Leonard Merrick

The Man Who Understood Women and Other Stories

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INTRODUCTION

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One of our most delightful novelists has recently written a preface to a collection of his short stories in which he apologises for disinterring them from magazines and resuscitating them in book form. I think he ought not to have done it. If a preface were needed, it should have been written rather as an appeal, than as a warning. It should have been in the nature of a bugle-blast. It should have said, in effect: "Here, my faithful and gentle readers who, owing to the limitations of time and space and the worries of the world, have missed much of my best and most cherished work—here is an opportunity of an unexpected feast." I confess that such an appeal would not have been modest—and the author in question is the most modest of our confraternity—but the assertion would have been true. Now, with the agreeable task before me of writing a preface to another man's collection, I am not bound by any such sense of modesty, and I should like to make clear once more certain issues which my friend above referred to has, to a certain extent, confused.

In the first place, it must be understood that the novel and the short story are two entirely distinct artistic expressions, as different as the great oil-painting and the miniature. And as rarely as the accomplished landscape-painter and the accomplished miniaturist are incarnate in one and the same individual, so rarely are the accomplished novelist and the accomplished short story writer thus

incarnate. The most fervent admirers of Mr. Rudyard Kipling, among whom I am proud to count myself, will not claim for his novels, though possessing the incalculable and indefinable personal touch, the magical genius of expression which is to be found in all his work—even in the *The Absent-minded Beggar,* the perfection of statement and the flawless technique of *Plain Tales from the Hills* and *Love's Handicap*. In the same way we would not measure Guy de Maupassant's greatness by *Une Vie* or *Mont Oriel;* and though the late Henry Harland is best known by that study in sunshine, *The Cardinal's Snuff-box,* his real lovers turn to the inimitable short stories in *Grey Roses* and *Comedies and Errors*.

Conversely, some of the greatest novelists have but little value as short story writers. The so-called short stories of Dickens—*The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Chimes, a Christmas Carol*—are between thirty and forty thousand words in length. Among Thackeray's many sketches may be found a few which we understand as short stories, but they do not rank with *Henry Esmond* and *The Newcomes*.

The essential novelist accustomed to his broad canvas, to the multiplicity of human destinies with which he is concerned and their inter-relation, to his varied backgrounds, to the free space which his art allows him both for minute analysis of character and for his own philosophical reflections on life, is apt to find himself absurdly cramped within the narrow confines of the short story. His short stories have a way of becoming condensed novels. They contain more stuff than they ought to hold, at a sacrifice of balance, directness and clearness of

exposition. Now, without dogmatising in the conventional fashion, or indeed in any fashion, over what a short story ought or ought not to be, or asserting definite laws of technique, I think it is obvious that if a story told in ten thousand words would have been a better, clearer, more fully developed story told in a hundred thousand, it is not a perfectly told story. For, though there is a modern tendency to revolt against an older school of criticism which set technique over subject, and to scoff at form, yet we cannot get away from the fact that the told story, whether long or short, is a work of art, and is subject to the eternal canons whereby every art is governed. No matter what a man has to say, if he does not strive to express it perfectly, he is offending. The "condensed novel," being imperfect, is an offence.

On the other hand, the essential short story writer engaged upon a novel, is apt to be dismayed by the vastness of the canvas he has to cover. His habit of mind—minute, delicate and swift—wars against a conception of the architectonics of a novel. In consequence, his novel may appear thin, episodical and laboured, with scenes spun out beyond their value, thus missing their dramatic effect and spoiling the balance of the work. If, therefore, a story of a hundred thousand words could have been told more effectively in ten thousand, it is, like the "condensed novel," not a perfectly told story.

Briefly, the tendency of the essential novelist in writing a short story is to make literary condensed milk, while that of the essential short story writer working in the medium of a novel is to make milk and water.

Occasionally, of course, among the great writers of fiction we meet with the combination of the two faculties. Balzac the short story writer is as great as Balzac the novelist. The *Contes Drolatiques* alone would have brought him fame. Stevenson was master of both crafts. Who shall say whether *The Sire de Malétroit's Door* or *The Ebb Tide* is the more perfect work of art?

Now among contemporary writers, Mr. Leonard Merrick is eminently one who, like Balzac and Stevenson, is gifted with the double faculty. His reputation as a novelist rests on a sure foundation, and his novels in this edition of his works will be dealt with by other hands. But, owing to the fact of the novel being in the commercial world "more important" than the short story, his claim to the distinct reputation of a short story writer has more or less been overlooked. Again, it is popularly supposed that a writer of fiction regards the short story as either a relaxation from more arduous toil or as a means of adding a few extra pounds to his income. In his acquiescence in this disastrous superstition lies my quarrel with my distinguished preface-writing friend. Now, although I do not say that we are all such high-minded folk that none of us has ever stooped to "pot-boiling," yet I assert that every conscientious artist approaches a short story with the same earnestness as he does a novel. Further, that in proportion to its length he devotes to it more concentration, more loving and scrupulous care. There are days during the writing of a novel when that combination of fierce desire to work and sense of power which one loosely talks about as "inspiration," is at ebb, and others when it is at flow. Homer nods sometimes. No man can bestow equal

essence of himself on every page of a long novel. But a short story is generally written at full-tide. By its nature it can be finished before the impulse is over. There is time to weigh every word of it, attend to the rhythm of every sentence, adjust the delicate balance of the various parts, and there is the thrilling consciousness of unity. Instead of the climax being months off, there it is at hand to be reached in a few glad hours. So, far from being an unconsidered trifle, the short story is a work of intense consideration, and as far as our poor words can matter, of profound importance.

It may be said that anything in the nature of a plea for the short story as a work of art is hopelessly belated—I am quite aware that the wise and gifted made it long ago, and I remember the preaching of the apostles of the early 'nineties—but its repetition is none the less useful. Every item in the welter of short stories with which the innumerable magazines both here and in America flood the reading public is not a masterpiece. Every item is not perfect work. Many are exceedingly bad—bad in conception, style and form. There is always the danger of the good being hidden, of bad and good being confused together in the public mind, and of the term "magazine story" becoming one of contemptuous and unthinking reproach, as was the term "yellow-back" a generation ago. Accordingly it is well that now and again a word should be said in deprecation of an attitude which a tired and fiction-worn world is liable to adopt; and it is well to remind it that in the aforesaid welter there are many beautiful works of art, and to beseech it to exercise discrimination.

The writer of an introduction to the work of a literary comrade labours under certain difficulties. He ought not to usurp the functions of the critic into whose hands the volume, when published, will come, and he is anxious, for the sake of prudence, not to use the language of hyperbole, though he has it in his heart to do so. But, at least, I can claim for these short stories of Mr. Leonard Merrick, that each, by its perfection of form and the sincerity of its making, takes rank as a work of art. In none is there a word too little or a word too much. Everywhere one sees evidence of the pain through which the soul of the artist has passed on its way to the joy of creation. Everywhere is seen the firmness of outline which only comes by conviction of truth, and the light and shade which is only attained by a man who loves his craft.

The field covered by Mr. Merrick in this collection is one which he has made peculiarly his own. Mainly it is the world of the artist, the poet, the journalist, in the years when hopes are high and funds are low, when the soul is full and the stomach empty. It is neither the Bohemia of yesterday's romance nor the Bohemia of drunken degradation, but the sober, clean-living, struggling Bohemia of to-day. It is a sedate, hard-up world of omnibuses, lodgings, second-rate tea shops and restaurants. Yet he does not belong to the static school who set down the mere greyness of their conditions. He is a poet, making—

" The violet of a legend blow
Among the chops and steaks,"

as in *The Lady of Lyons'.* To Rosie McLeod, living "up ninety-eight stairs of a dingy house in a dilapidated court" in

Montparnasse, comes the prince in the Fairy Tale. There is true poetry in *The Laurels and the Lady* with its amazing end. And yet his method is simple, direct, romantic. He writes of things as they really are, but his vision pierces to their significance. He can be relentless in his presentation of a poignant situation, as in *A Very Good Thing for the Girl*, a realist of the realists if you like; but here, as everywhere in his work, are profound pity, tenderness and sympathetic knowledge of the human heart. He writes not only of things seen, but of things felt. Whatever qualities his work may have, it has the great quality essential to all artistic endeavour—sincerity.

WILLIAM J. LOCKE.

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD WOMEN

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"Our bitterest remorse is not for our sins, but for our stupidities."—*Excerpt from Wendover's new novel*.

NOTHING had delighted Wendover so much when his first book appeared as some reviewer's reference to "the author's knowledge of women." He was then six or seven and twenty, and the compliment uplifted him the more because he had long regretted violently that he knew even less of women than do most young men. The thought of women fascinated him. He yearned to captivate them, to pass lightly from one love-affair to another, to have the right to call himself "blasé." Alas! a few dances in the small provincial town that he had left when he was eighteen comprised nearly all his sentimental experiences; during his years of struggle in London he had been so abominably hard up that lodging-house keepers and barmaids were almost the only women he addressed, and as his beverage was "a glass of bitter," the barmaids had been strictly commercial.

To be told that he understood women enraptured him. "Instinct!" he said to himself. "Now and then a man is born who knows the feminine mind intuitively." And in his next book there was an abundance of his fanciful psychology. Denied companionship with women, he revelled in writing about them, and drew from the pages in which he posed as their delineator something of the exultation that he would have derived from being their lover. There were even pages after which he felt sated with conquest. At these times

nothing accorded with his mood so well as to parade the Park and pretend to himself that the sight of the most attractive of the women bored him.

But as loneliness really cried within him pathetically, he had an adventure, culminating in marriage, with a shop assistant who glanced at him one evening in Oxford Street. After marriage they found as little of an agreeable nature to say to each other as might have been expected, so a couple of years later they separated, and the ex-shop hand went to reside with a widowed sister, who "made up ladies' own materials" at Crouch End.

Gradually he came to be accepted at his own valuation, to be pronounced one of the few gifted men from whom the feminine soul held no secrets. Then when he was close on forty, a novel that he produced hit the popular taste, and he began to make a very respectable income.

Now, for the first time, he had opportunities for meeting the class of women that he had been writing about, and he found, to his consternation, that they failed to recognise him as an affinity after all. They were very amiable, but, like the farmer with the claret, he "never got any forrader." He perceived that his profundities were thought tedious, and that his attentions were thought raw. It was a sickening admission for an authority on women to have to make, but when he tried to flirt he felt shy.

At last he decided that all the women whom he knew were too frivolous to appeal to a man of intellect, and that their company wearied him unutterably.

But, though he had reached middle-age, he had never as yet been really in love.

In the autumn of his forty-second year—few people judged him to be so much—he removed to Paris. Some months afterwards, in the interests of a novel that he had begun, he deserted his hotel in the rue d'Antin for a pension de famille on the left bank. This establishment, which was supported chiefly by English and American girls studying art, supplied the "colour" that he needed for his earlier chapters; and it was here that he made the acquaintance of Miss Searle.

Miss Searle was about six-and-twenty, bohemian and ambitious beyond her talents. Such pensions de famille abound in girls who are more or less bohemian, and ambitious beyond their talents, but Rhoda Searle was noteworthy—her face stirred the imagination, she had realised that she would never paint, and the free-and-easy intercourse of the Latin quarter had wholly unfitted her for the prim provincialism to which she must return in England.

"My father was a parson," she told Wendover once, as they smoked cigarettes together after dinner. "I had hard work to convince him that English art schools weren't the apex, but he gave in at last and let me come here. It was Paradise! My home was in Beckenhampton. Do you know it? It's one of the dreariest holes in the kingdom. I used to go over to stay with him twice a year. I was very fond of my father, but I can't tell you how terrible those visits became to me, how I had to suppress myself, and how the drab women and stupid young men used to stare at me—as if I were a strange animal, or something improper; in places like Beckenhampton they say 'Paris' in the same kind of voice that they say 'Hell.' I suppose I'm a bohemian by instinct, for

even now that I know I should never make an artist, my horror isn't so much the loss of my hopes as the loss of my freedom, my—my identity; I am never to be natural any more. After I leave here I am to go on suppressing myself till the day I die! Sometimes I shall be able to shut myself up and howl—that's all I've got to look forward to."

"What are you going to do?" asked Wendover, looking sympathetic, and thinking pleasurably that he had found a good character to put into his book.

"I am going back," she said, "a shining example of the folly of being discontented with district-visiting and Church bazaars! I go back a failure for Beckenhampton to moralise over. My old schoolmistress has asked me to stay with her while I 'look round'—you see, I've spent all my money, and I must find a situation. If the Beckenhampton parents don't regard me as too immoral, it is just possible she may employ me in the school to 'teach drawing'—unless I try to teach it. Then I suppose I shall be called a 'revolutionary' and be dismissed." She contemplated the shabby little salon thoughtfully, and lit another cigarette. "From the Boul' Mich' to a boarding school! It'll be a change. I wonder if it will be safe to smoke there if I keep my bedroom window open wide?"

Yes, it would be as great a change as was conceivable, and Rhoda Searle was the most interesting figure in the house to Wendover. She was going to England in a month's time—there was no reason why she should not go at once, save that she had enough money to postpone the evil day—and during this valedictory month, she and he talked of their "friendship." In the tortuous streets off the boulevard, she

introduced him to humble restaurants, where the dinners were sometimes amazingly good at ridiculously low prices. Together they made little excursions, and pretended to scribble or sketch in the woods—looking at each other, however, most of the time; and then at evening there was an inn to be sought, and the moon would rise sooner than the "friends"; and in the moonlight, when they returned to Paris and the pension de famille, sentiment would constrain their tones.

It was all quite innocent, but to the last degree unwise. The ex-shop assistant still throve decorously at Crouch End on his allowance, and Wendover should have seen that he was acting unfairly towards Miss Searle. To do him justice, he didn't see it—he had confided the story of his marriage to her, and it did not enter into his thoughts that she might care for him seriously notwithstanding; his experiences had given him no cause to esteem himself dangerous, and the lover who has never received favours is, in practice, always modest, though in aspirations he may be Juanesque. The suitor of quick perceptions has been made by other women, as everybody but the least sophisticated of débutantes knows.

But if he did not dream that he might trouble the peace of Miss Searle, he was perpetually conscious that Miss Searle had disturbed his own. A month's daily companionship with a temperament, plus a fascinating face, would be dangerous to any man—to Wendover it was fatal. His thoughts turned no longer to liaisons with duchesses; his work, itself, was secondary to Rhoda Searle. Silly fellow as he appears, the emotions wakened in him were no less

genuine than if he had combined all the noble qualities with which he invested the heroes of his books. Besides, most people would appear silly in a description which dealt only with their weaknesses. Wendover loved, and he cursed the tie that prevented his asking the girl to be his wife. How happy he might have been!

He had feared that the last evening would be a melancholy one. But it was gay—the greater part of it was gay, at any rate. As soon as the door slammed behind them he saw that she had resolved to keep the thought of the morrow's journey in the background, to help him to turn the farewell into a fête. Her laughing caution was unnecessary; her voice, her eyes had given him the cue—her journey was to be undertaken in the distant future, life was delicious, and they were out to enjoy themselves! He had proposed dining at Armenonville—it wasn't the Paris that she had known, but champagne and fashion seemed the right thing to-night; and no fiacre had ever before sped so blithely, never had the Bois been so enchanting, and never had another girl been such joyous company. After dinner, the Ambassadeurs! The programme? They didn't listen to much of it, they were chattering all the time. It was only when the lamps died out that he heard a sigh; it was only when the lamps died out that the morning train, and the parting, and the blank beginning of the afterwards, seemed to him so horribly near.

The little salon was half dark when they reached the pension de famille, everybody else had gone to bed. Wendover turned up the light, and, though she said it was too late to sit down, they stood talking by the mantelpiece.

"You've given me a heavenly memory for the end," she told him; "thanks so much! I shall be thinking of it at this time to-morrow."

"So shall I," said Wendover.

She took off her hat, and pulled her hair right before the mirror. "Shall you?"

"Will you write to me?"

"Yes, if you'd like me to."

"I'd more than like it—I shall look forward to your letters tremendously."

"There won't be much to say in them."

"They'll be from *you*. ... I wish you weren't going."

She raised her eyes to him. "Why?" she asked. Wendover kept silent a moment—it was the hardest thing that he had done in his life. If he answered, "Because I love you," he felt that he would be a cad. Besides, she must know very well that he loved her—what good would it do to tell her so?—doubtless she had repented her question in the moment of putting it! Yes, he would be a cad to confess to her—she would think less of him for it. He would choose the beau rôle—and she would always remember that, when he might have spoilt their last scene together and pained her, he had been strong, heroic!

"We've been such pals," he said. That she mightn't underrate the heroism, he turned aside, as the noble fellow in books does when he is struggling.

After a pause, she murmured blankly, "It's time I said 'good-night.'"

She went to him and gave him her hand. Her clasp was fervent—it was encouraging to feel that she was grateful!

Her gaze held him, and her eyes were wide, dark, troubled; he was sure that she was sorry for him.

"Good-night, my dear," said Wendover, still as brave as the fellow in the books. And when he had watched her go up the stairs—when she had turned again, with that look in her eyes, and turned away—he went back to the salon and was wretched beyond words to tell, for a fool may love as deeply as the wisest.

This was really their "good-bye"—in the morning the claims on her were many, and he was not the only one who drove to the station with her.

When she had been gone between two and three weeks, he received the promised letter. It told him little but that she was "the new drawing mistress"; of her thoughts, her attitude towards her new life, it said nothing. He replied promptly, questioning her; but she wrote no more, and not the least of his regrets was the thought that she had dismissed him from her mind so easily.

He did not remain much longer in the boarding-house, its associations hurt him too much. A sandy-haired girl, with no eyelashes and red ears, occupied the seat that had been Rhoda's at the table, and the newcomer's unconcerned possession of it stabbed him at every meal. Having taken precautions against letters for him going astray, he returned to the hotel, and there month after month he plodded at his book, and tried to forget.

Nearly a year had gone by when he stood again on the deck of a Channel boat. He had not spared himself, and the novel was finished, and he was satisfied with it; but he was as much in love as he had been on the morning when he

watched a train steam from the gare St. Lazare. As he paced the deck he thought of Rhoda all the time; it excited him that he was going to England, he might chance to see her—he might even run down to Beckenhampton for a day or two? It would make the situation harder to bear afterwards, of course, but——

He looked up "Beckenhampton" in the Railway Guide often during the next few days. The distance between them was marvellously short—the knowledge that an hour and a half's journey could yield her face to him again had a touch of the magical in it. An hour and a half from Hades to Olympus! The longing fevered him. He threw some things into a bag pellmell one morning, and caught the 10.15.

"The George Hotel!"—and from the hotel he directed the driver to the school. The little town was grey and drear; he pitied her acutely as he gazed about him from the fly. He understood how her spirit must beat itself against the bars, he realised what her arrival must have meant to her; behind one of the windows of this prison she had sat looking back upon her yesterday! How the year must have changed her! he wondered if she still smiled. The fly jolted into the narrow High Street—and he saw her coming out of the post-office.

Yes, she still smiled—the smile that irradiated her face and made him forget everything else! They stood outside the post-office together, clasping hands once more.

"You! what are you doing here?" she cried.

"I was just going to see you, I've just come from the station. How are you? You look very well."

"I'm all right. Are you back for good?"

"Yes, I left Paris a few days ago."

"Did you stay on at the pension?"

"Oh no, I gave that up soon after you went."

"You've finished your book, eh?"

"How did you know?"

"I saw something about it in a paper. And how's Paris? I dream I'm back sometimes."

"Paris is just the same."

"I suppose you never saw anything of the others afterwards—Kitty Owen, or the MacAllister girl?"

"No, I never came across any of them—I was working very hard. Well? Tell me things; what's the news? You're still at the school then?"

"No."

"No? Aren't you? I was on my way there. What are you doing?"

"I'm married."

The blood sank from his cheeks. "Married?"

"I've been married four months."

A woman came between them to post a letter, and he was grateful for the interruption. "Let me congratulate you."

"Thanks. My husband's a solicitor here. … You'll come and see us?"

"I'm afraid … I should have been delighted, of course, but I have to be in town again this evening."

"We'd better move—we're in everybody's way," she said. "Will you walk on with me? When does the book come out?"

"In a few weeks' time—I'll send a copy to you."

"Really? It would be very good of you. I've often looked at the book columns to see if it was published."

"Have you? I was afraid you'd forgotten all about me. … You—you might have written again; you promised to write!"

"I know."

"Why didn't you?"

"What was the good?"

"It would have made me happier. I missed you frightfully. I—I think that was why I left the pension, I couldn't stand it when you'd gone. … Well, are *you* happy?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

"I'm glad."

"So you won't come and see us?"

"It's impossible, I'm sorry to say. … As a matter of fact, I didn't mean to see you again at all."

"That's a pretty compliment!"

"Ah, you know what I mean—it seemed better that I shouldn't. But … I think I'm glad I did; I don't know! I've wondered sometimes whether you understood. … We shan't meet any more, and I should like you to know——"

"Don't," she exclaimed thickly. "For heaven's sake!"

"I must," said Wendover—"I loved you dearly!"

They had walked some yards before she answered; her voice was a whisper; "What's the use of saying that to me now?" The bitterness of suffering was in the words—they flared the truth on him, the annihilating truth.

"My God!" he faltered, "would it have been any use *then?*"

Her face was colourless. She didn't speak.

"Rhoda, did you care? If—if I had asked you to stay with me, would you have stayed?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me."

"Yes, then, I *would* have stayed!" she said hoarsely. "Whom should I have hurt? I was alone, I had no one to study but myself. I wanted you to ask me. Stayed? I'd have thanked God if you had spoken! You were blind, you *wouldn't* see. And now, when it's too late, you come and say it!"

"I wanted to be straight to you," he groaned. "I sacrificed my happiness to be straight to you—it was damnably hard to do."

"I know. But I didn't want sacrifices—I wanted love. … Oh, it's no good our talking about it!" She stopped, and sighed. "We shall both get over it, I suppose."

"*Is* it too late?" pleaded Wendover brokenly.

"Quite. Things aren't the same; last year I was free to do as I liked. I have no conventions, but I have a conscience—there's my husband to consider now, and—and more, too. I shouldn't be contented like that to-day—I should have injured others. You and I let our chance slide, and we shall never get it back. … Smile, and say something about nothing—there are people who know me coming along."

And he did not sleep at the George after all; in the next train that left for Euston, a grey-faced man sat with wide eyes, cursing his own obtuseness. And he has not met her since. There is, of course, a brighter side to the history—although Rhoda is unhappy, she is happier than she would have remained with Wendover when the gilt was off the gingerbread; and though Wendover will never forget her, he cherishes her memory with more tenderness than he would have continued to cherish the girl.

But neither she nor he recognises this, and in Wendover's latest work, one may see the line that has been quoted: "Our bitterest remorse is not for our sins, but for our stupidities."

The reception of the novel was most flattering, and as usual the author's "insight into the mind of Woman" has been pronounced "remarkable."

A VERY GOOD THING FOR THE GIRL

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BAGOT told us this tale in the Stage Door Club one night. We were sitting round the fire, talking of perfect love, and somebody asked him if he had ever thought of marrying.

"Once," said the comedian cheerfully.

"Couldn't you afford it?" His talent and the remains of his good looks were worth fifty pounds a week to him then, but there had been days—well, listen to Bagot!

"It wasn't that I couldn't afford it," he said with a laugh; "actors never wait till they can afford it. I escaped in a curious way. What saved me was being such an artist. Fact! I was really smitten. If I hadn't been an artist in spite of myself I should be shivering in the last train home to Bedford Park now, instead of talking to you dear boys in an arm-chair, with a glass at my side. What? Oh, I'll tell you about it with pleasure!

"Of course, you know I made my name as the 'Rev. Simon Tibbits' in poor Pulteney's *Touch and Go*. Some things a man doesn't forget, and I remember how I felt when I settled for the part better than I remember yesterday. You see it was my first London engagement, and I had been trying to get one in London for sixteen years. Sixteen years I had been on the road—and seen the amateurs with money sauntering on to the West End stage from their Varsity Club!

"My agent had told me to try my luck at the office over the theatre, one morning in July, and when I went in, there was nobody there but a young man who I guessed must be

Pulteney. He was sitting at the table with a pencil in his hand, fiddling with a model of one of the scenes, and looking as worried as if he had been Chancellor of the Exchequer.

"'Have I the honour of speaking to Mr. Pulteney?' said I. In those days I imagined authors were important persons.

"He flushed, and smiled—rather on the wrong side of his mouth, I thought. 'That's my name.'

"'I was sent round to see you about the part of the clergyman in your farcical comedy, Mr, Pulteney,' I said. I had really been sent to see the stage-manager, but soft soap is never wasted, and I was always a bit of a diplomatist.

"He asked me to sit down, and we talked. He was smoking a cigarette, and I thought for a moment he was going to offer me one. I suppose it occurred to him that it wouldn't be the right thing to ask an actor to smoke in the manager's room, for he threw his own cigarette away. He was a gentleman, poor Pulteney, though he was a deuced bad dramatist.

"The manager came bustling back soon, and began to hum and haw, but Pulteney put in a word that made it all right. I was told it was a capital part, and a big chance for me, and I skipped downstairs and out into the street, feeling as puffed-up as if I owned the Strand. As a matter of fact, the salary wasn't much—I had had better money in the provinces—but the thought of making a hit in the West End so excited me that I was nearly popping with pride.

"Great Cumberland Place! wasn't I sold when the part came. You've no idea how duffing it really was. I don't mind

saying that a good many jolly fine comedians would never have got a laugh in it. When I read the jokes I could have cried. It wasn't funny as the author wrote it, dear boys, believe me. I don't want to brag of what I've done—I'm not the man to gas about myself—but it was the character I put into it that made Pulteney's piece!

"Well, the rehearsals weren't beginning for three weeks, and I kept hoping I'd see how to do something with it before the first call. I spoke the lines one way, and I spoke the lines another way, and the more I studied the glummer I felt. I had my dinner at Exeter Hall several times and listened to the people giving their orders; it was cheap, and I thought I might hear the sort of tone I was trying to get hold of. But I didn't. On the Sunday I went to three churches and sat through three sermons. Honest Injun! And that was no use. Talk about an R.A.'s difficulty in finding the right model? I spent eight dusty days scouring London for a model for the 'Rev. Simon Tibbits'!

"Then one afternoon I had come out of Prossers' Avenue. As it happened I wasn't thinking shop; I wasn't thinking about anything in particular; and all of a sudden I heard a voice. *A* voice? I heard *the* voice. I heard the voice I needed for the part!

"I jumped. My heart was in my throat. There, smiling up at a six-foot constable, was a little parson asking the way to Baker Street. He looked like an elderly cherub, with his pink cheeks, and his innocent, inquiring eyes. I held my breath in the hope he would go on talking, but the policeman had answered him, and he tripped along with merely a 'Thank you.' He tripped along with the oddest walk I have ever

seen; and I dodged after him, never taking my gaze off his legs and studying them all the way to Charing Cross.

"As I expected, he was going by bus. There was one just moving. Up went his umbrella; and the next moment I was on the step, too, intending to lure him into conversation as soon as I could, and master his voice as nicely as I was mastering his legs.

"'Full inside,' said the conductor, putting his dirty hand before my face. I was so annoyed I could have punched his head!

"Well, there was nothing for it but to go on top and wait for someone to get out. Hang it, nobody did get out; and I saw no more of my little model till we reached Baker Street. I meant to let him walk a few yards, and then ask him to direct me to Lord's, but there was a surprise for me; he tripped across the road into the station. 'Oho,' I said to myself, 'training it? So much the better! We're going to have a comfortable chat together, after all, you and I!'

"I kept as close to him when he took his ticket as if I'd designs on his watch, and I heard him say, 'Third class to Rickmansworth, if you please.' This was rather awkward—I didn't want to pay a long fare, and I didn't know the line well; *I* had to book as far as Rickmansworth, too. When we got round to the platform the train was there, and he hovered up and down for five minutes or more, looking for a seat to suit him; I began to think we'd both be left behind. Then just as they were slamming the doors, he made up his mind. In he went, and I after him, and—what do you think? We were both on the same side of the compartment, with a fat woman and a soldier between us!

"Two passengers between us, I give you my word, and no room opposite. Not only I couldn't talk to him—I couldn't even see him. Every time we drew into a station I prayed the compartment would thin a bit; I sat tense, watching the faces. Not a sign on them! You've heard of the American rustic who got so exasperated standing up in a crowded car, that at last he shouted, 'Say! ain't none o' you people got homes?' That was how *I* felt."

Bagot's imitation of the rustic was very good, and we signified our appreciation in the usual way. When the laugh was over someone told the waiter we were thirsty, and the story-teller filled his pipe.

"Well," he resumed, puffing, "to cut a long journey short, we reached Rickmansworth without my having had a glimpse of my gentleman. I was about desperate now. He hadn't taken a dozen steps when I overtook him, and asked if he would be kind enough to inform me whether any decent apartments were to be had in the village. It didn't seem worth while to have had all this bother just to hear him speak again for ten seconds, and I was wishing myself back in my apartments in Kennington. I said the first thing that came into my head.

"It turned out to be the best question I could have put.

"I am a visitor myself," he said, beaming at me, "but I believe there are rooms to be had in Cornstalk Terrace. Yes, I am almost positive I noticed a card in a window as I passed through the street this morning."

"I stood simply lapping his voice up.

"'Is it difficult for a stranger to find?' I asked.

"'No, indeed,' he said, 'it is quite near. But I am going there; if you care to accompany me——'

"'Oh, you're too good!' I exclaimed, and upon my word I could have hugged him!

"The road was a great deal nearer than I wanted it to be, for he was chirruping to me beautifully, and I hated to part from him. When we arrived I effervesced with gratitude, and he hoped I'd find comfortable quarters; and then I went straight back to the station—and heard that I had just missed a train! Pleasant? Rickmansworth isn't the sprightliest place I've ever waited in either. I had some nourishment in the bar of the hotel across the way, and I examined the High Street. It wasn't extensive. The barmaid had told me there was a park close by, so I started to discover it. I wasn't keen on the park, you understand, but I thought it would be a nice quiet spot to rehearse in and see if I had caught the little cleric's voice. As I was going along, past a row of villas, blest if I didn't come across him again, standing at his gate!

"He supposed I had been hunting for lodgings all the time, so, of course, I had to keep the game up. He was a friendly old chap and, honour bright, I felt sorry to think I was going to turn him into ridicule on the stage. Still he would never know, and actors can't be choosers. He went inside to ask his landlady if she could recommend any diggings to me; and a minute afterwards, out he fluttered to say he had quite forgotten there would be a couple of rooms vacant in that very house next day. Christopher Columbus! I had had no more idea of taking rooms than I had of taking the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. But it was too gigantic a

chance to miss. I fixed the matter with the old woman there and then—and the next morning my model and I were living under the same roof! ... Pass the matches, one of you fellows, my pipe's out ...

"At the back of the house there were some lettuces and a clothes-prop that were called a 'garden.' My parlour was at the back, too; and after dinner I saw the rector airing himself. By now I had learnt he was a rector. I lost no time in joining him, you may be sure—I wasn't paying two rents to go to sleep on the sofa—and we discussed politics and public libraries. It was a bit heavy for me, but I didn't worry much what he talked about so long as I could hear his dulcet tones. I ought to have said there was a bench against the clothes-prop; so far as her means permitted, the old woman did things handsomely.

"There was a bench, and we sat down on it; and while we were sitting there, the door opened—and out into the sunshine there came a young and beautiful girl. She wore a white cotton frock, and there was no paint or powder on her face, and she had the kind of eyes that make you want to say your prayers and be good. I'm not going to gush—I'm holding myself in—but on my honour she was just the saintliest picture of English maidenhood ever seen in a poet's dream!

"'My daughter,' said my model.

"I was so staggered that I bowed like a super at a bob a night.

"Yes, the old woman did things handsomely—there was room for three on the bench. She sat by me, turning a backyard into paradise—I mean the girl, not the old woman