

Millions remember the famous author's dog stories but comparatively few know of his late-burgeoning fascination with life after death.

By Irving Litvag

This article is adapted from a chapter of Irving Litvag's recently-published book, *The Master of Sunnybank, A Biography of Albert Payson Terhune* (Harper & Row, 1977). Photos courtesy Harper & Row, Inc.

ALBERT PAYSON Terhune was one of the most popular writers in American publishing history. He achieved fame and wealth writing stories and books, mostly fiction and mostly about collies. Although critics never considered him an important writer by literary standards his works appealed so strongly to both adults

with life after death, his plans for a book on the subject, and the intriguing little volume that eventually came into being as a purported spirit communication from Albert Payson Terhune.

Terhune was born in Newark, N. J., in 1872, the son of a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. His mother,

Automatic Writing

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from

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

and children that they were among the best-selling books of the 1920's and 1930's, the peak years of Terhune's career, and continued to sell steadily for many years after his death. His most famous collection of collie stories, *Lad: A Dog*, is still in print today, almost 60 years after its original publication; it has gone through more than 80 editions.

Although Terhune's worshipping readers once numbered in the millions and many today remember his writings with great fondness, comparatively few know of the author's late-burgeoning fascination

who used the pen name Marion Harland, was a popular writer of romantic novels and guides for the homemaker.

After graduation from Columbia University in 1893 Terhune went to work as a reporter for the New York *Evening World*. Determined to become a successful free-lance writer he devoted most of his spare time (and some of his employer's time as well) to writing melodramatic short stories.

Terhune's parents owned a summer home and weekend retreat called "Sunnybank," a lovely 40-acre estate on the shore of Pompton Lake in the Ramapo Mountains of northern New



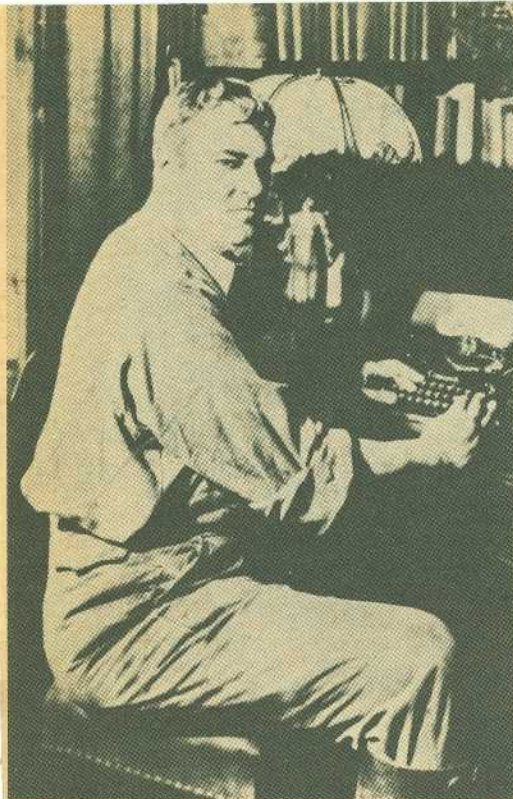
Terhune's collies, the prototypes for his stories, helped him realize his longheld dream of living permanently at Sunnybank as a successful free-lance writer.

Jersey. The great goal of young Terhune's life was to live there permanently as a successful writer. The elder Terhunes always had had dogs at Sunnybank and one of them was an old collie named Lad. It was Lad who helped Terhune reach his goal.

Early in 1915 a magazine published Terhune's first short story about Lad, a fictionalized adventure featuring the real-life Sunnybank and also Terhune and his wife, who were referred to in the story (and the many others that followed) as the Master and the Mistress. The story created a sensation. Readers pleaded with the magazine

for more tales about the regal old collie and editors of other publications asked Terhune to write dog stories for them. The author was glad to oblige them. In 1919 a dozen Lad stories were published as the now-classic *Lad: A Dog*.

Terhune became rigidly characterized in the public mind as a "dog writer" and the role held him firmly for the rest of his life, although he tried now and then to write on other subjects. Almost all of the Terhune dog books that appeared during the 1920's were big sellers and the author's income approached \$100,000



At this desk Terhune did most of his writing and here, after his death, his wife produced automatic writing.

a year. The Sunnybank collies, the estate itself, and Terhune and his wife became worldwide celebrities.

Several more Terhune books were published in the 1930's but in that decade the author's production declined as he passed the age of 60 and his health began to deteriorate. The demand for his work did not fade, however. Editors continued to ask him for new stories and books and his fan mail consistently averaged about 250 letters a week.

Late in his life Terhune began to

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evinced an intense interest in life after death. He always had been deeply religious, his faith nurtured by his upbringing as a minister's son. An essential part of his faith was the conviction that some sort of afterlife must exist. However, only a few years before his death, perhaps due to his knowledge that death was not far off, did Terhune begin a serious study of the question of life after death. He did much reading on the subject and began to make notes for what he told friends would be a major book about it.

Although he never had written anything specifically about life after death, from time to time Terhune's fascination with the subject had crept into his work. There was, for example, a short story called "Something" which had been published originally in 1921 in Terhune's book, *Buff: A Collie and Other Dog Stories*.

The eerie story concerned a collie who always seemed able to sense when his beloved master was in danger. The collie is left behind with his mistress and her small child when the master goes to war in Europe. The woman and child take the collie for a walk in the hills near their home one night and suddenly the dog startles them with "howls of mortal anguish." A moment later the collie's howls abruptly cease and the dog comes running to his mistress, eyes shining and tail wagging, just as he always had dashed forward to greet his master. The dog's eyes are fastened not on the woman, but on the space next to her, as if the collie saw someone who had just joined the little group. Later the woman learns that at the same mo-

ment the collie first howled, her husband had died in an army hospital in France.

Terhune also wrote about and related to friends stories of incidents at Sunnybank which seem to touch on the supernatural. One of them involved a Terhune dog named Rex who used to stand outside on the veranda at mealtime, looking at his master through the dining room window. The dog also frequently lay at Terhune's feet in front of the living room fireplace. About 18 months after Rex died an old friend of Terhune's came to visit Sunnybank for the first time in several years. As he was leaving the friend commented on Rex's adoration, saying that he had been watching the dog stare devotedly at his master. The friend was reminded that Rex had died the year before — but he still insisted that he had seen the dog at Terhune's feet the entire evening.

Rex figured in another such story. Another old friend of Terhune's came to visit and this man never had seen the dog when he was alive. But he asked Terhune the name of the big dog standing out on the veranda and gave a detailed description of the dead Rex, even mentioning a crooked scar across his nose.

* * *

TERHUNE died in February 1942 at the age of 69. He never wrote the hoped-for book on life after death but he did leave some notes and the rough draft of an essay called "Across the Line" in which he firmly argued the reality of life after death. He wrote that each of us possesses something that he called "the real Self" which is imperishable. If it can go forth from

the body in dreams, he argued, why is it not logical to assume that it continues to exist and to journey when the physical body goes into its permanent sleep? He declared that the wisest of men through the ages have affirmed the existence of life after death in a place "across the line." It is not ridiculous to believe in a life after death, he concluded in his usual emphatic manner, it is ridiculous *not* to believe in it.

Immediately after Terhune's death there was a strange real-life parallel to

For 22 years after her husband's death Anice Terhune believed she received messages from him almost daily. She carefully recorded them.



A short time later Mrs. Terhune received a letter from a woman who said that she had enjoyed some success with automatic writing. Giving the name of a mutual friend as a reference, she offered to come to Sunnybank and attempt to make contact with the spirit of Albert Payson Terhune. The widow, assured by the mutual friend that the letter writer was respectable and honest, decided to try the experiment.

The woman, never publicly identified by Mrs. Terhune except as "Mrs. S.," came to Sunnybank and the two women sat on the comfortable veranda. Mrs. S. used no implements other than paper and pencil. She sat quietly for a few moments, her eyes closed, then began slowly to write. The communication was terse and unambiguous: "I, Bert Terhune. Cure of our ills is instantaneous. I never felt stronger than now. Comes one thrilling experience after another." The message went on to promise that Terhune someday would be able to communicate directly with Anice's mind, without the need for an intermediary.

Mrs. Terhune, the episodes of the church and the lost documents not far behind her, quickly became convinced that the communications came from her dead husband. She was particularly struck, she later wrote, by what she felt was a faithful rendering of Bert Terhune's personality and manner of speaking — although Mrs. S. stated that she never had met the author while he was alive nor had she heard him speak. (Mrs. Terhune's failure to identify Mrs. S. has prevented an investigation of the woman's veracity, her standing in psychical research, or

even whether she accepted any payment for her services. The widow obviously accepted unquestioningly the woman's statements that she never had met or heard Terhune.)

Mrs. S. was invited to return periodically to Sunnybank for more sessions, and the communications continued. Terhune answered questions put to him by Anice and repeatedly affirmed that he was with friends and relatives who had died earlier. He chided her for not fully accepting the reality of his continued existence and began to urge her to spread the message of eternal life. There often was great poignancy in the messages as Terhune expressed his longing for Anice and their life together at Sunnybank but he also consoled her by reminding her that a permanent reunion lay ahead.

* * *

IN AUGUST 1942, about six months after her husband's death, Anice Terhune received her first direct communication from her husband's spirit. From then on she needed no help from Mrs. S. or any other intermediary. For the remaining 22 years of her life Mrs. Terhune had almost daily communications which she believed, with complete faith, were direct messages from Albert Payson Terhune. When she felt a message coming through, as she did almost every evening, she picked up pencil and paper and began to write.

The messages gave considerable detail about a life after death in a land of almost indescribable beauty. But even (there each soul has work to do and there are responsibilities for learning.) Terhune himself, he said, was learning to teach others to help themselves.

the incident described in the story "Something." The evening after Terhune's funeral his widow sat in the living room at Sunnybank with her husband's nephew, Frederic F. Van de Water, who was a complete skeptic about life after death. As he and the bereaved widow sat talking in front of the roaring fireplace, one of the dogs who had been sprawled on a rug nearby suddenly jumped to his feet, fully alert. He walked hurriedly to the front door, looked up and then followed "something" across the entire width of the big room, something that moved directly across the dog's field of vision. The dog wagged his tail happily in greeting, then returned to his place on the rug. Skeptic or not, Van de Water admitted later that the incident left him shaken.

Anice Terhune was devastated by her husband's death. She suffered a nervous collapse and was hospitalized for a time. When she returned to Sunnybank a series of incidents began which were to transform her life and convince her that her husband had not really left, that in spirit he remained with her at Sunnybank.

Mrs. Terhune never had been known to have any connection with psychical research or spiritualism. She was a talented, intelligent, rather domineering woman. A gifted pianist and composer, she gave up a promising musical career when she married Bert Terhune. She continued intermittently to compose music and later demonstrated writing ability of her own. She was the author of three published novels along with magazine articles and short fiction pieces. Her interests always were artistic and

cultural; those who knew her well were not aware of any mystical bent.

A few weeks after Terhune's death his wife renewed a search in his old desk for some dog papers she needed. She had tried repeatedly to find them among the jumble of manuscripts and documents in the study, to no avail. Another effort ended in failure and she sat in her husband's chair, near tears from discouragement. Suddenly, she said, she heard her husband's voice gently telling her exactly where to look for the lost papers and she quickly found them. They had been inserted among other documents where her earlier searches had missed them.

Later, during Maundy Thursday church services, Anice was thinking of her husband's grave in the church cemetery just outside and silently began to weep. Suddenly she looked up and saw a light moving near the church ceiling, then coming closer to her. As it descended, she said, it became the face and form of her husband. He was conveying to her an urgent message: he was not out in the graveyard but was there in the church with her in spirit. He was not dead, the vision insisted; he was alive!

Mrs. Terhune later asked her minister whether he had noticed anything unusual during the service. He had not, he replied, but he had seen her face and knew at once that she was seeing a vision. (Recently I interviewed the widow of that minister. She told me that her husband never doubted that something very unusual had happened to Anice Terhune during that service. He never forgot the look of joy on her face.)

In a later communication (which like those mentioned heretofore took place during World War II) he told of being assigned to Florida to help escort the spirits of airmen killed in a plane crash as they came "across the line."

As the communications continued the spirit of Bert Terhune entreated his wife to tell the world what she had discovered. She must take his rough draft on life after death, he said, and put with it her accounts of his post-mortem conversations with her. She was to make them into a book to inform all humanity that physical death is really not the end. Mrs. Terhune began to get the materials together.

That book, as it eventually was published, included communications that came over a period of several months up to October 1942. In the last of those messages, regarded by Mrs. Terhune as highly evidential, her husband's spirit told her he had encountered an ancestress of hers named Phebe Barlow whom he described as centuries old. Mrs. Terhune, a descendant of families distinguished in American history, was quite familiar with her family tree and was certain it did not include a Phebe Barlow.

A few weeks later an editor of *Colonial Families of America* asked Mrs. Terhune to check an updated sketch of the Stockton family from which she was descended. The sketch also included the Olmstead family into which her maternal grandmother had married. Mrs. Terhune said she knew nothing of the Olmsteads until that day and never had seen a history of that family. As she read cursorily through it she saw: "Capt. James

Olmstead married on May 1st, 1673, Phebe Barlow, daughter of Thomas Barlow of Fairfield, Connecticut." Mrs. Terhune regarded this as overwhelming evidence that she actually was in touch with her dead husband's spirit.

Her husband's notes and the records of the early communications with his spirit were combined by Mrs. Terhune into a slim book called *Across the Line* published originally by Dryden Press. (Its publishing and distribution later were taken over by E. P. Dutton & Company, the publisher of *Lad: A Dog*.) *Across the Line*, first published in 1945, remains in print today and has had a sizable audience over the years.

Twice in recent years I have sought *Across the Line* at one of the largest public libraries in the St. Louis, Mo., area, where I live. Both times I had to add my name to a waiting list of considerable length for a 30-year-old book.

As the years passed Anice Terhune lived on at Sunnybank, alone except for longtime loyal servants. She continued to keep careful records of the messages from her husband and in keeping with his wishes, began to make plans for additional books on the same subject.

By 1952 Mrs. Terhune told friends that Bert's spirit had dictated two more books, one of them titled *That You May Know*. She could not send the manuscripts to the publisher as yet, she said, because her husband felt that *Across the Line* still was doing important work. She occasionally read portions of the other books to friends who later described them as similar to

Across the Line with detailed descriptions of the afterlife. The friends were permitted to listen to excerpts but never to examine the manuscripts themselves.

The two other books never were published and whether Mrs. Terhune ever submitted them to a publisher is not known. What happened to the manuscripts is another unsolved mystery. Persons associated with the disposition of Mrs. Terhune's estate after her death say they cannot recall finding the manuscripts nor the records of the automatic writing among her personal effects.

Until her death in 1964 at the age of 91 years Anice Terhune retained her unshakable faith that her husband's spirit still lived and regularly communicated with her. One of his messages told her that he sometimes watched her from his large portrait on the wall. Thereafter, when friends came to call, Anice would include Bert in the conversation. She would turn to the portrait and say, "Bert, Hal and Ruth have come to see us." Or during the conversation she might turn to the portrait and ask Bert if he agreed, then wait expectantly for his answer.

The house at Sunnybank was kept exactly as it was when Bert Terhune lived there — papers and photographs, desk and typewriter in his study remained as if awaiting his return to begin work on a new book. In the dining room no one was permitted to sit in his chair.

Anice Terhune's actions and her belief in her husband's continued existence were regarded as delusions by some old friends and they began to avoid her company. Others, while skeptical, remained loyal to her. One of these was Frederic Van de Water. However, he devised a test of the veracity of Anice's purported communications with Bert. He drew up a few questions to which only he and Bert Terhune knew the answers and asked Anice to put the questions to her husband's spirit. The answers that were provided, Van de Water told other relatives later, could not possibly have come from Bert Terhune.

Yet other relatives and friends, aware of the deep bond that had existed between Bert and Anice Terhune, of his passionate love for Sunnybank and his vow to return there after his death, were persuaded as time went on that somehow, against all odds, Anice and Bert had managed to break through death's barrier.

There can be no doubt of Mrs. Terhune's honesty and sincerity. Everything she did from 1942 until her death radiated her belief that Bert Terhune's spirit lived and that she communicated with him.

After the original publication of Across the Line in 1945 she wrote to one of Bert's old pals — a newspaperman who had given the book a good review — and said, "I know Bert will read it and be glad his old friend is *still* his friend and mine!"

THE NAME FOR THE JOB

GUESTS AT the Detroit, Mich., Athletic Club do a double take when they see the coatroom attendant's name tag. She is Betty Hatrack and as of June 1976 she had been the club's chief hat and coat checker for 20 years.