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### **The Methods of Publishing**

Samuel Squire Sprigge (1860–1937) was a qualified physician who worked for *The Lancet* from 1892 and was editor from 1909 until his death. He published several books including a history of the journal and its founder, and a volume of essays, *Physic and Fiction*. *The Methods of Publishing* first appeared in 1890 and is Sprigge's passionate contribution to the late nineteenth-century discussion on how the question of literary property is best resolved. Sprigge argues that this matter is often treated in a cavalier manner that disadvantages authors, particularly in the relationship between publisher and author. In his view, book prices are too low, copyright protection for authors is insufficient, the royalty system is in chaos, and authors do not obtain a fair share of profits. He proposes that literary property questions be treated with the same legal formality and protection as is found in other business dealings.

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*LITERARY PROPERTY.—4.*

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# THE METHODS OF PUBLISHING.

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“We demand for Literary Property the same jealousy and the same resolution to obtain just treatment as prevails in all other branches of business.”—*Report of the Society for 1889.*

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BY

S. SQUIRE SPRIGGE,

M.B. CANTAB.

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## P R E F A C E.

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THE aim of this book is to arouse a general feeling that there is sound good sense in the demand made in the Report of the Society of Authors for 1889.

“*We demand,*” the Report ran, “*for Literary Property the same jealousy and the same resolution to obtain just treatment as prevails in all other branches of business.*”

By this statement I hope to escape the imputation of having failed to do anything which I have never tried to do.

There are in the office of the Society of Authors records of publishing undertaken upon every conceivable and inconceivable plan. All, however, fall under one of these five heads :—(1) SALE OUT-RIGHT, (2) LIMITED SALE, (3) THE HALF-PROFIT SYSTEM, (4) THE ROYALTY SYSTEM (with certain variations), and (5) PUBLICATION BY COMMISSION (also with certain variations).

And under these five heads, the enquiry into the methods of publishing is conducted.

It would seem that the peculiar, unbusiness-like, and but too frequently disgraceful manner with which Literary Property is treated has its origin in the two facts—(1), that the existence of this property is not generally realised ;\*

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\* Its existence has been denied *in toto* on the ground that all ideas are free, so that no one can claim a monopoly in them. The assertion appears to have been made in all gravity.



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and (2), that, where realised, its value can only with difficulty be estimated.

As a consequence the law regulating a property, which appears even to its possessors so vague and ill-defined, is in its turn obscure, incomplete, and inconclusive.

One preliminary chapter has, therefore, been devoted to a brief consideration of the nature of Literary Property, and another to a brief demonstration of the fact that an approximate estimate of its value in particular cases can often be arrived at.

Of all the charges in a publisher's account, the two which authors find it hardest to believe in are those for advertisement, and those for "author's corrections." In each case the author's resentment naturally follows his inability to understand the account. He sees but one thing, that he is required to implicitly trust his publisher, as no vouchers or details are forthcoming. All may go well. On the contrary, something may happen which rightly or wrongly shakes the profound confidence which is thus demanded of the author, and straightway he believes that he is being cheated. Again, certain ways of dealing with "Remainder-stock" have led frequently to much annoyance.

A large proportion of the smaller complaints received at this office have arisen out of some irregularity under one or other of these three heads. A separate chapter has, therefore, been devoted to the discussion of each.

There is no intention here to make an attack upon publishers as a class, or upon any individual publisher. This is a protest against the methods by which the disposal of an enormously valuable property is effected.

These methods, however, will exist until the contracts between author and publisher are prepared with the business-like care and accuracy which are displayed in the contracts for the disposal of property in all its other forms. This desirable result will certainly never be attained, except in response to the combined resolution of writers as a body. It is equally certain that it must follow upon such combined resolution. From the moment that

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dealings in Literary Property receive due legal formality and legal protection in their treatment, much of the petty chicanery, so contemptible and yet so vexatious, that is now rife, will come to an end, while the avocation of the serious and extensive rogue will be gone.

At present it is sufficient to find fault with the methods in vogue, for reasons which it is hoped will appear satisfactory.

It will later be the duty of the Society of Authors to submit a scheme for publishing, based upon what may seem after careful consideration of the whole question fair and equitable principles.

*Office of the Incorporated Society of Authors,  
4, Portugal Street, W.C.*

*July, 1890.*