

The Inside Story

On William Saroyan

By William Saroyan

Illustrated

by William Saroyan



Hundreds of thousands of people regard me, I believe, as something of a success: A well-dressed, well-fed young writer, famous for his ties, who has moved upward and forward in the world of letters with a speed veering on the imperceptible; an Oriental whose name has become a word in the English language. Saroyan, n., one with money, a gentleman, a scholar, an artist; v., to slay, butcher, club, strafe, bombard, or cause to spin; adj., pleasing, ill-mannered, gallant; prep., near-by, within, over, under, toward.

STAGE
November, 1940 * p. 66



What, however, is the inside story? What is the truth? Who is the real Saroyan? Is he a success, or a failure? I will go over the entire saga from there to here chronologically:

- 1908** Born, squawked.
- 1909** Inarticulate, squawked.
- 1910** Stepped on beer bottle, cut foot, squawked.
- 1911** Laughed; burned finger, squawked; laughed; fell off chair, squawked; laughed; chased a rabbit, didn't catch it, squawked.
- 1912** Run over by a bicycle, squawked.
- 1913** Taken to kindergarten, squawked.
- 1914** Handed book and asked to read, squawked.
- 1915** Began to think, squawked.
- 1916** Moved 200 miles, squawked.
- 1917** Became William Saroyan, squawked.
- 1918** Asked question: What is life? Got no answer, squawked.
- 1919** Began to change the world, using a bicycle, a baseball bat, and a pair of pliers.

In 1920 I fell in love with the loveliest creature that ever breathed. A dancer at the Hippodrome Theatre, small, dark, and dainty as the devil. I decided to marry her immediately and let the rest of the world go one-two-three-four, as the saying is. Did I marry her? No. I didn't even talk to her. I followed her one night from the Hippodrome Theatre to a little broken-down house on O Street where she had a room. I stood in front of the house until both my feet went to sleep, but that was all. She left town three days later, and I haven't seen her since. They tore the house down about three years ago. I don't know what happened to her. What happened to me was awful.

- 1921** Clipped many coupons, received much mail, read many brochures.

In 1923 I bought a typewriter. Decided to write the greatest story ever written. Did not do so.

In 1924 I again decided to write the greatest story ever written. Did not do so.

1925 Left school. Went to work on a vineyard north of Sanger. Learned a little Mexican and a little Japanese.

1926 Moved to San Francisco. Capital: thirty cents. Got a job at the Fior D'Italia Market evening of arrival, earned five dollars the following day, Saturday. Monday I got a job at the Southern Pacific. Decided to write the greatest story ever written. Did not do so. Quit the job after three weeks. Took a boat to Los Angeles. Boat sank a year later, twenty-two lives lost. Joined the National Guards for two weeks, Monterey and meals.

1927 Went back to San Francisco. Lived at Public Library.

1928 Went to N. Y. by bus. Suitcase containing \$80 sent to Memphis by mistake. Broke. Got job day of arrival. World still unchanged. Borrowed two dollars, lost it in a black-jack game. Stood in front of a restaurant, slept in the office on two chairs. Suitcase arrived after two months.

1929 Returned to San Francisco. Lost a tooth. Gambled. Luck lousy.

1930 Wrote the greatest story ever written. Got it back with a rejection slip. Rejected rejection slip.

1931 Wrote it again. Got it back.

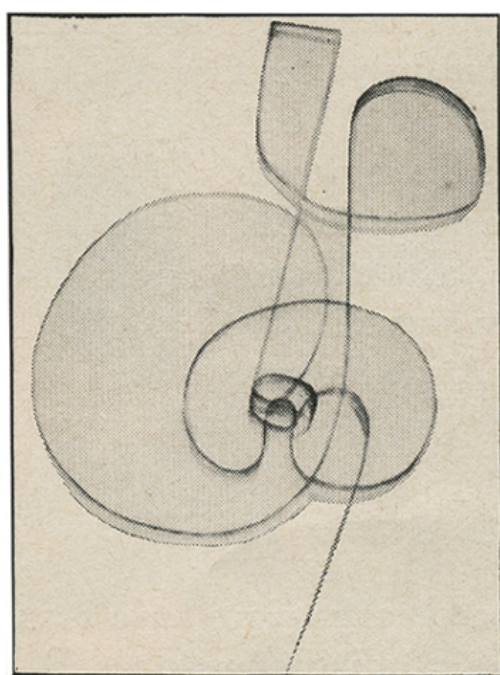
1932 Wrote it again. Got it back. One day that year I didn't have a penny. I walked four miles to town. Got in a five-handed rummy game. High-hand paid. My hand was high-hand. Laid the cards out in front of me. A near-sighted player who believed his hand was high-hand paid for the game: twenty-five cents. I won three games straight. Went next door and bet Nankin and Volta Maid to win, a fifty-cent combination. They won. Got back \$15. Great triumph.

Went around town spending money and swearing. Got in a draw-poker game, intending to win enough money to go to Mexico. Went broke on the first hand. Held four sevens. Winning hand four aces.

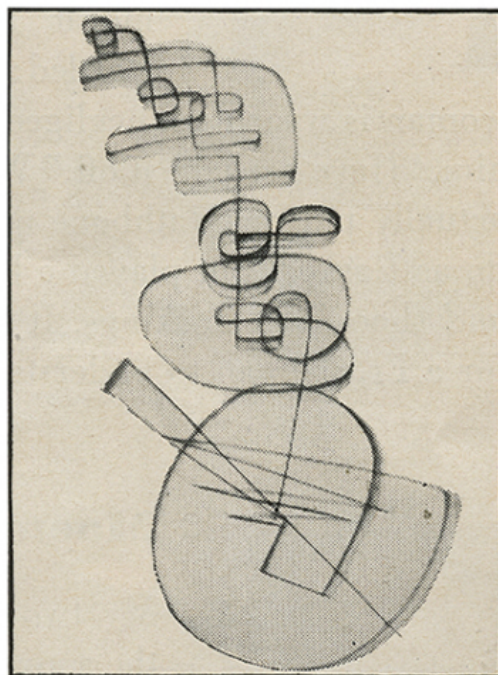
1933 Wrote the greatest story ever written. Had no stamps. Borrowed a quarter, mailed it to *Story*. Accepted. Got busy. Got \$15.

1934 Story published. Book published. Very angry. And so on and so forth.

Any who like may regard me as a success, but I know better. Any time you hold four sevens the first hand and lose to four aces, you're a failure.



1908: BORN, SQUAWKED



1911: DIDN'T CATCH RABBIT