**Some Novelists I Have Known**

W. Somerset Maugham

I

ONE of Hazlitt’s most enchanting essays is *My First Acquaintance with Poets,* in which he relates how he came to know Coleridge and Wordsworth. Coleridge had come to Shrewsbury to take charge of its Unitarian Congregation, and Mr. Rowe, whom he was succeed­ing, went down to the coach to meet him; but though he saw a round-faced man in a short black coat who seemed to be talking at a great rate to his fellow­passengers he could find no one answering the descrip­tion of the man he was expecting. He went home, but had scarcely got there when the round-faced man in the black coat entered and ‘dissipated all doubts on the subject, by beginning to talk. He did not cease while he stayed; nor has he since, that I know of.’ Hazlitt’s father, a dissenting minister, lived ten miles from Shrewsbury and a few days later Coleridge walked over to see him. Hazlitt, then twenty years old, was presented to him. The poet found the young man an enthusiastic and intelligent listener and invited him to come to Nether-Stowey in the spring. This Hazlitt did, and after he had been there a day or two Wordsworth arrived. ‘He instantly began to make havoc of the half of a Cheshire cheese on the table, and said triumphantly that his marriage with experience had not been so unproductive as Mr. Southey’s in teaching him a knowledge of the good things of this life.’ Next day Coleridge and Hazlitt accompanied Wordsworth to Alfoxden, where he read in the open air the story of Peter Bell. ‘There is a charm in the recitation both of Coleridge and Wordsworth,’ says Hazlitt, ‘which acts as a spell Upon the heart, and disarms the judgment. Perhaps they have deceived themselves by making use of this ambiguous accompani­ment.’ Hazlitt, though excited and admiring, relin­quished neither his critical acumen nor his sense of humour.

It is the delight I take in this essay that has prompted me to write the following pages. Alas, I have no such great figures to write about as Coleridge and Words­worth. *The Ancient Mariner, Kubla Khan,* the great ode and *The Solitary Reaper* will be read as long as English poetry is read; but who can tell whether any of the authors with whom I propose to deal in this essay will be remembered by posterity. Brahma, the Indian monists think, created the world for sport, thus exercising in this little bit of fun the infinite activity which is one of his attributes; and it is with just such sardonic and unscrupulous humour that posterity orders literary fame. Its wilfulness is beyond reason. It takes no account of virtue and little of industry; it is indifferent to high endeavour and sincerity of purpose. How unjust it is that Mrs. Humphry Ward, with her well-stored mind and her command of language, with her solid gifts, her conscientiousness and her seriousness, should be so forgotten that even her name will be unknown to most readers of today, whereas a dissipated French abbé, a hack-writer of the eighteenth century who wrote interminable and unreadable novels, should have achieved immortality because in the long course of one of them he wrote the story of a little baggage called Manon Lescaut.

Before I begin I should like to make it quite clear that though I knew the authors I am going to speak of over a long period I was not really intimate with any of them. One reason of this is that until I made a success as a writer of light comedies I knew very few authors, and for the most part those I knew, and only casually, were like myself very small fry. One’s intimate friends are those one makes in one’s teens or early twenties. I was thirty-four when I became a popular playwright, and though after that I came in contact with many of the literary figures of the day they were a good deal older than me and they were by then too much occupied with their own activities and the friends these had brought them for me to become anything more than a random acquaintance. I have been a wanderer all my life and when I was not wanted in London for the rehearsals of a play I spent long periods out of England so that I lost touch with the people my success had enabled me to meet.

French authors live for the greater part of the year in Paris. They form cliques and the members of a clique meet constantly, in cafes, in newspaper offices, in their apartments; they dine together and talk and criticise one another’s books; they write to one another (with a view to future publication) immense letters. They defend one another; they attack one another. English authors are different. On the whole they are not much interested in their fellow-writers. They are apt to live in the country and only go to London when they need to. They are more indiscriminately social than the French and mix freely in circles other than literary. Their close friends are, as with Henry James, a little group of fervent admirers or, as with H. G. Wells, the persons who share their particular interests. If you are not numbered among one or other of these classes you have little chance of admittance into their intimacy. But the chief reason why I have never become easily familiar with the men of letters I propose to write about is owing to some fault in my own character. I am either too self-centred, or too diffident, or too reserved, or too shy to be able to be on confidential terms with anyone I know at all well, and when on occasion a friend in trouble has opened his hearf to me I have been too embarrassed to be of much help to him. Most people like to talk about themselves and when they tell me things I should have thought they would prefer to keep to themselves I am abashed. I prefer to guess at the secrets of their hearts. It is not in me to take people at their face value and I am not easily impressed. I have no power of veneration. It is more in my humour to be amused by people than to respect them.

Many have been on terms of much closer friendship with the more or less illustrious persons my recollections of whom I am now offering to the reader, and I have written the above only to impress upon him that they (my recollections) can suggest no more than a partial portrait of my subjects.

I saw Henry James long before I knew him. Some­how or other I was allotted two seats in the dress circle for the first night of *Guy Domville.* I can’t think why, because I was still a medical student and one of George Alexander’s first nights was a fashionable affair and seats in the better parts of the house were distributed among critics, regular first-nighters, friends of the management and persons of consequence. The play was a dreadful failure. The dialogue was graceful, but perhaps not quite direct enough to be taken in by an audience and there was a certain monotony in its rhythm. Henry James was fifty when he wrote the play and it is hard to understand how such a practised writer could have invented such a tissue of absurdities as was that night presented to the public. There was in the second act a distressing scene of pretended drunkenness which gave one goose-flesh. One blushed for the author. The play reached its tedious end and Henry James was very unwisely brought on the stage to take a bow, as was the undignified custom of the time. He was greeted with such an outburst of boos and catcalls as only then have I heard in the theatre. From my seat in the dress circle he seemed oddly fore­shortened. A stout man on stumpy legs, and owing to his baldness, notwithstanding his beard, a vast expanse of naked face. He confronted the hostile audience, his jaw fallen so that his mouth was slightly open and on his countenance a look of complete bewilderment. He was paralysed. I don’t know why the curtain wasn’t immediately brought down. He seemed to stand there interminably while the gallery and the pit continued to bawl. There was clapping in the stalls and dress circle, and he said afterwards that it was enthusiastic, but there he was mistaken. It was half-hearted. People clapped in protest at the rudeness of pit and gallery, and out of pity because they could not bear to see the wretched man’s hunuliation. At last George Alexander came out and led him, crushed and cowed, away.

In a letter he wrote to his brother William after that disastrous evening Henry James, like many another dramatist wrho has had a failure, said that his play was ‘over the heads of the usual vulgar theatre-going London public’. That was not the fact. It was a bad play. It is possible that the outcry would have been less violent if the audience had not been exasperated by the incredible conduct of the characters. Their motives were, as in so much of Henry James’s work, not the motives of normal human beings, and though in his fiction he was persuasive enough very often to conceal the fact from the reader, presented on the stage they glaringly lacked plausibility. The audience felt instinc­tively that people did not behave with the lack of common sense with which he made them behave and, so feeling, felt that they had been made fools of. In their boos there was more than irritation because they had been bored, there was resentment.

One can see the play Henry James wanted to write and perhaps thought he had written, but it is wretchedly evident that he fell very far short of his intention. He despised the English theatre and was convinced that he could write much better plays himself. Years before in Paris he wrote that he had ‘mastered Dumas, Augier and Sardou’, and claimed that he knew ‘all they knew and a great deal more besides.’ Why he failed as a dramatist is obvious enough. He was like a man who because he can ride a bicycle thinks he can ride a horse. If under that impression he goes out for a day with the Pytchley he will come a cropper at the first fence. One unfortunate result of Henry James’s misadventure was that it confirmed managers in the belief that no novelist could write a play.

II

It was not till many years later, when I had myself written successful plays, that I met Henry James. It was at a luncheon party given by Lady Russell, the author of *Elizabeth and her German Garden,* in a flat she then had, if I remember rightly, near Buckingham Gate. It was by way of being a literary party and Henry James was of course the lion of the occasion. He said a few polite words to me, but I received the impression that they meant very little. I forget how long it was after this that I happened to go to an afternoon per­formance of *The Cherry Orchard* given by the Stage Society and found myself sitting next to Henry James and Mrs. W. K. Clifford, the widow of the mathe­matician, and herself the author of two good novels, *Mrs. Keith’s Crime* and *Aunt Anne.* The intervals were long and we had ample time to talk. Henry James was perplexed by *The Cherry Orchard,* as well he might be when his dramatic values were founded on the plays of Alexander Dumas and Sardou, and in the second interval he set out to explain to us how antagonistic to his French sympathies was this Russian incoherence. Lumbering through his tortuous phrases, he hesitated now and again in search of the exact word to express his dismay; but Mrs. Clifford had a quick and agile mind; she knew the word he was looking for and every time he paused immediately supplied it. This was the last thing he wanted. He was too well-mannered to protest, but an almost imperceptible expression on his face betrayed his irritation and, obstinately refusing the word she offered, he laboriously sought another, and again Mrs. Clifford suggested it only to have it again turned down. It was a scene of high comedy.

Ethel Irving was playing the part of Chekov’s feck­less heroine. She was herself moody, neurotic and emotional, which suited the character, and her per­formance was excellent. She had made a great success in a play of mine and Henry James was curious to know about her. I told him what I could. Then he pul me a very simple question, but he felt it would be crude and perhaps a trifle snobbish to put it simply. Both Mrs. Clifford and I knew exactly what he wanted to say. He led up to his enquiry like a big-game hunter stalking an antelope. He approached stealthily and drew back when he suspected that the shy creature winded him. He wrapped up his meaning in an increasingly embarrassed maze of circumlocution till at last Mrs. Clifford could stand it no longer and blurted out: ‘Do you mean, is she a lady?’ A look of real suffering crossed his face. Put so, the question had a vulgarity that outraged him. He pretended not to hear. He made a little gesture of desperation and said:

‘Is she, *enfin,* what you’d call if you were asked point­blank, if so to speak you were put with your back to the wall, is she a *femme du monde?’*

In 1910 I went to America for the first time and in due course paid a visit to Boston. Henry James, his brother having recently died, was staying at Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his sister-in-law and Mrs. James asked me to dinner. There were but the three of us. I can remember nothing of the conversation, but I could not help noticing that Henry James was troubled in spirit, and after dinner, when the widow had left us alone in the dining-room, he told me that he had promised his brother to remain at Cambridge for, I think, six months after his death, so that if he found himself able to make a communication from beyond the grave there would be two sympathetic witnesses on the spot ready to receive it. I could not but reflect that Henry James was in so nervous a state that it would be difficult to place implicit confidence in any report he might make. His sensibility was so exacer­bated that he was capable of imagining anything. But hitherto no message had come and the six months were drawing to their end.

When it was time for me to go Henry James insisted on accompanying me to the corner where I could take the street-car back to Boston. I protested that I was perfectly capable of getting there by myself, but he would not hear of it, not only on account of the kind­ness and the great courtesy which were natural to him, but also because America seemed to him a strange and terrifying labyrinth in which without his guidance I was bound to get hopelessly lost.

As we walked along, he told me what his good manners had prevented him from saying before Mrs. James, that he was counting the days that must elapse before, having fulfilled his promise, he could sail for the blessed shores of England. He yearned for it. There, in Cambridge, he felt himself forlorn. He was determined never to set foot again on that bewildering and unknown country that America was to him. It was then that he uttered the phrase which seemed to me so fantastic that I have never forgotten it. T wander about these great empty streets of Boston,’ he said, ‘and I never see a soul. I could not be more alone in the Sahara.’ The street-car hove in sight and Henry James was seized with agitation. He began waving frantically when it was still a quarter of a mile away. He was afraid it wouldn’t stop, and he besought me to jump on with the greatest agility of which I was capable, for it would not pause more than an instant, and if I were not very careful I might be dragged along and if not killed, at least mangled and dis­membered. I assured him I was quite accustomed to getting on street-cars. Not American street-cars, he told me, they were of a savagery, an inhumanity, a ruthlessness beyond any conception. I was so infected by his anxiety that when the car pulled up and I leapt on, I had almost the sensation that I had had a miraculous escape from certain death. I saw him standing on his short legs in the middle of the road, looking after the car, and I felt that he was trembling still at my narrow shave.

But homesick as he was for England I don’t believe that he ever felt himself quite at home there. He remained a friendly, but critical alien. He did not know the English as an Englishman instinctively knows them and so his English characters never to my mind ring quite true. His American characters, at least to an Englishman, on the whole do. He had certain remarkable gifts, but he lacked the quality of empathy which enables a novelist to feel himself into his characters, think their thoughts and suffer their emotions. Flaubert vomited as though he too had swallowed arsenic when he was describing the suicide of Emma Bovary. It is impossible to imagine Henry James being similarly affected if he had had to narrate a similar episode. Take *The Author of Beltraffio.* In that a mother lets her only child, a little boy, die of diphtheria so that he should not be corrupted by his father’s books, of which she profoundly disapproves. No one could have conceived such a monstrous episode who could imagine a mother’s love for her son and in his nerves feel the anguish of the child tossing restlessly on his bed and the pitiful, agonising struggle for breath. That is what the French call *littérature.* There is no precise English equivalent. On the pattern of writer’s cramp you might call it writer’s hokum. It signifies the sort of writing produced purely for literary effect without a relation to truth or probability. A novelist may ask himself what it feels like to commit a murder and then may invent a character who commits one to know what it feels like. That is *littérature.* People commit murders for reasons that seem good to them, not in order to enjoy a curious experience. The great novelists, even in seclusion, have lived life passionately. Henry James was content to observe it from a window.

But you cannot describe life convincingly unless you have partaken of it; nor, should your object be different, can you fantasticate upon it (as Balzac and Dickens did)' unless you know it first. Something escapes you unless you have been an actor in the tragi-comedy. However realistic he tries to be, the novelist cannot hope to give a representation of life as exactly as a lithograph can give a representation of a drawing. With his characters and the experiences he causes them to undergo he draws a pattern, but he is more likely to convince his readers that the pattern is acceptable if the people he depicts have the same sort of motives, foibles and passions as they know they have themselves and if the experiences of the persons in question are such as their characters render plausible.

Henry James regarded his relations and friends with deep affection, but this is no indication that he was capable of love. Indeed he showed a singular obtuse­ness in his stories and novels when he came to deal with the most deeply seated of human emotions; so that, interested and amused as you are, (often amused at him rather than with him,) you arc constantly jolted back to reality by your feeling that human beings simply do not behave as he makes them do. You cannot take Henry James’s fiction quite seriously as, for instance, you take *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary;* you read it with a smile, and with the suspension of disbelief with which you read the Restoration drama­tists. (This notion is not so far-fetched as it may seem at first sight: if Congreve had been a novelist he might well have written the bawdy narrative of promiscuous fornication which Henry James entitled *What Maisie*

*Knew.}* There is all the difference between his novels and those of Flaubert and Tolstoi as there is between the paintings of Daumier and the drawings of Con­stantin Guys. The draughtsman’s pretty women drive in the Bois in their smart carriages, luxurious and fashionable, but they have no bodies in their elegant clothes. They amuse, they charm; but they are as unsubstantial as the stuff that dreams are made of. Henry James’s fictions are like the cobwebs which a spider may spin in the attic of some old house, intricate, delicate and even beautiful, but which at any moment the housemaid’s broom with brutal common sense may sweep away.

It is not my purpose to criticise Henry James’s work, yet it is impossible in his case to write of the man rather than of the author. They are in fact inseparable. The author absorbed the man. To him it was art that made life significant, but he cared little for any of the arts except the one he practised. He was little interested in music or painting. When Gosse was going to Venice he conjured him without fail to see Tintoretto’s *Crucifixion* at San Cassiano. It is odd that he should have picked out this fine but stagey picture to com­mend rather than Titian’s grand *Presentation of the Virgin* or Veronese’s *Jesus in the House of Levi.* No one who knew Henry James in the flesh can. read his stories dispassionately. He got the sound of his voice into every line he wrote, and you accept (not willingly, but with indulgence) the abominable style of his later work, with its ugly Gallicisms, its abuse of adverbs, its too elaborate metaphors, the tortuosity of its long sentences, because they are part and parcel of the charm, benignity and amusing pomposity of the man you remember.

I am not sure that Henry James was fortunate in his friends. They were disposed to be possessive, and they regarded one another’s claim to be in the inner circle of his confidence with no conspicuous amiability. Like a dog with a bone, each was inclined to growl when another showed an inclination to dispute his exclusive right to the precious object of his devotion. The reverence with which they treated him was of no great service to him. They seemed to me, indeed, some­times a trifle silly: they whispered to one another with delighted giggles that Henry James privately stated that the article in *The Ambassadors* on the manufacture of which the fortune of the widow Newsome was founded, and the nature of which he had left in polite obscurity, was in fact a chamber pot. I did not find this so amusing as they did. I think it would be unfair to say that Henry James demanded the admiration of his friends, but he certainly enjoyed it. English authors, unlike their fellows in France and Germany, are chary of assuming an attitude. The pose of *Cher Maire* makes them feel faintly ridiculous. Perhaps because Henry James had first come to know dis­tinguished writers in France he took the pedestal on which his admirers placed him as a natural prerogative. He was touchy and could be cross when he was not treated with what he thought proper respect. On one occasion a young Irish friend of mine was staying at Hill for the week-end in company with Henry James. Mrs. Hunter, their hostess, told him that he was a talented young man and Henry James on the Saturday afternoon engaged him in conversation. My friend was petulant and impatient, and at length, driven to desperation by James’s interminable struggle to find the one word that would express exactly what he wanted to say, blurted out: ‘Oh, Mr. James, I’m not of any importance. Don’t bother about rooting around for the right word. Any old word is good enough for me.’ Henry James was deeply affronted and com­plained to Mrs. Hunter that the young man had been very rude to him, whereupon Mrs. Hunter gave him a severe scolding and insisted that he should apologise to her distinguished guest. This he accordingly did. Once Jane Wells inveigled Henry James and me to go with her to a subscription dance in aid of some worthy object in which H. G. was interested. Mrs. Wells, Henry James and I were chatting in a kind of ante­room adjoining the ballroom when a brash young man bounced in, interrupting Henry James in his discourse, and seizing Jane Wells’s hands said: ‘Come on and dance, Mrs. Wells, you don’t want to sit there listening to that old man talking his head off.’ It wasn’t very polite. Jane Wells gave Henry James an anxious glance and then with a strained smile went off with the brash young man. Henry James was too little accustomed to be treated like that to take it, as he might sensibly have done, with a good-natured laugh, and he was much offended. When Mrs. Wells came back he got up and a little too formally bade her good­night.

When someone transplants himself from one country to another he is more likely to assimilate the defects of its inhabitants than their virtues. The England in which Henry James lived was excessively class­conscious, and I think it is to this that must be ascribed the somewhat disconcerting attitude he adopted in his fiction to those who were so unfortunate as to be of humble origin. Unless he were an artist, by choice a writer, it seemed to him more than a little ridiculous that anyone should be under the necessity of earning a living. The death of a member of the lower orders could be trusted to give him a mild chuckle. I think this attitude was emphasised by the fact that, himself of good family, he could not have dwelt long in England without becoming aware that to the English one American was very like another. He saw com­patriots on the strength of a fortune acquired in Michigan or Ohio received with as great cordiality as though they belonged to the eminent families of Boston and New York, and in self-defence somewhat exaggerated his native fastidiousness in social relations. Sometimes he made rather ludicrous mistakes and would attribute to some young man who had taken his fancy a distinction which he obviously did not possess.

If in these pages I have made Henry James, I hope not unkindly, a trifle absurd it is because that is what I found him. I think he took himself a good deal too seriously. We look askance at a man who keeps on telling you he is a gentleman; I think it would have been more becoming in Henry James if he had not insisted so often on his being an artist. It is better to leave others to say that. But he was gracious, hospitable and when in the mood uncommonly amusing. He had uncommon gifts and if I think they were too often ill- directed that is only what I think and I ask no one to agree with me. The fact remains that those last novels of his, notwithstanding their unreality, make all pther novels, except the very best, unreadable.

III

I met H. G. Wells for the first time at a flat which Reggie Turner had near Berkeley Square. I was living then in Mount Street and sometimes I would drop in to see him. Reggie Turner was on the whole the most amusing man I have known. I will not attempt to describe his humour, since Max Beerbohm has done it to perfection in the essay called *Laughter.* Reggie was not so well pleased as he might have been with this flattering tribute because Max had added that he was not very responsive to the humour of others. He asked me if it was true, and I was bound to admit that it was. Reggie liked an audience, though he was quite content with one of three or four, and then he would take a theme and embroider upon it with such drollery that he made your sides so ache with laughter that at last you had to beg him to stop. He was by way of being a novelist, but somehow, when he took up his pen his gaiety, his extravagant invention, his lightness deserted him, and his novels were dull. They were unsuccessful. He said of them: ‘With most novelists it’s their first edition that is valuable, but with mine it’s the second. It doesn’t exist.’ I will set down here a quip of his because I do not think it is well known. He was one of the few of Oscar Wilde’s friends who remained faithful to him after his disgrace. Reggie was in Paris when Wilde, living in a cheap, dingy hotel on the left bank of the Seine, was dying. Reggie went to see him every day. One morning he found him distraught. He asked him what was the matter. ‘I had a terrible dream last night,’ said Oscar, ‘I dreamt I was supping with the dead.’ ‘Well,’ said Reggie, ‘I’m sure you were the life and soul of the party, Oscar.’ Wilde burst into a roar of laughter and regained his spirits. It was not only witty, but kind.

On the day on which I was first introduced to H. G. he had been lunching with Reggie and they had gone back to his flat to continue their conversation. H. G. was then, I suppose, at the height of his fame. I had not expected to find him there and was slightly dis­concerted. I had recently made a success as a dramatist which the newspapers described as spectacular, but I was well aware that I had thereby lost caste with the intelligentsia. H. G. was cordial enough, but, perhaps because I was sensitive, I received the impression that he looked upon me with a sort of off-hand amusement as he might have looked upon Arthur Roberts or Dan Leno. He was busy reconstructing the world according to his own notions of how it should be shaped, and he had no time for anyone who was not with him, so that he could be enlisted to serve his ideas, or against him, so that he could be reasoned with, argued with, and if not brought round ignominiously discarded.

Though after that I saw him now and then, it was not till a number of years later, when I had settled down on the Riviera and H. G. had a house there too at which he spent a considerable part of the year, that our slight acquaintance ripened into friendship. Later still, when he had parted with the companion who shared the house with him (carved on the chinpey- piece in the sitting-room was the phrase: This house was built by two lovers), and abandoned it to her, he would from time to time come to stay with me. He was very good company. He was not a wit as Max Beerbohm or Reggie Turner was, but he had a lively sense of humour and could laugh at himself as well as at others. Once he asked me to lunch to meet Barbusse, the author of a novel called *Le Feu* that had made a great stir. It is a long time ago and I can only remember that Barbusse was a long, thin, hirsute man dressed in shabby black like a mute at a French funeral. He had dark angry eyes and a restless manner. He was an ardent, violent socialist and his speech was torrential. Though H. G. understood French well enough he spoke it haltingly, so that Barbusse had the conversation pretty much to himself. He treated us as though we were a public meeting. When he left, H. G. turned to me with a wry smile and said: ‘How silly our own ideas sound when we hear them out of somebody else’s mouth.’ He was sharp-witted and, though apt to find persons who didn’t agree with him stupid and so objects of ridicule, the humour he exercised at their expense was devoid of malice.

H. G. had strong sexual instincts and he said to me more than once that the need to satisfy these instincts had nothing to do with love. It was a purely physio­logical matter. If humour, as some say, is incom­patible with love, then H. G. was never in love, for he was keenly alive to what was rather absurd in the objects of his unstable affections and sometimes seemed almost to look upon them as creatures of farce. He was incapable of the idealisation of the desired person which most of us experience when we fall in love. If his com­panion was not intelligent he soon grew bored with her, and if she was her intelligence sooner or later palled on him. He did not like his cake unsweetened and if it was sweet it cloyed. He loved his liberty and when he found that a woman wished to restrict it he became exasperated and somewhat ruthlessly broke off the connection. Sometimes this was not so easily done and he had to put up with scenes and recrimina­tions that he even found difficult to treat with levity. He was of course like most creative persons self-centred. That to sever a tie that had lasted for years might cause the other party pain and humiliation appeared to him merely silly. I was somewhat closely concerned, in one of these upheavals in his life, and speaking of the trouble it was causing him he said: ‘You know, women often mistake possessiveness for passion and when they are left, it is not so much that their heart is broken as that their claim to property is repudiated.’ He thought it unreasonable that what on his side was merely the relaxation from what he regarded as his life’s work on the other might be enduring passion. This he aroused. It surprised me since his physical appearance was not particularly pleasing. He was fat and homely. I once asked one of his mistresses what especially attracted her in him. I expected her to say his acute mind and his sense of fun; not at all; she said that his body smelt of honey.

Notwithstanding H. G.’s immense reputation and the great influence he had had on his contemporaries he was devoid of conceit. There was nothing of the stuffed shirt in him. He never put on airs. He had naturally good manners and he would treat some unknown scribbler, the assistant librarian, for instance, of a provincial library, with the same charming civility as if he were as important as himself. It was only later that by a grin and a quip you could tell what a donkey he had thought him. I remember attending a dinner of the P.E.N., of which H. G. was then president. There were a great many people present and after H. G. had read a report a number of them got up to ask questions. Most of them were silly, but H. G. replied to them all with great courtesy. One thickly bearded man, which marked him out as a conscious intellectual, leapt to his feet time time and again to make short speeches of a singular ineptitude and it was only too obvious that he was trying merely to attract attention to himself. H. G. could have crushed him with a retort, but he listened to him attentively and then reasoned with him as if he had been talking sense. After the proceedings were over I told H. G. how much I admired the wonderful patience with which he had dealt with the silly fellow. He chuckled and said: ‘When I was a member of the Fabian Society I got a lot of practice in dealing with fools.’

He had no illusions about himself as an author. He always insisted that he made no pretension to be an artist. That was, indeed, something he despised rather than admired, and when he spoke of Henry James, an old friend, who claimed, as I have hinted, perhaps a little too often that he was an artist and nothing else, it was good-humouredly to ridicule him. ‘I’m not an author,’ H. G. would say, ‘I’m a publicist. My work is just high-class journalism.’ On one occasion, after he had been staying with me, he sent me a complete edition of his works and next time he came he saw them displayed in an imposing row on my shelves. They were well printed on good paper and hand­somely bound in red. He ran his finger along them and with a cheerful grin said: ‘They’re as dead as mutton, you know. They all dealt with matters of topical interest and now that the matters aren’t topical any more they’re unreadable.’ There is a good deal of truth in what he said. He had a fluent pen and too often it ran away with him. I have never seen any of his manuscripts, but I surmise that he wrote with facility and corrected little. He had a way of repeating in one sentence, but in other words, exactly what he said in the previous one. I suppose it was because he was so full of the idea he wanted to express that he was not satisfied to say it only once. It made him unnecessarily verbose.

H. G.’s theory of the short story was a sensible one. It enabled him to write a number that were very good and several that were masterly. His theory of the novel was different. His early novels, which he had written to cam a firing, did not accord with it and he spoke of them slightingly. His notion was that the function of the novelist was to deal with the pressing problems of the day and to persuade the reader to adopt the views for the betterment of the world which he, H. G., held. He was fond of likening the novel to a woven tapestry of varied interest, and he would not accept my objec­tion that after all a tapestry has unity. The artist who designed it has given it form, balance, coherence and arrangement. It is not a jumble of unrelated items.

His later novels are, if not, as he said, unreadable, at least difficult to read with delight. You begin to read them with interest, but as you go on you find your interest dwindle and it is only by an effort of will that you continue to read. I think *Tono Bungay* is generally considered his best novel. It is written with his usual liveliness, though perhaps the style is better suited to a treatise than to a novel, and the characters are well presented. He has deliberately avoided the suspense which most novelists attempt to create and he tells you more or less early on what is going to happen. His theory of the novelist’s function allows him to digress abundantly, which, if you are interested in the characters and their behaviour, can hardly fail to arouse in you some impatience.

One day when he was staying with me in the course of conversation he made the remark: ‘I’m only interested in people in the mass, I’m indifferent to the individual.’ Then with a smile: T like you, in fact I’ve got a real affection for you, but I’m not interested in you.’ I laughed. I knew it was true. ‘I’m afraid I can’t multiply myself by ten thousand to arouse your interest, old boy,’ I said. ‘Ten thousand?’ he cried. ‘That’s nothing. Ten million.’ During the course of his life he came in contact with a great many people, but with rare exceptions, though consistently pleasant and courteous, they made no more impression on him than the ‘extras’ who compose the crowd in a moving picture.

I think that is why his novels are less satisfactory than one would have liked them to be. The people he puts before you are not individuals, but lively and talkative marionettes whose function it is to express the ideas he was out to attack or to defend. They do not develop according to their dispositions, but change for the purposes of the theme. It is as though a tadpole did not become a frog, but a squirrel—because you had a cage that you wanted to pop him into. H. G. seems often to have grown tired of his characters before he was half-way through and then, frankly discarding any attempt at characterisation, he becomes an out-and- out pamphleteer. One curious thing that you can hardly help noticing if you have read most of H. G.’s novels is that he deals with very much the same people in book after book. He appears to have been content to use with little variation the few persons who had played an intimate part in his own life. He was always a little impatient with his heroines. He regarded his heroes with greater indulgence. He had of course put more of himself in them; most of them in fact are merely himself in a different guise. Trafford in *Marriage* is indeed the portrait of the man H. G. thought he was, added to the man he would have liked to be.

IV

In the last twenty-five years I have had a lot of people staying with me, and sometimes I am tempted to write an essay on guests. There are the guests who never shut a door after them and never turn out the light when they leave their room. There are the guests who throw themselves on their bed in muddy boots to have a nap after lunch, so that the counterpane has to be cleaned on their departure. There are the guests who smoke in bed and bum holes in your sheets. There are the guests who are on a régime and have to have special food cooked for them and there are the guests who wait till their glass is filled with a vintage claret and then say: ‘I won’t have any, thank you.’ There are the guests who never put back a book in the place from which they took it and there are the guests who take away a volume from a set and never return it. There are the guests who borrow money from you when they are leaving and do not pay it back. There are the guests who can never be alone for a minute and there are the guests who are seized with a desire to talk the moment they see you glancing at a paper. There are the guests who, wherever they are, want to be somewhere else and there arc the guests who want to be doing something from the time they get up in the morning till the time they go to bed at night. There are the guests who treat you as though they were gauleiters in a conquered province. There are the guests who bring three weeks laundry with them to have washed at your expense and there are the guests who send their clothes to the cleaners and leave you to pay the bill. There are the guests who take all they can get and offer nothing in return.

There are also the guests who are happy just to be with you, who seek to please, who have resources of their own, who amuse you, whose conversation is delightful, whose interests are varied, who exhilarate and excite you, who in short give you far more than you can ever hope to give them and whose visits are only too brief. Such a guest was H. G. He had a social sense. When there was a party he wanted to make it go. Now and then there were neighbours who had to be asked to lunch or dine and sometimes they were dull. H. G. would talk to them as entertainingly as if they had the wits to understand him. One such occasion stands out in my memory because it is the only time I saw him defeated. One of my neighbours, hearing that he was staying with me, called me up and told me that she had a great admiration for him and that she’d always been told that he was a marvellous talker and would so much like to meet him. I asked her to lunch. We sat down and H. G., who liked to talk, began to do so. He had just got into his stride when the lady interrupted him with a remark which showed that she hadn’t listened to a word he said. He stopped, and when she had finished went on. Again she interrupted him and again he stopped. When she paused he started once more and again she inter­rupted. It was evident that her wish was not to hear H. G. talk, but to have him listen to her talk. He gave me one of his funny grins and relapsed into silence. For the rest of lunch he sat mute while she cheerfully gave utterance to a stream of shattering platitudes. When she went away she said she’d had a wonderful time.

I saw H. G. for the last time during the war. I was in New York and he had come to America to deliver a series of lectures. He came to lunch with me just before his return to England. He looked old, tired and shrivelled. He was as perky as ever, but with some­thing of an effort. His lectures were a dismal failure. He was not a good speaker. It was odd that after so much public speaking he had never been able to defiver a discourse, but was obliged to read it. His voice was thin and squeaky and he read with his nose in his manuscript. People couldn’t hear what he said and they left in droves. He had also seen a number of highly influential persons, but though they listened to him politely he could not but see that they paid little attention to what he said. He was hurt and dis­appointed. ‘I’ve been saying the same things to people for the last thirty years,’ he said to me with exaspera­tion, ‘and they won’t listen.’ That was the trouble. He had said the same things too often. Many of his ideas were sensible, none of them was complicated; but, like Goethe, he thought that one must always repeat truth: *Man muss das Wahre immer wiederholen.* He was so constituted that never a doubt entered his mind that he was definitely possessed of *das Wahre.* Naturally people grew impatient when they were asked once more to listen to views they knew only too well. He had had an immense influence on a whole generation and had done a great deal to alter the climate of opinion. But he had had his say. He was mortified to find that people looked upon him as a has-been. They agreed with him or they didn’t. When they listened to him it was no longer with the old thrill of excitement, but with the indulgence you accord to an old man who has outlived his interest.

He died a disappointed man.

V

H. G. set little store on the pure novelist. I think he would have segregated the novelists who seek primarily to entertain on an island next to the one on which in *A New Utopia* he settled the drunkards, where, well- fed and comfortably housed, they could spend their leisure in reading one another’s works. The only straight novelist with whom he was on terms of real intimacy was Arnold Bennett. A woman I knew told me how once standing next to Henry James at a very grand party at Londonderry House, one of those parties graced by royalty, where decorations were worn, stars and impressive ribbons, and the women blazed with diamonds, she had perhaps flippantly said to him: ‘Fun, isn’t it, for middle-class people like you and me to find ourselves hobnobbing with all these swells.’ She saw at once by the look on his face that she had said the wrong thing. He didn’t at all like being called middle class, and the look of amusement in her eyes when she noticed his annoyance increased his displeasure. Henry James was wrong to take offence, for after all it is the middle class that has created the wealth of English literature. That is natural enough. The boy of poor parents has received a scanty education and is forced to go to work at an early age. He has had little opportunity to read. The boy born in the upper ranks of society is seduced by the amusements his circumstances put within his easy reach, and his ambition, if he has any, is more likely to lead him to seek distinction in the way approved of by the people among whom his happy lot is cast. In either case his urge to create must be very strong to overcome the hindrances, though very different in character, which combine to thwart him. The nobility and gentry, so far as I know, have only produced two poets whose work is definitely a part of English litera­ture, Shelley and Byron, and only one novelist, Fielding. The youth of middle-class parentage who has an irresistible impulse to write has received an education which is at least adequate; he has had access to some­thing of a library; he has probably come in contact with a greater variety of people than either the son of an artisan or the son of a country squire; and though his family may deplore his taking to the hazardous profession of literature the idea is not quite foreign to their prepossessions and may even make a certain appeal to their pride. The English middle class is never without the desire to rise in the social scale and to have a writer in the family is to the clergyman, the solicitor, the Civil Servant something of a prestige item.

I think H. G. and Arnold were drawn together because both were of modest origin and both had had an arduous struggle to win recognition. After they had achieved success both felt that, though for some­what different reasons, they stood slightly apart from the rest of the literary world, and that again was a bond between them. But the chief cause of H. G.’s genuine attachment to Arnold was that Arnold was a very lovable man.

I first knew him in 1904 when we were both living in Paris. I had taken a tiny apartment near the Lion de Belfort, on the fifth floor, from which I had a spacious view of the cemetery of Montparnasse. I used to dine at a restaurant in the rue d’Odessa. A number of painters, illustrators, sculptors and writers were in the habit of dining there and we had a little room to ourselves. We got a very good dinner, *vin compris,* for two francs fifty, and it was usual to give four sous to Marie, the good-humoured and sharp- tongued maid who waited on us. We were of various nationalities and the conversation was carried on indifferently in English and French. On occasion someone would bring his mistress and her mother, whom he introduced politely to the company as *ma belle mère,* but for the most part we were all men. We discussed every subject under the sun, generally with heat, and by the time we came to coffee (with which, 1 seem to remember, a *fine* was thrown in) and lit our cigars, *demi londrès* at three sous apiece, the air was heady. We differed with extreme acrimony. Arnold used to come there once a week. He reminded me years later that the first time we met, which was at this restaurant, I was white with passion. The conversation was upon the merits of Hérédia. I asserted that there was no sense in him, and a painter scornfully replied that you didn’t want sense in poetry, you wanted sound. Someone contributed an anecdote about Mallarmé and Degas. Degas arrived late at one of Mallarmé’s celebrated Tuesdays and said he’d been trying all day to write a sonnet and couldn’t get an idea. To this Mallarmé replied: ‘But, my dear Degas, one doesn’t write a sonnet with ideas, one-writes it with words.’ From this an argument arose upon the objects and limitations of poetry which soon enlivened the whole company. I exercised such powers as I had of sarcasm, invective and vituperation, and my antagonist, Roderic O’Connor by name, a taciturn Irishman, than whom there is no man more difficult to cope with, was coldly and bitingly virulent. The entire table took up the dispute and I have still a dim recollection of Arnold, smiling a little, calm and a trifle Olympian, putting in now and then a brief, dogmatic, but, I am certain, judicious remark. He was older than most of us. He was then a thin man, with dark hair very smoothly done in a fashion that suggested the private soldier of the day. He was much more neatly dressed than we were and more con­ventionally. He looked like a managing clerk in a city office. At that time the only book he had written that we knew of was *The Grand Babylon Hotel* and our attitude towards him was somewhat patronising. We were arrogantly high-brow. Some of us had read the book and enjoyed it, which was enough for us to decide that there was nothing m it, but the rest shrugged their shoulders and declined to waste their time over such trash. Had you read *Marie Donadieu?* That was the stuff to give the troops.

Arnold was living at that time in Montmartre, I think in the Rue de Calais, in a small dark apartment which he had filled with Empire furniture. It was certainly not genuine, but this he did not know, and he was exceedingly proud of it. Arnold was a tidy man and his apartment was very neat, with every article in an appointed place, but it was not very comfortable and you could not imagine anyone making a home of it. It gave you the impression of a ‘set’ arranged for a man who saw himself in a certain rôle which he was playing conscientiously, but into the skin of which he hadn’t quite got. On deciding to live in Paris Arnold had given up the editorship of a magazine called *Woman* and was settled down to train himself for the profession of literature. Through Marcel Schwob he had got to know several of the French writers of the day, and I seem to remember his telling me that Schwob had taken him to see Anatole France, who was then the high priest of French letters. Arnold diligently read the French literary reviews, of which at that time the *Mercure de France* was the most distinguished; he read Stendhal and Flaubert, but chiefly Balzac, and I think he told me that he had read through the whole of the *Comédie Humaine* in a year. When I first knew him he was starting on the Russians and talked with enthusiasm of *Anna Karenina.* He thought it the greatest of all novels. I am under the impression that he did not discover Chekov till somewhat later. When he did, he began to admire Tolstoi less.

Arnold’s plan of campaign to achieve success in his calling was cut-and-dried. He proposed to make his annual expenditure by writing novels, and by writing plays to make provision for his old age. He meant to write two or three books to get his hand in and then write a masterpiece. When I asked him what sort of book this was going to be he said, something on the lines of *A Great Man;* but that, he added, had brought him in nothing at all and he couldn’t afford to go on in that style till he was properly established. I listened,

but attached no importance to what he said. I did not think him capable of writing anything of consequence. Because I had lately had my first play produced by the Stage Society he asked me to read one of his. The characters were plausible and the dialogue natural, but in his determination to be realistic he had allowed none of them to make a witty or even a clever remark and had, so it seemed to me, gone out of his way to eschew anything in the nature of dramatic action. As a picture of middle-class life the play had veri­similitude, but I found it dull. Perhaps only it was before its time.

Like everyone else who lives in Paris Arnold had come across a particular little restaurant where you could get a better dinner for less money than anywhere else. This one was on the first floor, somewhere in Montmartre, and now and then I used to go over to dine, Dutch Treat, with him. After dinner we went back to his apartment and he would play Beethoven on a cottage piano. He was nothing if not thorough, and it was obvious that if you were living in Mont­martre as a man of letters and a Bohemian (though a clean, respectable one) to complete the picture you must have a mistress. But that costs money and Arnold, who had come to Paris for a definite purpose and had only a certain sum to dispose of, was too cagey to squander on luxuries what he needed for necessities. He was not a son of the Five Towns for nothing and he solved the problem in a characteristic fashion. One night after we had been dining together and were sitting amid the Empire furniture of his apartment, he said:

‘Look here, I have a proposal to make to you.’ ‘Oh?’

‘I have a mistress with whom I spend two nights a week. She has another gentleman with whom she spends two other nights. She likes to have her Sundays to herself and she’s looking for someone who’ll take the two nights she has free. I’ve told her about you. She likes writers. I’d like to see her nicely fixed up and I thought it would be a good plan if you took the two nights that she has vacant.’

The suggestion startled me.

‘It sounds rather cold-blooded to me,’ I said.

‘She’s not an ignorant woman, you know,’ Arnold insisted. ‘Not by any manner of means. She reads a great deal, Madame de Sévigné and all that, and she can talk very intelligently.’

But even that didn’t tempt me.

Arnold was good company, and I always enjoyed spending an evening with him, but I didn’t very much like him. He was cocksure and bumptious, and he was rather common. I don’t say this depreciatingly, but as I might say that someone was short and fat. I left Paris after a year and so lost touch with him. He wrote one or two books which I did not read. The Stage Society produced a play of his which I liked. I wrote and told him so and he wrote to thank me and in the course of his letter laid out the critics who had not thought so well of the play as I had. I can’t remember whether it was before or after this that *The Old Wives’ Tale* was published. I began reading it with misgiving, but this quickly changed to astonish­ment. I had never supposed that Arnold could write anything so good. I was deeply impressed. I thought it a great book. I have read many appreciations of it, and I think everything has been said but one thing, which is that it is eminently readable. I should not mention a merit that is so obvious except that many great books do not possess it. It is the novelist’s most precious gift, and it is one that Arnold had even in his slightest and most trivial pieces. I have of late read *The Old Wives' Tale* again. Though written in rather a drab style, with an occasional use of ‘literatese’ which gives you a jolt, and without elegance, it is still extremely readable. The characters ring true: they are not intrinsically interesting, it was not to Arnold’s purpose to make them brilliant, and it is a mark of his skill that notwithstanding you follow their fortunes with interest and sympathy. Their motives are plausible and they behave as from what you know of them you would expect them to behave. The incidents are completely probable: Sophia is in Paris during the siege and the Commune; an author less determined to avoid the sensational would have looked upon it as an opportunity, by describing scenes of terror, anguish and bloodshed, to give his narrative a lift. Not Arnold. Sophia goes about her business unperturbed; she looks after her lodgers, buys and hoards food, makes money when she can, and in fact conducts herself precisely as of course the great mass of the people did.

*The Old Wives’ Tale* was slow to make its way. I think I am right in saying that it was received favour­ably, but not with frantic eulogy, and that its circula­tion was inconsiderable. For a time it looked as though it would have no more than the sort of *succès d’estime* that *Maurice Guest* had and be forgotten as all but one novel out of a thousand is forgotten. By a happy chance, however, it was brought to the attention of George Doran, an American publisher, and he bought sheets; he then acquired the American rights, set it up and launched it on its triumphal course. It was not until after its great success in America that it was taken over by another publisher in England and won favour with the British public.

For many years, what with one thing and another, I do not think I met Arnold, or if I did it was only at a party, literary or otherwise, at which I had the opportunity to say no more than a few words to him; but after the First World War and until his death I saw him frequently. By this time he had become a ‘character’. He was very different from the thin, rather insignificant man that I had known in Paris. He had grown stout. His hair, very grey, was worn long and he had cultivated the amusing cock’s comb that the caricaturists made famous. He walked with an arrogant strut, his back arched and his head thrown back. He had always been neat in his dress, discon­certingly even, but now he was grand. He wore a fob and frilled shirts in the evening and took an immense pride in his white waistcoats. At one time he had a yacht and he dressed the part of the owner in style. Yachting cap, blue coat with brass buttons, white trousers: no actor playing the rôle in a musical comedy could have arrayed himself more perfectly in character. In one of his diaries he has related the story of a picnic I took him on while he was staying with me in the South of France. I had a motor-boat then and after picking up the rest of my guests in Cannes we went over to the Isle Sainte Marguerite to bathe, eat *bouillabaisse* and gossip. The women wore pyjamas and the men tennis shirts, ducks and espadrilles, but Arnold, refusing to permit himself such *sans gène,* was dressed in a check suit of a sort of mustard colour, fancy socks and fancy shoes, a striped shirt, a starched collar and a foulard tie. After lunch a violent mistral sprang up which prevented us from leaving the island. Some of the persons present took the prospect without amenity of being marooned for an indefinite period and when twelve hours later the sea had sufficiently calmed down to allow us to risk the crossing more than one of them faced the slight danger we were in with a good deal of anxiety. Arnold throughout remained dignified, self-possessed, good-tempered and interested. When at six in the morning, bedraggled and unshaven, we at last got home, he, in his smart shirt and neat suit, looked as dapper and well-groomed as he had looked eighteen hours before.

But it was not only in appearance that Arnold differed from the man I had known before. Life had changed him. I think it possible that when I first knew him he was hampered by a certain diffidence and his bumptiousness was assumed to conceal it. Success had given him confidence. It had certainly mellowed him. He had acquired a proper assurance of his own merit. He told me once that there were only two novels written during the first twenty years of the century that he was confident would survive and one of them was *The Old Wives’ Tale.* It may be that he was right. That depends on the whirligig of taste. Realism is a fashion that comes and goes. When readers ask their novels to give them fantasy, romance, excitement, suspense, surprise, they will find Arnold’s masterpiece pedestrian and rather dull. When the pendulum swings back and they want homely truth, verisimilitude, good sense and sympathetic delineation of character they will find it in *The Old Wives’ Tale.*

I have said before that Arnold was a lovable man. His very oddities were endearing. Indeed it was to them that the great affection in which he was held was largely owing, for people laughed at foibles in him of which they believed themselves exempt and thus mitigated the oppression which his talent must other­wise have made them feel. They liked him all the better for the absurdities which gave them a comfort­able sense of superiority. He was never what in England is technically known as a gentleman, but he was never vulgar any more than the traffic surging up Ludgate Hill is vulgar. He was devoid of envy. He was generous. He was courageous. He always said with perfect frankness what he thought and because it never struck him that he could offend he seldom did; but if, with his quick sensitiveness, he imagined that he had hurt somebody’s feelings, he did everything in reason to salve the wound. But only in reason. If the affronted person continued to bear a grudge he dis­missed him with a shrug of the shoulders and a ‘silly ass’. He retained to the end an engaging naivety. He was convinced that there were two things he knew all about—money and women. His friends were unanimous in agreeing that this was an illusion. It got him now and then into trouble. With all his common sense, and he had more common sense than most of us, he made the mistake to which many novelists are prone, of ordering his life after the pattern of one of the novels he might very well have written. In a work of fiction the author can pull the strings and with sufficient skill on the whole get his characters to act as he wants them to. In real life people are more difficult to cope with.

I was surprised to see how patronising in general were the obituary notices written at Arnold’s death. A good deal of fun was made of his obsession with grandeur and luxury, and the pleasure he took in *trains de luxe* and first-class hotels. He never grew quite accustomed to the appurtenances of wealth. Once he said to me: ‘If you’ve ever really been poor you remain poor at heart all your life. I’ve often walked,’ he added, ‘when I could very well afford to take a taxi because I simply couldn’t bring myself to waste the shilling it would cost.’ He admired and disapproved of extravagance.

The criticism to which he devoted much time during his later years came in for a good deal of adverse comment. He loved his position on the *Evening Standard.* He liked the power it gave him and enjoyed the interest his articles aroused. The immediate response, like the applause an actor receives after an effective scene, gratified his appetite for actuality. It gave him the illusion, peculiarly pleasant to the author whose avocation necessarily entails a sense of apart­ness, that he was in the midst of things. Whatever he thought, he said without fear or favour. He had no patience with the precious, the affected or the pompous. If he thought little of writers who are now more praised than read it is not certain that he thought wrongly. He was more interested in life than in art. In criticism he was an amateur. The professional critic is probably somewhat shy of life, for otherwise it is unlikely that he will devote himself to the reading and judging of books rather than to the stress and turmoil of living. He is more at ease with it when the sweat has dried and the acrid odour of humanity has ceased to offend the nostrils. He can be sympathetic enough to the realism of Defoe and the tumultuous vitality of Balzac, but when it comes to the productions of lus own day he feels more comfortable with works in which a deliberately literary attitude has softened the asperities of reality.

That is why, I suppose, the praise that was accorded to Arnold for *The Old Wives’ Tale* after his death was cooler than one would have expected. Some of the critics said that notwithstanding everything he had a sense of beauty, and they quoted passages to show his poetic power and his feeling for the mystery of existence. I do not see the point of making out that he had some­thing of what you would have liked him to have a great deal more of and ignoring that in which his power and value lay. He was neither mystic nor poet. He was interested in material things and in the humours of common men in general and he described life, as every writer does, in the terms of his own temperament.

Arnold was afflicted with a very bad stammer; it was painful to watch the struggle he sometimes had to get the words out. It was torture to him. Few realised the exhaustion it caused him to speak. What to most men is as easy as breathing was to him a constant strain. It tore his nerves to pieces. Few knew the humiliations it exposed him to, the ridicule it excited in many, the impatience it aroused, the awkwardness of feeling that it made people find him tiresome, the minor exaspera­tion of thinking of a good, amusing or apt remark and not venturing to say it in case the stammer ruined it. Few knew the distressing sense it gave rise to of a bar to complete contact with other men. It may be that except for the stammer which forced him to introspec­tion Arnold would never have become a writer. But I think it is no small proof of his strong and sane character that notwithstanding this impediment he was able to retain his splendid balance and regard the normal life of man from a normal point of view.

*The Old Wives’ Tale* is certainly the best book he wrote. He never lost the desire to write another as good and because it was written by an effort of will he thought he could repeat it. He tried in *Clayhanger,* and for a time it looked as though he might succeed. I think he failed only because his material fizzled out. After *The Old Wives’ Tale* he had not enough left to complete the vast structure he had designed. No writer can get more than a certain amount of orc out of one seam; when he has got that, though it remains, miraculously, as rich as before, it is only others who can profitably work it. Arnold tried again in *Lord Raingo,* and he tried for the last time in *Imperial Palace.* In this I think the subject was at fault. Because it profoundly interested him he thought it was of universal interest. He gathered his data systematically, but they were jotted down in note-books and not garnered (as were those of *The Old Wives’ Tale)* unconsciously, and preserved, not in black and white, but as old memories in his bones, in his nerves, in his heart. But that Arnold should have spent the last of his energy and determination on the description of an hotel seems to me to have symbolic significance. For I feel that he was never quite at home in the world. It was to him perhaps a sumptuous hotel, with marble bathrooms and a perfect cuisine, in which he was a transient guest. I feel that he was, here among men, impressed, delighted, but a little afraid of doing the wrong thing and never entirely at his ease. Just as his little apart­ment in the rue de Calais years before had suggested to me a part played carefully, but from the outside, I feel that to him life was a rôle that he played con­scientiously, and with ability, but into the skin of which he never quite got.

I remember that once, beating his knee with his clenched fist to force the words from his writhing lips, he said: T am a nice man.’ He was.

VI

I mentioned early in this essay that I was introduced to Henry James by Elizabeth Russell. I knew her slightly over a number of years, but when she built herself a house near Mougins, which is an easy hour’s drive from my own, I saw her fairly often, and so came to know her much better. She made her reputation with three books, starting with *Elizabeth and Her German Garden,* when she was still Countess von Arnim, but later on wrote a number of novels in a style in which the English have never had much success. This is the light, amusing novel which is not an outrage to the intelligence. I think the English are apt to be suspicious of books that arc so entertaining and so easy to read. Farce they wallow in, but high comedy causes them a vague discomfort. Perhaps it makes them feel that the author is poking fun at them. And it is true that Elizabeth was inclined to be flippant about matters that we are more inclined to take seriously. She was a little, rather plump woman, not pretty, but with a pleasant, open, frank face, which was a very fallacious indication of her character. In one of his aphorisms Pearsall Smith said: ‘Hearts that are delicate and kind and tongues that are neither—these make the finest company in the world.’ I do not know whether Elizabeth’s heart, except where dogs were concerned, was delicate and kind, but her tongue was neither and she was very good company. She regarded her fellow­creatures with a robust common sense which some thought verged on the cynical. It was typical of her that over her writing-room she should have affixed the quotation: ‘Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away.’ She had a low voice and an innocent manner which added to the effect of the devastating things she said. She could be very malicious. I remember one occasion when I asked her to lunch because H. G., a very old friend of hers, was staying with me. He had recently published his autobiography and in the course of conversation he mentioned that he had gone down to see again the house, Up Park, where in his boyhood he had spent his holidays. His mother had been lady’s maid to the owner and much later had returned as housekeeper. From time to time H. G. spent considerable periods there and as was natural enough lived, as the phrase goes, ‘below stairs’.

‘And this time, H. G.,’ asked Elizabeth with her most ingenuous air, ‘did you go in by the front door?’

It was said of course to embarrass him and for a moment succeeded. He flushed a little, grinned and did not answer. Afterwards another of my guests asked Elizabeth why she had put that awkward question to him. She opened her eyes wide and with a wonderful assumption of innocence answered: ‘I wanted to know.’

I asked Elizabeth once whether the story I had often heard was true that when her husband was very ill she read to him as he lay in bed the book in which she had drawn a caustic portrait of him. When she reached the last page, so the story ran, shattered by what he had been made to listen to, he turned his face to the wall and died. She looked at me blandly and said:

‘He was very ill. He would have died in any case.’

Elizabeth lived to a ripe old age and retained to the end the complacent air of a woman who knows she is attractive to men. Before I leave her I will recount a story she told which is not only characteristic, but so diverting that I think it would be a pity if it were forgotten. I don’t know whether she told it to anybody else. She was living with her second husband, Lord Russell, on Telegraph Hill. When she went into the kitchen one morning she found the cook gasping; she asked what was the matter, and the cook told her that she had just cut off the head of the chicken they were to have for dinner that night, and then the headless chicken had laid an egg.

‘Show it me,’ said Elizabeth.

She looked at it pensively for a moment and then said:

‘Give it to his lordship for breakfast tomorrow.’

Next morning, sitting at table opposite her husband, she watched him as he ate the boiled egg. When he had finished she asked him:

‘Did you notice anything funny about that egg, Frank?’

‘No,’ he answered. ‘Was there anything peculiar about it?’

‘No, nothing,’ she said, ‘except that it was laid by a dead hen.’

He gave her a startled look, sprang to the window and vomited. With a demure smile she added to me:

‘And d’you know, I don’t believe he ever really loved me after that.’

I will end th;s essay with an account of my one and only meeting with Mrs. Wharton. She was then a well- known and highly esteemed novelist. Her short stories are ingenious and well-contrived, and in *Ethan Frame* she wrote a remarkably able novel about the country folk of New England; but her main interests lay with the rich and fashionable people who lived on Fifth Avenue and had sumptuous palaces at Newport. She described a phase of American civilisation which has long since passed away, and the manners and customs of her characters, their attitude towards the problems and difficulties that confront them, are so different from those of today that we can only believe what she tells us because we know that she wrote of what she knew. Her novels have now the same sort of charm that time gives to certain pictures regardless of their artistic merit. The crinolines, the bustles that women wore, as fashion changed made them absurd, but today, with the passing of the years, they have become ‘costume’ and give us an amused delight. Mrs. Wharton’s style was easy, pleasant and not undistinguished. She deserves a place, even though but a minor one, in American literature.

Mrs. Wharton lived in Paris, but sometimes came to England, chiefly, I think, to see Henry James, who was an intimate and revered friend; and on these visits she spent a few days in London. On one of these occasions Lady St. Helier asked her to lunch and asked me too. She had a large house in Portland Place and she enter­tained a great deal. People were inclined to laugh at her because she was something of a lion-hunter, but they accepted her invitations with alacrity since they were pretty sure to find themselves in company with persons who were cither eminent, amusing or notorious. When a certain man was being tried for what looked like a peculiarly callous murder and his birth and antecedents made the case the talk of high society one bright young spark asked another if he knew the accused. ‘No,’ he answered, ‘but if he isn’t hanged I shall certainly meet him at Lady St. Helier’s next week.’ The party to which I was bidden was choice and rather select, and because besides Mrs. Wharton I was the only author present, when lunch was over my hostess took me up to her so that we could have a chat. She was seated in the middle of a small French sofa in such a way as to give it the appearance of a throne, and since she gave no indication that she wished to share it with me I took a chair and sat down in front of her. She was a smallish woman, with fine eyes, regular features and a pale clear skin drawn radier tightly over the bones of her face. She was dressed with the sober magnificence suitable to a woman of birth, of wealth and of letters. She made the other ladies there, all of exalted rank, look dowdy and provincial. She talked and I listened. She talked very well. She talked for twenty minutes. In that time, with a light touch and well-chosen words, she traversed the fields of painting, music and literature. Nothing she said was commonplace, everything she said was just. She said exactly the right things about Maurice Barrès, Andre Gide and Paul Valéry; it was impossible not to concur with her admirable remarks upon Debussy and Stravinsky; and of course what she had to say about Rodin and Maioll, about Cézanne, Degas and Renoir was just what one would have wished her to say. I have never met anyone whose perceptions were so sensitive, whose opinions so sound and whose artistic sentiments so exemplary.

Though my literary friends do not, I am sorry to say, look upon me as a member of the intelligentsia, I very much enjoy the conversation of cultured persons and I think (perhaps mistakenly) that I can adequately hold my own with them. Indeed sometimes I gently lead them down the garden path of mysticism and when I talk to them of Denis the Areopagite and Fray Luis de Leon, throwing in Samkaracharia for good measure, I often have them gasping for breath like speckled trout on a river bank. But Mrs. Wharton got me down. Most people have a blind spot; many suffer from vagaries of taste. I was once sitting at the opera behind a distinguished and talented woman. The opera was *Tristan and Isolde.* At the end of the second act she gathered her ermine cloak around her shoulders and, turning to her companion, said: ‘Let’s go. There’s not enough action in this play.’ Of course she was right, but perhaps that wasn’t quite the point. There are persons of intelligence and susceptibility who prefer Verdi to Wagner, Charlotte Brontë to Jane Austen and cold mutton to cold grouse. Mrs. Wharton was devoid of frailty. Her taste was faultless. She admired only what was admirable. But such is the frowardness of human nature (of mine at all events), in the end I began to grow a trifle restive. It would have been a comfort to me if I could have found a chink in the shining armour of her impeccable refinement, if she had unaccountably expressed a sneaking tenderness for something that was downright vulgar; if, for instance, she had admitted to a secret passion for Marie Lloyd, or, though it had not yet burst on an enraptured world, had confided in me that she went to the Victoria Palace every night to hear *The Lambeth Walk.* But no. She said nothing but the right thing about the right person. The worst of it was that I could not but agree with everything she said. I could not bring myself to affirm that I thought Maioll boring and André Gide silly. She said about everyone that she so lightly touched upon, for there was nothing pedantic in her discourse, precisely what I thought myself and what every right-minded person should think. I cannot imagine anything more exasperating.

At last I said to her: ‘And what do you think of Edgar Wallace?’

‘Who is Edgar Wallace?’ she replied.

‘Do you never read thrillers?’ I asked.

‘No.’

Never has a monosyllable contained more frigid dis­pleasure, more shocked disapproval nor more wounded surprise. I will not say she blenched, for she was a woman of the world and she knew instinctively how to deal with a solecism, but her eyes wandered away and a little forced smile slightly curled her lips. The moment was embarrassing for both of us. Her manner was that of a woman to whom a man has made proposals offensive to her modesty, but which her good breeding tells her it will be more dignified to ignore than to make a scene about.

‘I’m afraid it’s getting very late,’ said Mrs. Wharton.

I knew that my audience was at an end. I never saw her again. She was an admirable creature, but not my cup of tea.