his regular

\$2,500 advance with the contract. At Hough's suggestion, advertisements quoted the review in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*: "It is a progressive novel—one of the little voices of the era. *You would better read it, for it will teach you something.*" Surrounding this were up to a dozen texts of commendation from progressive politicians and public men who had received advance copies from the publicity department.

Reviews were mixed, but even the most favorable gave only qualified approval, and that usually for message rather than writing. For example, the personally informed Mrs. Elia W. Peattie wrote, March 30, 1912, in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*:

It is apparent almost from the outset that here is no bid for popularity. In this violent, often repellent book there throbs a sort of patriotic anguish. . . .

The tale itself never assumes quite the accent of verity. It will seem like a parable. . . .

Other reviews accused Hough of seeing America as totally corrupt, of being a socialist and un-American. Chafing under criticism, he defended himself in a lengthy piece for the *New York Times*, April 7, 1912, titled prophetically, "Why Authors Go Insane." "The first of these three books was dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, then President of the United States," Hough wrote. "He ceased to be President soon after. The next was dedicated to the Hon. Albert J. Beveridge—who soon thereafter lost his seat in the United States Senate. Perhaps Gov. Wilson shuddered when he saw this dedication—I don't know. All the author can know about it is that he did not try to do anything pretentious, but did the very best he knew how." Wounded by critics, Hough seems to be backing away, denying that his work is serious. There is a note of sorrow, almost

futility, in the article. Governor Wilson did not lose the election, of course, but *John Rawn* lost its fight for popularity. It sold just enough—slightly over twenty thousand copies—to require Bobbs-Merrill to advance another \$2,500 under the terms of the contract. Then sales stopped, and the royalties actually earned totaled \$1,917.77 less than Hough had received in advances. By mid-1913 Hough felt ethically, though not legally, in debt to Bobbs-Merrill for almost two thousand dollars.

### III

Normal procedure for liquidating such debts was to publish a popular fifty-cent edition. Although royalties on these were only  $2\frac{1}{2}\phi$ , the volume of sales could usually be counted upon to bring in several thousand dollars. This way Hough had finally earned almost seven thousand dollars on *The Purchase Price*. But Hough hated popular editions, mainly because he felt that he should receive at least 10 per cent rather than the 5 per cent that was standard at Bobbs-Merrill. When he refused to accept less than 10 per cent on a popular edition of *John Rawn*, the publishers decided to get tough.

Now difficulties with Bobbs-Merrill became only a part of Hough's general feeling of failure. On December 12, 1912, he wrote to Howland: "For many months I have not been very happy in my work. The returns of my list seem disconcertingly small this last year. But so much of our mental makeup is physical that maybe I am just tired. At least I hope so. I have lost considerable time this summer, but have got the old mill started once more." The old mill may have been started again, but it creaked audibly. The same refrain sounds again and again through letters

of the next few months. Business investments were going sour. Hough had been lashed by the critics for a book which said plainly what he had been concealing in romance for years. He had been working so hard that his health was going bad.

Worst of all, his manuscripts were being turned down by magazines, and the man who had boasted three years before that he had almost a hundred thousand dollars was beginning to be "scared about the future for Mrs. Hough." His nervous illness got worse when readers at Bobbs-Merrill advised rejection of *The Lady and the Pirate*, which no one accused of too serious a purpose, and Howland wrote that the house wanted to reconsider the matter of advances. "How are we going to safeguard the investment?" he asked. "I can't see it myself. I don't believe it sound business. The situation absolutely doesn't warrant it" (April 19, 1913). Hough's reply the next day was nearly the cry of a beaten man:

Dear Hewitt:

As perhaps you know, I have been ailing for some time, & this spring on the verge of a breakdown. I need *rest* & above all freedom from worry. Your letter comes like a sort of blow on the head, & I am not in shape to answer it now. I have been waiting a long time, for good news, from Indianapolis.

Tomorrow I am going to a friend's in the country. When I come back in a few days I want to see Mr. Bobbs. My plans must be made before long so I can go north all well & not worry. It is killing me.

According to Bobbs, when Hough came down to Indianapolis early in May, "He begged with tears in his eyes that I take up for personal review the judgment of our editors, claiming that the readers had been influenced by the per-

sonal antagonism of the Chief Editor and laying the utmost stress upon the importance to him to have the book published at once" (Bobbs to Gale Blocki, January 24, 1914). Bobbs agreed to look at the book immediately, since Hough was leaving for the Yukon to try to recover his health. Upon reading the manuscript, Bobbs opted for publication and talked to Hough in Chicago by telephone on May 20, the day before he left for Canada.

Hough's mind was somewhat confused, as letters of this period show. He either did not understand Bobbs' intention or Bobbs left the publication date vague. In Canada Hough quarreled with his host and wrote a check for his expenses that almost destroyed his bank balance. Trying hard to keep himself under control, he returned to Chicago in early September and found that *The Lady and the Pirate*, which he thought full of printers' errors, was already in the book stores. He had no contract and no advance. The book was to be a moderate success in spite of poor printing. Hough had quit trying to save the country, as a promotional release put it, and produced a purely frivolous comedy. But it was to be a long time before Hough got any of the royalties which he now needed merely to satisfy creditors.

Bobbs apparently was trying to force Hough to make up for the *John Rawn* deficit somehow, preferably by granting permission to publish cheap editions of his Bobbs-Merrill titles at a 2½¢ royalty. Bad feeling grew both in Chicago and Indianapolis as one delay followed another. Hough finally got his contract late in October for the regular 10 per cent and advance, but the check did not arrive in spite of repeated complaints and pleas. On November 12, 1913, Bobbs traveled to Chicago to bargain with Hough. "After

a prolonged and painful interview, in which Hough was extremely violent," Bobbs reported, "I accepted a proposal which he made for a settlement not because it was adequate, but because his condition made further negotiations impossible, and said to him that on receipt of a letter from him setting out his proposal as he had then made it to me, I would send him a check for the \$2,500. His letter bore so little resemblance to his proposition that the only charitable view of the matter was that he did not know in the morning what he had said the night before" (Bobbs to Blocki, January 21, 1914). The letter from Hough admitted to a deficit of only one thousand dollars, rather than two thousand, and consented to a popular edition of *John Rawn* of only forty thousand copies. After this, all pretense of cordiality was dropped. On December 26, 1913, Bobbs received a telegram which read: "Merry Christmas. Sued you today."

As Gale Blocki, Bobbs' Chicago lawyer, pointed out, Bobbs-Merrill had little chance of winning. Hough was under no legal obligation to make up for the advance on *John Rawn*, and holding up the stipulated advance on *The Lady and the Pirate* was a breach of contract (Blocki to Bobbs, January 23, 1914). Blocki urged Bobbs to settle the matter out of court and to visit Hough once more, but Bobbs declined to do business with a mad man. In addition, Bobbs-Merrill was negotiating to sell some of Hough's books to the motion picture industry, and Hough was beginning to declare that his movie rights had not been forfeited when he agreed to split dramatic rights with his publisher. Bobbs felt that this contention might jeopardize movie rights in all the contracts that belonged to the house.

In April, 1914, Blocki finally worked out an agreement, out of court, much in Hough's favor. Hough received an immediate check for \$1,500 and the motion picture rights to all his books. The *John Rawn* deficit was to be made up from 5 per cent royalties on cheap editions of *John Rawn* only, which was not very likely almost two years after original publication. Blocki consoled Bobbs with the information that Hough's lawyers were getting two thousand dollars a month for their services (Blocki to Bobbs, April 2, 1914).

Hough ultimately established a lucrative new relationship with D. Appleton and Co. His work appeared regularly in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Covered Wagon* (1922) became one of the most popular motion pictures produced up to that time. Hough never repaired his friendship with Bobbs or the house. His royalties from Bobbs-Merrill averaged five dollars a year, and he kept protesting through his lawyers until he purchased his plates and rights in 1919. For the rest of his life a quarrel which was partly their fault, but largely his own, made him think of Bobbs-Merrill as that "strange bunch down there" in Indianapolis.

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