Now what is a writer to say about a sample of his own work? If he takes one course, he’s simpering. If he goes the opposite way, he’s Saroyan. There seems to be left open for him only that most ignoble route, the middle of the road.

I think that this story of mine is the nicest bit of writing, the most careful, that I have ever done. The story, of course, is not half what I meant it to be; it never is. It was supposed to tear your heart out, and it does not. But as to workmanship, it is my best.

That is why I chose “The Standard of Living” for this anthology. At least, I think that is why I chose it. It may be that I felt a certain maternal obligation to say a few words in its favor. Nobody else did.

Dorothy Parker
Pipersville, Pa.
July 20, 1942

Annabel and Midge came out of the tearoom with the arrogant slow gait of the leisured, for their Saturday afternoon stretched ahead of them. They had lunched, as was their wont, on sugar, starches, oils, and butterfats. Usually they ate sandwiches of spongy new white bread greased with butter and mayonnaise; they ate thick wedges of cake lying wet beneath ice cream and whipped cream and melted chocolate gritty with nuts. As alternates, they ate patties, sweating beads of inferior oil, containing bits of bland meat bogged in pale, stiffening sauce; they ate pastries, limber under rigid icing, filled with an indeterminate yellow sweet stuff, not still solid, not yet liquid, like salve that has been left in the sun. They chose no other sort of food, nor did they consider it. And their skin was like the petals of wood
anemones, and their bellies were as flat and their flanks as lean as those of young Indian braves.

Annabel and Midge had been best friends almost from the day that Midge had found a job as stenographer with the firm that employed Annabel. By now, Annabel, two years longer in the stenographic department, had worked up to the wages of eighteen dollars and fifty cents a week; Midge was still at sixteen dollars. Each girl lived at home with her family and paid half her salary to its support.

The girls sat side by side at their desks, they lunched together every noon, together they set out for home at the end of the day's work. Many of their evenings and most of their Sundays were passed in each other's company. Often they were joined by two young men, but there was no steadiness to any such quartet; the two young men would give place, unlamented, to two other young men, and lament would have been inappropriate, really, since the newcomers were scarcely distinguishable from their predecessors. Invariably the girls spent the fine idle hours of their hot-weather Saturday afternoons together. Constant use had not worn ragged the fabric of their friendship.

They looked alike, though the resemblance did not lie in their features. It was in the shape of their bodies, their movements, their style, and their adornments. Annabel and Midge did, and completely, all that young office workers are besought not to do. They painted their lips and their nails, they darkened their lashes and lightened their hair, and scent seemed to shimmer from them. They wore thin, bright dresses, tight over their breasts and high on their legs, and tilted slippers, fancifully strapped. They looked proud and cheap and charming.

Now, as they walked across to Fifth Avenue with their skirts swirled by the hot wind, they received audible admiration. Young men grouped lethargically about newsstands awarded them murmurs, exclamations, even—the ultimate tribute—whistles. Annabel and Midge passed without the condescension of hurrying their pace; they held their heads higher and set their feet with exquisite precision, as if they stepped over the necks of peasants.

Always the girls went to walk on Fifth Avenue on their free afternoons, for it was the ideal ground for their favorite game. The game could be played anywhere, and, indeed, was, but the great shop windows stimulated the two players to their best form.
Annabel had invented the game; or rather she had evolved it from an old one. Basically, it was no more than the ancient sport of what-would-you-do-if-you-had-a-million-dollars. But Annabel had drawn a new set of rules for it, had narrowed it, pointed it, made it stricter. Like all games, it was the more absorbing for being more difficult.

Annabel’s version went like this: You must suppose that somebody dies and leaves you a million dollars, cool. But there is a condition to the bequest. It is stated in the will that you must spend every nickel of the money on yourself.

There lay the hazard of the game. If, when playing it, you forgot, and listed among your expenditures the rental of a new apartment for your family, for example, you lost your turn to the other player. It was astonishing how many—and some of them among the experts, too—would forfeit all their innings by such slips.

It was essential, of course, that it be played in passionate seriousness. Each purchase must be carefully considered and, if necessary, supported by argument. There was no zest to playing wildly. Once Annabel had introduced the game to Sylvia, another girl who worked in the office. She explained the rules to Sylvia and then offered her the gambit “What would be the first thing you’d do?” Sylvia had not shown the decency of even a second of hesitation. “Well,” she had said, “the first thing I’d do, I’d go out and hire somebody to shoot Mrs. Gary Cooper, and then . . .” So it is to be seen that she was no fun.

But Annabel and Midge were surely born to be comrades, for Midge played the game like a master from the moment she learned it. It was she who added the touches that made the whole thing cozier. According to Midge’s innovations, the eccentric who died and left you the money was not anybody you loved, or, for the matter of that, anybody you even knew. It was somebody who had seen you somewhere and had thought, “That girl ought to have lots of nice things. I’m going to leave her a million dollars when I die.” And the death was to be neither untimely nor painful. Your benefactor, full of years and comfortably ready to depart, was to slip softly away during sleep and go right to heaven. These embroideries permitted Annabel and Midge to play their game in the luxury of peaceful consciences.

Midge played with a seriousness that was not only proper but extreme. The single strain on the girls’ friendship had followed an an-
nouncement once made by Annabel that the first thing she would buy with her million dollars would be a silver-fox coat. It was as if she had struck Midge across the mouth. When Midge recovered her breath, she cried that she couldn't imagine how Annabel could do such a thing—silver-fox coats were common! Annabel defended her taste with the retort that they were not common, either. Midge then said that they were so. She added that everybody had a silver-fox coat. She went on, with perhaps a slight loss of head, to declare that she herself wouldn't be caught dead in silver fox.

For the next few days, though the girls saw each other as constantly, their conversation was careful and infrequent, and they did not once play their game. Then one morning, as soon as Annabel entered the office, she came to Midge and said that she had changed her mind. She would not buy a silver-fox coat with any part of her million dollars. Immediately on receiving the legacy she would select a coat of mink.

Midge smiled and her eyes shone. “I think,” she said, “you’re absolutely right.”

Now, as they walked along Fifth Avenue, they played the game anew. It was one of those days with which September is repeatedly cursed; hot and glaring, with slivers of dust in the wind. People drooped and shambled, but the girls carried themselves tall and walked a straight line, as befitted young heiresses on their afternoon promenade. There was no longer need for them to start the game at its formal opening. Annabel went direct to the heart of it.

“All right,” she said. “So you’ve got this million dollars. So what would be the first thing you’d do?”

“Well, the first thing I’d do,” Midge said, “I’d get a mink coat.” But she said it mechanically, as if she were giving the memorized answer, to an expected question.

“Yes,” Annabel said, “I think you ought to. The terribly dark kind of mink.” But she, too, spoke as if by rote. It was too hot; fur, no matter how dark and sleek and supple, was horrid to the thoughts.

They stepped along in silence for a while. Then Midge’s eye was caught by a shop window. Cool, lovely gleamings were there set off by chaste and elegant darkness.
"No," Midge said, "I take it back. I wouldn't get a mink coat the first thing. Know what I'd do? I'd get a string of pearls. Real pearls."

Annabel's eyes turned to follow Midge's.

"Yes," she said, slowly. "I think that's a kind of a good idea. And it would make sense, too. Because you can wear pearls with anything."

Together they went over to the shop window and stood pressed against it. It contained but one object—a double row of great, even pearls clasped by a deep emerald around a little pink velvet throat.

"What do you suppose they cost?" Annabel said.

"Gee, I don't know," Midge said. "Plenty, I guess."

"Like a thousand dollars?" Annabel said.

"Oh, I guess like more," Midge said. "On account of the emerald."

"Well, like ten thousand dollars?" Annabel said.

"Gee, I wouldn't even know," Midge said.

The devil nudged Annabel in the ribs. "Dare you to go in and price them," she said.

"Like fun!" Midge said.

"Dare you," Annabel said.

"Why, a store like this wouldn't even be open this afternoon," Midge said.

"Yes, it is so, too," Annabel said. "People just came out. And there's a doorman on. Dare you."

"Well," Midge said. "But you've got to come too."

They tendered thanks, icily, to the doorman for ushering them into the shop. It was cool and quiet, a broad, gracious room with panelled walls and soft carpet. But the girls wore expressions of bitter disdain, as if they stood in a sty.

A slim, immaculate clerk came to them and bowed. His neat face showed no astonishment at their appearance.

"Good afternoon," he said. He implied that he would never forget it if they would grant him the favor of accepting his soft-spoken greeting.

"Good afternoon," Annabel and Midge said together, and in like freezing accents.

"Is there something—" the clerk said.
“Oh, we’re just looking,” Annabel said. It was as if she flung the words down from a dais.

The clerk bowed.

“My friend and myself merely happened to be passing,” Midge said, and stopped, seeming to listen to the phrase. “My friend here and myself,” she went on, “merely happened to be wondering how much are those pearls you’ve got in your window.”

“Ah, yes,” the clerk said. “The double rope. That is two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, Madam.”

“I see,” Midge said.

The clerk bowed. “An exceptionally beautiful necklace,” he said. “Would you care to look at it?”

“No, thank you,” Annabel said.

“My friend and myself merely happened to be passing,” Midge said. They turned to go; to go, from their manner, where the tumbrel awaited them. The clerk sprang ahead and opened the door. He bowed as they swept by him.

The girls went on along the Avenue, and disdain was still on their faces.

“ Honestly!” Annabel said. “Can you imagine a thing like that?”

“Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars!” Midge said. “Why, that’s a quarter of a million dollars!”

“He’s got his nerve!” Annabel said.

They walked on. Slowly the disdain went, slowly and completely as if drained from them, and with it went the regal carriage and tread. Their shoulders dropped and they dragged their feet; they bumped against each other, without notice or apology, and caromed away again. They were silent and their eyes were cloudy.

Suddenly Midge straightened her back, flung her head high, and spoke, clear and strong.

“ Listen, Annabel,” she said. “Look. Suppose there was this terribly rich person, see? You don’t know this person, but this person has seen you somewhere and wants to do something for you. Well, it’s a terribly old person, see? And so this person dies, just like going to sleep, and leaves you ten million dollars. Now, what would be the first thing you’d do?”
Of all the illegitimate children of the arts, the theatrical press-agent is generally held in the lowest esteem. He is paid to exploit producers, trained seals, and actors; he is a parasite on a parasite. The interesting thing (to me) about Richard Maney is that he represents a distinct reversal in the normal order of things. In life, it is not usual for the hired publicist to maintain an ironical attitude about the thing publicized, any more than it is usual for the average flea to be superior and detached about a dog. Mr. Maney is also unique in his odd calling in that he tells the truth as often as not.

New York, N. Y.

WOLCOTT GIBBS
July, 1942

(A PROFILE)

JUST as the advance agent for a circus is not likely to be disturbed by even the largest elephant, so his metropolitan equivalent, the Broadway press agent, can look on the most succulent actor and still remain composed. This is a natural condition, since both actors and elephants, observed for any length of time at close range, are apt to seem no better than anybody else. It is remarkable only when the publicity man, who after all is paid to exploit these phenomena, makes no attempt to hide his good-natured derision.

There are a good many press agents in New York who operate on a sort of man-to-man basis with their clients; Richard Sylvester Maney, the most prosperous gnome of the lot, is the only one who persistently treats them with the genial condescension of an Irish cop addressing a Fifth Avenue doorman. This comparison isn't altogether arbitrary.