



Jerome K. Jerome

Novel Notes



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PROLOGUE

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

The house had many advantages, so my father would explain to friends who expressed surprise at his choosing such a residence, and among these was included in my own small morbid mind the circumstance that its back windows commanded an uninterrupted view of an ancient and much-peopled churchyard. Often of a night would I steal from between the sheets, and climbing upon the high oak chest that stood before my bedroom window, sit peering down fearfully upon the aged grey tombstones far below, wondering whether the shadows that crept among them

might not be ghosts—soiled ghosts that had lost their natural whiteness by long exposure to the city’s smoke, and had grown dingy, like the snow that sometimes lay there.

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

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

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

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

My mother said nothing, but took me up in her arms, and carried me back to bed; and then, sitting down beside me, and holding my hand in hers—there was not so very much difference in the size—began to sing in that low, caressing voice of hers that always made me feel, for the time being, that I wanted to be a good boy, a song she often used to sing to me, and that I have never heard anyone else sing since, and should not care to.

However, while she sang, something fell on my hand that caused me to sit up and insist on examining her eyes. She laughed; rather a strange, broken little laugh, I thought,

and said it was nothing, and told me to lie still and go to sleep. So, I wriggled down again and shut my eyes tight, but I could not understand what had made her cry.

Poor little mother, she had a notion, founded evidently upon inborn belief rather than upon observation, that all children were angels, and that, in consequence, an altogether exceptional demand existed for them in a certain other place, where there are more openings for angels, rendering their retention in this world difficult and undependable. My talk about ghosts must have made that foolishly fond heart ache with a vague dread that night and for many a night onward, I fear.

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

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

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

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

But the memory of that dingy graveyard, and of the shadows that dwelt therein, came back to me very

vividly the other day, for it seemed to me as though I were a ghost myself, gliding through the silent streets where once I had passed swiftly, full of life.

Diving into a long unopened drawer, I had, by chance, drawn forth a dusty volume of manuscript, labelled upon its torn brown paper cover, *NOVEL NOTES*. The scent of dead days clung to its dogs'-eared pages; and, as it lay open before me, my memory wandered back to the summer evenings—not so very long ago, perhaps, if one but adds up the years, but a long, long while ago if one measures Time by feeling—when four friends had sat together making it, who would never sit together any more. With each crumpled leaf I turned, the uncomfortable conviction that I was only a ghost grew stronger. The handwriting was my own, but the words were the words of a stranger, so that as I read I wondered to myself, saying, “Did I ever think this? Did I really hope that? Did I plan to do this? Did I resolve to be such? Does life, then, look so to the eyes of a young man?”—not knowing whether to smile or sigh.

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

That I have a right to do so I have fully satisfied my own conscience, an exceptionally fussy one. Of the four joint authors, he whom I call “MacShaughnassy” has laid aside his title to all things beyond six feet of sun-scorched ground in the African veldt; while from him I have designated “Brown” I have borrowed but little, and that little I may fairly claim to have made my own by reason of

the artistic merit, with which I have embellished it. Indeed, in thus taking a few of his bald ideas and shaping them into readable form, am I not doing him a kindness, and thereby returning good for evil? For has he not, slipping from the high ambition of his youth, sunk ever downward step by step, until he has become a critic, and, therefore, my natural enemy? Does he not, in the columns of a certain journal of large pretension but small circulation, call me "Arry" (without an "H," the satirical rogue), and is not his contempt for the English-speaking people based chiefly upon the fact that some of them read my books? But in the days of Bloomsbury lodgings and first-night pits we thought each other clever.

From "Jephson" I hold a letter, dated from a station deep in the heart of the Queensland bush.

"Do what you like with it, dear boy," the letter runs, "so long as you keep me out of it. Thanks for your complimentary regrets, but I cannot share them. I was never fitted for a literary career. Lucky for me, I found it out in time. Some poor devils don't. (I'm not getting at you, old man. We read all your stuff, and like it very much. Time hangs a bit heavy, you know, here, in the winter, and we are glad of almost anything.) This life suits me better. I love to feel my horse between my thighs, and the sun upon my skin. And there are the youngsters growing up about us, and the hands to look after, and the stock. I daresay it seems a very commonplace unintellectual life to you, but it satisfies my nature more than the writing of books could ever do. Besides, there are too many authors as it is. The world is so busy reading and writing, it has no time left for thinking. You'll tell me, of

course, that books are thought, but that is only the jargon of the Press. You come out here, old man, and sit as I do sometimes for days and nights together alone with the dumb cattle on an upheaved island of earth, as it were, jutting out into the deep sky, and you will know that they are not. What a man thinks—really thinks—goes down into him and grows in silence. What a man writes in books are the thoughts that he wishes to be thought to think.”

Poor Jephson! He promised so well at one time. However, he always had strange notions.

CHAPTER I

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

When, however, I told her that my friend Jephson was going to collaborate with me, she remarked, "Oh," in a doubtful tone; and when I further went on to explain to her that Selkirk Brown and Derrick MacShaughnassy were also going to assist, she replied, "Oh," in a tone, which contained no trace of doubtfulness whatever, and from which it was clear that her interest in the matter, as a practical scheme, had entirely evaporated.

I fancy that the fact of my three collaborators being all bachelors diminished somewhat our chances of success, in Ethelbertha's mind. Against bachelors, as a class, she entertains a strong prejudice. A man's not having sense

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