TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM A NOTEBOOK

by Vincent Starrett

AN excessively hot morning in the month of July. The place Chicago, and the year 1909. I was a young and ambitious journalist in those days, a writer of "features" for an afternoon newspaper; and I had been dispatched to a local hotel to cover a meeting of the International Council of Women.

"Mrs. Grannis," I said to the first delegate I met, a dear old lady with a lively tongue and no atom of humor in all her fragile little body, "I have heard it said that the Roman Catholics are a bit reticent in this matter of suffrage for women. Can you say whether that is so, and if it *is* so, why?"

I am afraid I was seeking a sensation.

She nodded sagaciously: Mrs. Elizabeth B. Grannis of New York. Good soul! She was then eighty-three years of age, and it is reasonable to suppose that she is no longer living. Her eyes lighted. She bent toward me, that none other might catch her reply. Her answer came in a sinister whisper.

"The Vatican," she breathed fiercely, "the Vatican is behind it all!"

Leaning still nearer, in the deepest of confidential murmurs she added: "The Vatican, you know, is *terribly* Roman Catholic!"

Quaint little old lady! The accuracy of that final assertion is, I suppose, beyond challenge. Thanks to Mrs. Grannis, I shall never forget the religion of the Vatican. It is more than eighteen years since our conversation occurred, and it is still the best story I have to tell of a long newspaper experience. I had intended to save it for my Memoirs, but recently I told it to a friend, and he screamed and rolled over on his back. "Oh, really, I *must* tell that to Bob!" he said. So now that it is started I may as well tell it again myself, before it comes back to me as one of Irvin Cobb's favorite stories.

Besides, I have almost ceased to worry about my Memoirs. It is beginning to break over me that they would not be particularly important.

But a good story is a good story wherever it is told, and as I look back over two decades of active journalism it occurs to me that there have been many joyous passages to mark the life as memorable. The fact is, I have been overhauling my notebooks.

Not all that a newspaper man sees and hears gets into print—not immediately, at any rate, and in his own paper. The really good stories are often suppressed, for anywhere from eight to eighty excellent reasons. Nor are the misguided efforts of the young men who procure news, when news there is none, celebrated ordinarily in song or story. One of the jolliest yarns of memory—it was not my pleasure to write it—described the disruption of a theatrical première by an inebriate in the audience, who insisted upon pelting the star with marshmallows. The name later furnished by the intoxicated young man to the police was not strictly his own; and it was good fellowship on the part of Wallace

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Smith, as well as good ethics, to refrain from telling the truth about his drunken confrère of that evening.

From the viewpoint of a reporter, an assignment to interview a visiting celebrity is regarded usually as the cream of a day's possibilities. Not all celebrities are amiable, however. I am reminded by my notebook that Hopkinson Smith and Sir William Watson were most unamiable. So also, in his fashion, was Arnold Bennett. A bored, unhappy person was Mr. Bennett when he reached Chicago in tow of his publisher, Mr. Doran, and one wondered what the newspaper gang in New York had done to him. Quite lacking in distinction he appeared, as he came down the steps in the La Salle Street Station; but his restless eyes were everywhere at once, and there was little that escaped his glance. I watched him as he stooped on the stairs to pick up a cigarette box that someone had tossed away. But it was empty, and he threw it down again without emotion and passed on into the street, into the arms of his implacable foes, the reporters. Nobody, I believe, got much of interest out of him. At the Press Club luncheon in his honor he listened almost sullenly to the sprightly addresses of the speakers. He had stipulated that he must not be asked to talk, and so the addresses were announced, each in its turn, as "the address Mr. Bennett would have delivered, if Mr. Bennett would have delivered an address". Mr. Bennett, however, was not amused.

Yet, away from the reporters, he thawed, and an admirable story is told of his visit to the Cliff Dwellers' eyrie, where he was more at ease. The collecting fraternity had turned out in force, and the bookshops had been stripped of his first editions. After dinner the signing began. Down the long table went volume after volume, with its owner's card in its covers, and in each the novelist inscribed a suitable sentiment. At length his head lifted, and he re-read with interest the name upon a card that had just come down to him for the third time. A wry smile twisted his lips and pushed his eyebrows upward, and he wrote:

"To Karl Edwin Harriman, who is getting to be quite an old friend."

In vivid contrast to Bennett was Gilbert Parker, a handsome and vigorous man, who talked well and fluently on various subjects. He also was given a dinner at the Press Club. I have no idea what Parker said on that occasion; but his encounter with Forrest Crissey was epic. Crissey, an old newspaper man, is possibly Parker's warmest American admirer, and he was overcome by the signal honor of shaking the Canadian's hand and offering him a cigarette. These advances having been received without disfavor, the journalist waxed lyric about *The Weavers,* and in five minutes had quoted from everything Parker had written, shaken the Gilbertian arm into numbness, and—astounding climax—implored the novelist to suggest a name for a recently-acquired terrier, an opportunity which was, I believe, declined.

When Conan Doyle visited Chicago, I was myself, I think, almost as maudlin, save that I had no dog. I wanted to talk of Sherlock Holmes, and Sir Arthur stubbornly insisted upon talking spiritualism. Mr. Chesterton was more amenable, and willingly talked Father Brown until he was dragged away.

Speaking of Sherlock Holmes reminds me of an amusing encounter with William Gillette, always a courteous and affable man to interview. The "immortals" had come to town—the American Academy of Arts and Letters—in a special train, to exhibit themselves to the intelligentsia at Fullerton Hall. The newspaper harps and harpies met the incoming gods at an outlying station and rode into the city on the special. Adventuring through the coaches, I came upon a compartment whose door stood partly open and, peeping inside, recognized the occupant. He was looking dreamily out of the window, at the speeding landscape, in such fashion that his perfect Sherlockian profile seemed etched against the glass.

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I put my head inside. "A penny, Mr. Gillette," I said cleverly; "the proverbial penny!" There was an ironic twinkle in his eye as he turned.

"You would like to know what I was thinking?" he drawled. "I was thinking what a delightful paradox it would be if this train were to roll down the embankment, and all the 'immortals' were to be killed."

And I recall an amusing episode of the occupation of Vera Cruz by the Americans, which I covered for the *Chicago Daily News.* Among the innumerable war correspondents on the scene were Jack London, Oliver Madox Hueffer, the brother of Ford Madox Ford, and Richard Harding Davis. Davis, veteran of many campaigns, was the dean of the party. He was a bit lordly, was Davis, although a splendid fellow. His dignity was often incredible. He was a man of importance in literature and journalism, and he did not forget it. He had been offered a brigadier-generalship at the outbreak of the Spanish war, which he had declined with a great deal of publicity. He was the author of *Soldiers of Fortune,* and he was the personal friend of the commanding officer of our column. He was, in short, Richard Harding Davis.

I think his manner offended Hueffer, the Englishman, but they appeared to get along well enough on the few occasions when they were thrown together. At length Davis and Medill McCormick went to Mexico City, were thrown into jail, had a number of other adventures, and ultimately returned safely to the seaport. We had all been alarmed for their safety, and were glad to see them back. The day after their return, Davis and Hueffer met upon the street. It had been, of course, some weeks since they had seen each other, but it is unbelievable that Davis really had forgotten Hueffer, who advanced, smiling, with outstretched hand.

"Glad to see you back again," said the English correspondent heartily. "Must have had a great time up there!"

"Ha—yes, of course!" replied Davis, gingerly accepting the hand-clasp. "But, by George, old chap, I think I've forgotten you!"

Hueffer's features did not change by the flicker of an eyelash. His smile widened, his hand-grasp tightened.

"That's quite all right, old man," he said affectionately. *"You* may have forgotten *me,* but *I* shall never forget *you—Mr. London!"*

Among the pressmen of my day, in Chicago, were men who are today novelists and poets of wide reputation. Ben Hecht, for instance. My notebooks have many pages devoted to him. Hecht occupied a desk in a sunny corner of the *Daily News* local room and, in addition to his regular duties, wrote reams of ribald verse for the delectation of the rest of the staff. He also began innumerable plays that never went beyond the first surprising acts. How he managed to get his regular assignments written was always a mystery to the rest of us; but somehow he did, and even managed to thump two novels out of his typewriter—neither of which, I believe, has been published.

At times he was seized by fits of temperament and mysticism and, as he usually planned his seizures beforehand, he would come down to the office on temperamental days carrying a sofa pillow of violent design, sometimes yellow, sometimes blue. This he would hurl into his corner and, scorning a chair, brace his back with the colored atrocity while turning out his daily chore of ribald verses. He was always persuaded by the office to write his official assignments upon a typewriter, however, for his handwriting was abominable.

Once he fell under the spell of Ouija, and brought a board into the office. In no time at all half the staff was listening to the revelations of the thing. Some mad projects were formed, and not all of them were abandoned. Once we two tried to locate, by these dubious means, a copy of the rare first edition of Poe's *Tamerlane,* but without success.

There was another occasion when, with Ouija and Kent Sykes, a star rewrite man,

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Hecht endeavored to solve a murder mystery many years old. It was revealed to the wild pair that upon a certain night there would be no moon, and that upon that night the body of a man, murdered years before, would float up out of the lake at Jackson Park. The man's name had been Wilson. All the details were supplied by Mr. Wilson himself, and the night came, as foretold—black and moonless as a night of Acheron or Carcosa. A bit doubting, but nervously eager, the precious pair took up a station at the appointed spot and awaited the body from the deep.

They waited for an hour, without a sign, and were about to leave when Sykes gripped his companion's arm.

"My God, Ben!" he said. "Look at that!"

Then they both looked; and as they looked, something long and black floated in from the lake and bumped against the shore line.

It was a log, of course; but, as the adventurers said, speaking of the incident later, "think of a log actually floating up, at that spot, at that minute!"

Another journalist of the day was Carl Sandburg. It may be, some day, an illuminating commentary on Sandburg if I reveal his shocking habit of destroying the books he reads. I first saw this curious vandalism practiced in an antiquarian bookshop in Clark Street, where we stood together before the open shelves and cursed the literature of our day. Suddenly the poet plucked forth a volume and presented it for inspection.

"I've always intended to read this," he said in his slow, serious voice, "and now here's a copy for thirty-five cents. I can begin it on the train, to-night."

Rapidly flipping over the first fifty or sixty pages of the book, he seized them tightly between his fingers and, with a quick wrench, tore them from the covers. A clerk, standing nearby, almost fainted. My eyes bulged with astonishment.

"That'll be enough for to-night," continued the poet, calmly pocketing the fragment; and turning to the dazed clerk, he added: "Wrap up the rest of this, Brother, and put my name on it. I'll get it later in the week, maybe." He paid for the volume and stalked out.

"It's all right," he said easily, in response to my demand for an explanation. "If I like the beginning, I'll get the rest of it some day. If I don't, I can throw this away and forget it. I've got fragments of books wrapped up, waiting for me all over town, I guess. The dealers get used to it. They get their money, so what do they care?"

None the less I protested. "Do you do that with all your books?" I asked. "Even the fine bindings?"

He answered quite seriously: "Well, I don't think I'd do it with a really fine book; but then, I don't buy fine bindings".

And he didn't, for upon another occasion I saw him purchase from a ten-cent stall the final volume of Bourrienne's *Napoleon*, a ragged, dog-eared derelict, long bereft of its three companions. He looked up and caught my eye, then handed me the purchase. "Who cares to read about the *early* life of Napoleon, anyway?" he asked.

Possibly he is still buying and destroying books for train-reading; I don't know. But admirers of this poet, with a passion for association volumes, might do well to canvass the second-hand bookshops of Chicago for the uncalled-for, forgotten fragments with his name upon the wrappings.

And it is not alone with the celebrities one met, or the celebrities with whom one worked, that amusing memories are associated. Daily, in the streets and parks, in the buses and elevated trains of the city, the reporter whose ears and eyes are wide to the world encounters those singular passages in life that make it worth the living. Every one of him, at the bottom of his heart or his trunk, is a playwright or a novelist. His private notebooks are filled with ill-written, jumbled fragments that are some day, he hopes, to find their place in a great work of realism. It was Balzac, was it not, who col-

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lected his realism by following people in the street and listening to their conversation? The only trouble with this ingenious system of eavesdropping is that the results are likely to be fragmentary and unsatisfying. One catches an intriguing phrase and presses closer; but the crowd heaves and ripples, and the sequel is lost forever. It is a curious fact that more than half the contents of a notebook are doomed to be wasted.

The most extraordinary fragment that ever drifted to me out of Babel came to my ears in the crowded aisle of a department store. A protesting citizen, haggard and three-parts mad, was being propelled through the crush by his wife—the relationship was painfully obvious—apparently toward some remote lunch-room. As he lurched past with the rabble, over his shoulder he flung back a desperate cry: "I ain't going to eat one of them things!"

Ships that pass in the night. Time and again I have tried to guess the object of his aversion; but in all the world of edibles there is nothing that seems quite to merit the combined fury and despair of his utterance.

And once, attracted by a crowd at a street corner, I approached to find two roughs in altercation. I stood about for a few moments, but it was pretty tame. Then, as I was preparing to depart, one said belligerently to the other: "Why, you little bum, I'll—I'll—!" He told the other what he would do to him.

It was an appalling threat, and a magnificent imagination—of a kind—must have suggested it. I stopped again, fascinated. I had never seen the thing done, and I did not believe it *could* be done. It developed that I was quite right. It was the merest bluff. The whole affair was one of dialogue only. Yet I shall always remember that terrific threat, and sometime, perhaps, in an obscene nightmare, I shall behold it consummated.

Finally, there is the story told me by Ray Henderson. He was standing on a street corner in Chicago—at Wabash Avenue and Congress Street, to be exact—doing nothing in particular, when a seedy woman in rusty black, who had been eyeing him for some time in silence, pushed forward and thrust a card into his hand. He looked at it in surprise, then back at the woman; but she had turned sharply and was walking rapidly away toward State Street. The card carried an inscription in red characters about an inch high: "Get Right With God!"

Then, while the excellent Raymond was registering bewilderment, and some resentment, a high-powered car spun up to the curb beside which he stood, stopped with a grinding of brakes, and the loveliest young woman he had ever seen leaned toward him and sharply asked: "What did that woman give you?"

The admirable Ray Henderson, still registering stupefaction, handed her the card. She glanced at it, said "Oh!" in such fashion as to leave him guessing at her emotion, and took off after the woman in black at top speed. The woman in black, however, had disappeared, and in a few minutes the car too had vanished.

That is all there is to the story, but it is a perfect opening for a Stevensonian tale of "The Dynamiter" sort—for a modern Arabian Night in Soho or Clark Street. I once built a short story around the episode, and finished it to my own satisfaction, but in all probability I was a hundred miles wide of the truth.

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CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

In a recent issue of the *London Mercury* the author of the Editorial Notes department, presumably the editor, Mr. J. C. Squire, wrote as follows: "We wish somebody could drive it into the heads of the more excitable American journalists that there is no longer (however things may have been in the past) any touch of patronage in the English attitude toward American literature". He went on to refer to a review in THE BOOKMAN written by Mr. Gorham B. Munson in which Mr. Munson complained of a patronizing English attitude toward American letters.

We do not wish to enter a blanket defense of Mr. Munson's whole article—in fact his irritation at English writers on that occasion led him to a counter-attack which we think justified Mr. Squire in deploring "this tendency to think that any useful purpose can be served by critics on the two sides of the Atlantic bandying wholesale charges against the literature produced on the other side". Nevertheless on the central issue we think that Mr. Squire is sadly in the wrong; the occasion seems an appropriate one to pursue the subject a little.

This is Mr. Squire's statement of the case:

We daresay that Mr. Munson might be able to quote from the ass, or asses, here who have been silly or offensive about American literature. There are plenty of asses here as in other countries, and a good many of them write for the papers. If they did not, a large portion of the public would find that its demands were not catered for. But even if such foolish critics can be found, why not attack them for their folly? Why, because A has misbehaved himself, should B be bludgeoned on the head, being perfectly innocent? We not only assert, but we know, that every respectable practising critic of our acquaintance is as interested in contemporary American literature as he is in English, does not say to himself when reading, "This is an American book," or "This is an English book," and judges both with an equal detachment and an equal desire to praise anything he finds to be good, and to condemn anything he thinks bad. So far as novels are concerned, we can go further. We frequently meet discriminating people who do not read many novels and who say that at the moment they read more American novels than English. If the complainant had read recent English reviews of such books as Mr. Lewis's *Dodsworth* and Miss Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop,* he could hardly have sustained his charge against the critics; if he knew how these works were discussed in thousands of intelligent English households, he might change his opinion about the attitude of our public. . . . We should not have said anything about this outburst had it not been for the fact that it is of a type that recurs. Very likely this sort of thing is usually said by somebody who does not know this country, and who has formed some exaggerated and universalised picture of the rigid and supercilious Englishman of legend. The self-consciousness of a young, eager and ambitious nation does the rest. Whatever the explanation, we think that English commentators might, when an occasion like this arises, take some little pains to dispel these illusions.

In this laudable effort to dispel illusions, silence asses, and drive sense into the heads of excitable American journalists Mr. Squire has, as we see it, fallen into a series of confusions the elucidation of which may help to achieve the amity at which he blunderingly aims. One is a mere matter of fact: whether there is any longer a touch of patronage in the English attitude toward American literature. In saying no Mr. Squire is simply mis-

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