

Novel Notes

by Jerome K. Jerome

PROLOGUE

Years ago, when I was very small, we lived in a great house in a long, straight, brown-coloured street, in the east end of London. It was a noisy, crowded street in the daytime; but a silent, lonesome street at night, when the gas-lights, few and far between, partook of the character of lighthouses rather than of illuminants, and the tramp, tramp of the policeman on his long beat seemed to be ever drawing nearer, or fading away, except for brief moments when the footsteps ceased, as he paused to rattle a door or window, or to flash his lantern into some dark passage leading down towards the river.

The house had many advantages, so my father would explain to friends who expressed surprise at his choosing such a residence, and among these was included in my

own small morbid mind the circumstance that its back windows commanded an uninterrupted view of an ancient and much-peopled churchyard. Often of a night would I steal from between the sheets, and climbing upon the high oak chest that stood before my bedroom window, sit peering down fearfully upon the aged gray tombstones far below, wondering whether the shadows that crept among them might not be ghosts--soiled ghosts that had lost their natural whiteness by long exposure to the city's smoke, and had grown dingy, like the snow that sometimes lay there.

I persuaded myself that they were ghosts, and came, at length, to have quite a friendly feeling for them. I wondered what they thought when they saw the fading letters of their own names upon the stones, whether they remembered themselves and wished they were alive again, or whether they were happier as they were. But that

seemed a still sadder idea.

One night, as I sat there watching, I felt a hand upon my shoulder. I was not frightened, because it was a soft, gentle hand that I well knew, so I merely laid my cheek against it.

"What's mumma's naughty boy doing out of bed? Shall I beat him?" And the other hand was laid against my other cheek, and I could feel the soft curls mingling with my own.

"Only looking at the ghosts, ma," I answered. "There's such a lot of 'em down there." Then I added, musingly, "I wonder what it feels like to be a ghost."

My mother said nothing, but took me up in her arms, and carried me back to bed, and then, sitting down beside me, and holding my hand in hers--there was not so very much

difference in the size--began to sing in that low, caressing voice of hers that always made me feel,for the time being, that I wanted to be a good boy, a song she often used to sing to me, and that I have never heard any one else sing since, and should not care to.

But while she sang, something fell on my hand that caused me to sit up and insist on examining her eyes. She laughed; rather a strange,broken little laugh, I thought, and said it was nothing, and told me to lie still and go to sleep. So I wriggled down again and shut my eyes tight, but I could not understand what had made her cry.

Poor little mother, she had a notion, founded evidently upon inborn belief rather than upon observation, that all children were angels,and that, in consequence, an altogether exceptional demand existed for them in a certain other place, where there are more openings for

angels, rendering their retention in this world difficult and undependable. My talk about ghosts must have made that foolishly fond heart ache with a vague dread that night, and for many a night onward, I fear.

For some time after this I would often look up to find my mother's eyes fixed upon me. Especially closely did she watch me at feeding times, and on these occasions, as the meal progressed, her face would acquire an expression of satisfaction and relief.

Once, during dinner, I heard her whisper to my father (for children are not quite so deaf as their elders think), "He seems to eat all right."

"Eat!" replied my father in the same penetrating undertone; "if he dies of anything, it will be of eating."

So my little mother grew less troubled, and, as the days went by, saw reason to think that my brother angels might consent to do without me for yet a while longer; and I, putting away the child with his ghostly fancies, became, in course of time, a grown-up person, and ceased to believe in ghosts, together with many other things that, perhaps, it were better for a man if he did believe in.

But the memory of that dingy graveyard, and of the shadows that dwelt therein, came back to me very vividly the other day, for it seemed to me as though I were a ghost myself, gliding through the silent streets where once I had passed swiftly, full of life.

Diving into a long unopened drawer, I had, by chance, drawn forth a dusty volume of manuscript, labelled upon its torn brown paper cover, NOVEL NOTES. The scent of dead days clung to its dogs'-eared pages; and, as it lay

open before me, my memory wandered back to the summer evenings--not so very long ago, perhaps, if one but adds up the years, but a long, long while ago if one measures Time by feeling--when four friends had sat together making it, who would never sit together any more. With each crumpled leaf I turned, the uncomfortable conviction that I was only a ghost, grew stronger. The handwriting was my own, but the words were the words of a stranger, so that as I read I wondered to myself, saying: did I ever think this? did I really hope that? did I plan to do this? did I resolve to be such? does life, then, look so to the eyes of a young man? not knowing whether to smile or sigh.

The book was a compilation, half diary, half memoranda. In it lay the record of many musings, of many talks, and out of it--selecting what seemed suitable, adding, altering, and arranging--I have shaped the chapters that hereafter

follow.

That I have a right to do so I have fully satisfied my own conscience, an exceptionally fussy one. Of the four joint authors, he whom I call "MacShaughnassy" has laid aside his title to all things beyond six feet of sun-scorched ground in the African veldt; while from him I have designated "Brown" I have borrowed but little, and that little I may fairly claim to have made my own by reason of the artistic merit with which I have embellished it. Indeed, in thus taking a few of his bald ideas and shaping them into readable form, am I not doing him a kindness, and thereby returning good for evil? For has he not, slipping from the high ambition of his youth, sunk ever downward step by step, until he has become a critic, and, therefore, my natural enemy? Does he not, in the columns of a certain journal of large pretension but small circulation, call me "Arry" (without an "H," the satirical

rogue), and is not his contempt for the English-speaking people based chiefly upon the fact that some of them read my books? But in the days of Bloomsbury lodgings and first-night pits we thought each other clever.

From "Jephson" I hold a letter, dated from a station deep in the heart of the Queensland bush. "Do what you like with it, dear boy," the letter runs, "so long as you keep me out of it. Thanks for your complimentary regrets, but I cannot share them. I was never fitted for a literary career. Lucky for me, I found it out in time. Some poor devils don't. (I'm not getting at you, old man. We read all your stuff, and like it very much. Time hangs a bit heavy, you know, here, in the winter, and we are glad of almost anything.) This life suits me better. I love to feel my horse between my thighs, and the sun upon my skin. And there are the youngsters growing up about us, and the hands to look after, and the stock. I daresay it seems a

very commonplace unintellectual life to you, but it satisfies my nature more than the writing of books could ever do. Besides, there are too many authors as it is. The world is so busy reading and writing, it has no time left for thinking. You'll tell me, of course, that books are thought, but that is only the jargon of the Press. You come out here, old man, and see it as I do sometimes for days and nights together alone with the dumb cattle on an upheaved island of earth, as it were, jutting out into the deep sky, and you will know that they are not. What a man thinks--really thinks--goes down into him and grows in silence. What a man writes in books are the thoughts that he wishes to be thought to think."

Poor Jephson! he promised so well at one time. But he always had strange notions.

CHAPTER I

When, on returning home one evening, after a pipe party at my friend Jephson's, I informed my wife that I was going to write a novel, she expressed herself as pleased with the idea. She said she had often wondered I had never thought of doing so before. "Look," she added, "how silly all the novels are nowadays; I'm sure you could write one." (Ethelbertha intended to be complimentary, I am convinced; but there is a looseness about her mode of expression which, at times, renders her meaning obscure.)

When, however, I told her that my friend Jephson was going to collaborate with me, she remarked, "Oh," in a doubtful tone; and when I further went on to explain to her that Selkirk Brown and Derrick MacShaughnassy were

also going to assist, she replied, "Oh," in a tone which contained no trace of doubtfulness whatever, and from which it was clear that her interest in the matter, as a practical scheme, had entirely evaporated.

I fancy that the fact of my three collaborators being all bachelors diminished somewhat our chances of success, in Ethelbertha's mind. Against bachelors, as a class, she entertains a strong prejudice. A man's not having sense enough to want to marry, or, having that, not having wit enough to do it, argues to her thinking either weakness of intellect or natural depravity, the former rendering its victim unable, and the latter unfit, ever to become a really useful novelist.

I tried to make her understand the peculiar advantages our plan possessed.

"You see," I explained, "in the usual common-place novel we only get, as a matter of fact, one person's ideas. Now, in this novel, there will be four clever men all working together. The public will thus be enabled to obtain the thoughts and opinions of the whole four of us, at the price usually asked for merely one author's views. If the British reader knows his own business, he will order this book early, to avoid disappointment. Such an opportunity may not occur again for years."

Ethelbertha agreed that this was probable.

"Besides," I continued, my enthusiasm waxing stronger the more I reflected upon the matter, "this work is going to be a genuine bargain in another way also. We are not going to put our mere everyday ideas into it. We are going to crowd into this one novel all the wit and wisdom that the whole four of us possess, if the book will hold it.

We shall not write another novel after this one. Indeed, we shall not be able to; we shall have nothing more to write. This work will partake of the nature of an intellectual clearance sale. We are going to put into this novel simply all we know."

Ethelbertha shut her lips, and said something inside; and then remarked aloud that she supposed it would be a one volume affair.

I felt hurt at the implied sneer. I pointed out to her that there already existed a numerous body of specially-trained men employed to do nothing else but make disagreeable observations upon authors and their works--a duty that, so far as I could judge, they seemed capable of performing without any amateur assistance whatever. And I hinted that, by his own fireside, a literary man looked to breathe a more sympathetic atmosphere.

Ethelbertha replied that of course I knew what she meant. She said that she was not thinking of me, and that Jephson was, no doubt, sensible enough (Jephson is engaged), but she did not see the object of bringing half the parish into it. (Nobody suggested bringing "half the parish" into it. Ethelbertha will talk so wildly.) To suppose that Brown and MacShaughnassy could be of any use whatever, she considered absurd. What could a couple of raw bachelors know about life and human nature? As regarded MacShaughnassy in particular, she was of opinion that if we only wanted out of him all that HE knew, and could keep him to the subject, we ought to be able to get that into about a page.

My wife's present estimate of MacShaughnassy's knowledge is the result of reaction. The first time she ever saw him, she and he got on wonderfully well together;

and when I returned to the drawingroom, after seeing him down to the gate, her first words were, "What a wonderful man that Mr. MacShaughnassy is. He seems to know so much about everything."

That describes MacShaughnassy exactly. He does seem to know a tremendous lot. He is possessed of more information than any man I ever came across. Occasionally, it is correct information; but, speaking broadly, it is remarkable for its marvellous unreliability. Where he gets it from is a secret that nobody has ever yet been able to fathom.

Ethelbertha was very young when we started housekeeping. (Our first butcher very nearly lost her custom, I remember, once and for ever by calling her "Missie," and giving her a message to take back to her mother. She arrived home in tears. She said that