

# *Odd Fish*

*Stacy Fumonier*  
*and*  
*George Belcher*

UC-NRLF



8 4 512 665

ODD FISH

Library of



Princeton University.

From the Fund  
given by  
Charles Scribner '75





ODD FISH

*BY MAX BEERBOHM*

**A SURVEY.** Containing Fifty-nine cartoons in black and white and a coloured frontispiece. Crown 4to. Price 25s. net.

**ROSSETTI AND HIS CIRCLE.** Containing Twenty-three cartoons in colour. Crown 4to. Price 25s. net.

---

LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN, LTD.

# ODD FISH

*Being a casual selection of  
London Residents  
Described & drawn by*

**STACY AUMONIER  
&  
GEORGE BELCHER**

*First Edition*

*Published by W<sup>m</sup> Heinemann Ltd., -21, Bedford St., Strand.*



*First published 1923.*

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN.

## CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	11
MR. J. K. SHORE . . . . .	17
IDA ST. ALBANS . . . . .	24
DARCY DE LA TOUCHE . . . . .	26
SIR ALFRED CLAPPE . . . . .	32
LILY BATES . . . . .	38
JOHN CHORTLEBAND . . . . .	41
MRS. BRISKETT . . . . .	43
THE DUKE OF EAST ANGLIA . . . . .	48
WILBUR G. KELMER . . . . .	55
P.C. 4463K . . . . .	58
COMMANDER SINCLAIR SOUTHBOUND, R.N. . . . .	64
"UNCLE JAMES" . . . . .	68
GEORGE BELCHER . . . . .	74

12-19-57. Sinclair.  
 (RECAP)  
 3611  
 .98  
 367



TO  
BROTHER SAVAGES  
AND  
GUESTS

Copied from one of the old address books

Wm W

NOTE.

The following are the names & addresses of the London residents, described or drawn in this Volume. (The entries cannot always be taken as accurate)

J. K. ~~Smith~~ <sup>Shane</sup>

7 a Millway Passage  
Naids Hill. W.

5/26  
20/3  
1/10

111 ~~London Rd~~ <sup>111</sup> S. Albans <sup>garden</sup>  
131 St Maggie Square

3! John Wood. W.U

Miss Daisy de la Touche

~~London Rd~~ <sup>London Rd</sup>  
Brompton Suburb  
(C) ~~London Rd~~ <sup>London Rd</sup>

45 Shepherd's Avenue  
Clapham Common garden

same as above address not known

Sir Alfred Clappre

City of London

9 Byam Court Westminster.

also Broad Street

Lily Lilly Bates

c/o Mrs Postling

92 Bolting St  
Bromley W.C

London Rd

London Rd

John Christchurch (Ed:)

3 Pine St  
Mayfair.

1/17/10  
1/17/10  
1/17/10

W.C.

~~Mr. Bra'srett~~  
Mr. Bra'srett.  
(address unknown)

~~Mr. Bra'srett~~ dead.

The Duke of East Angles  
East Angles Area  
Hyde Park

Wilbur B Kelner  
"Studios"  
Chelsea Embankment. SW

P.C. 4461 S  
118 Grosvenor St  
Park



~~Commander Southbound RN~~  
with 118 Grosvenor St  
head of hair

Commander Southbound RN  
United for  
unarmed source club  
Piccadilly.



118  
118  
118  
118  
118  
118  
118  
118

Wade James (Polton)  
"The Geronimos"  
fourth side  
Huehuan Coman



# ODD FISH

## INTRODUCTION

**I**T is quite evident that as the years progress the work of the historian will become simpler. Not that the social problems are becoming less complex; on the contrary they are becoming more involved, but the machinery for recording their ebb and flow, their effect upon character, their repercussion upon the individual, will work more smoothly, truthfully, and rapidly. Even poor Mr. Lloyd George cannot go out of his front door, or make a fozzle on the ninth green, without being snapshotted, sketched, and probably filmed. Practically every word he utters is taken down in shorthand, printed, broadcasted, and analysed. The tones of his voice are imprisoned in a thousand gramophone boxes. His tastes, predilections, size of hat, passions, prejudices, even the time and quality of his smiles and meals are all recorded and verified. In twenty years' time it would be useless for him to say: "I was not that kind of man." Civilization has got him taped, as it has every other public character. What would we not give for this knowledge of Burke, Plato, or Leonardo da Vinci? Fancy if we could hear Leonardo's voice after all these centuries, and actually see the Master walking the streets of Florence, with the plans of its defence under his arm! What kind of smile had Leonardo? Wouldn't it be great to see Lincoln walk, and hear John Bright speak! The farther back



## ODD FISH

we go the more blurry become our historical records. The teachings of Jesus Christ are a kind of rumour.

We are now reaching the stage when history as a science is emerging from the myth. In this respect the cinema—much as you may dislike it—is playing an important part. Every event is being filmed, stowed away, and card-indexed. The prospect has an appalling side. One visualizes the day coming when not only royal weddings and football matches are relentlessly recorded, but there are State machines always at work day and night, a diabolical combination of cinema and dictaphone, so that any moment someone may tap you on the shoulder and say: "Aha, my lad! What were you doing at 10.37 last Friday night? You come along with me."

And then the awful individual may lead you to the Historical Records Office, Block 17, into Department 476b, and he will look up Folio 97477, Section MX $\frac{3}{4}$ , and he will produce a roll and scroll, and you will hear your own voice saying exactly what you said to the girl, or you will see the wretched victim that you murdered choking in your own hands. Witnesses will not be necessary. This is the unpleasant side of the picture, a side so flagrantly tampering with the liberty of the subject that even the onslaughts of the prohibitionists pale before it. When the liberty of the subject only concerns the liberty to do *good*, it ceases to be liberty.

These reflections upon the potentialities of the cinema occur to us because a short time ago we saw a film produced by an eminent film magnate, called "Through Three Reigns." It included the very first films ever done. We beheld actual incidents, taken on the spot, from the reigns of Queen Victoria, King Edward, and King George. As such it was interesting

## INTRODUCTION

and valuable. But what impressed us, after watching the film for an hour and a half, was—how valuable, and equally historical, it would have been to have had recorded the lives, actions, and behaviour of the common people sixty or seventy years ago! There were a few such incidents as women riding high bicycles, and people getting out of the train going to Henley regatta. But these incidents were like oases in a desert of fustian formality. One got fed up with Lifeguards trotting up Whitehall, and distinguished generals stepping slowly to the beat of Chopin's Funeral March. It was a redundant nuisance. The same people seemed to look sad at the same funerals and happy at the same weddings. Well, people usually do. It didn't help us at all. What was interesting was that there was present an eminent historian, no less a celebrity than Mr. Hilaire Belloc. And he made a speech. He pointed out how valuable the cinema was going to be to the historian and to the teacher. He roughly promulgated a scheme for reconstructing history so that young people should be able to visualize it exactly. . . .

At this point he appeared to us to go off the deep end. He was not optimistic about the scheme, because he said he was afraid it would never be done properly. He said : " You see, the trouble is, people love excitement. If you were to reproduce, say, the battle of Agincourt, they wouldn't care whether the uniforms and accoutrements were correct, so long as there was an exciting fight! "

Now, with all respect to so distinguished an authority, we submit that this is the point of view of a schoolmaster and not of an artist. In the first place, the chief fault of the cinema—in its present stage—is that it doesn't give the imagination a chance. Everything is presented to you with photographic

## ODD FISH

realism from a distance, then, in case you are wall-eyed, you are shown the villain's hand, about twenty feet square, slipping the jewel out of the casket. This kind of thing does not help children to visualize. It makes them mentally lazy.

In the second place, with regard to history, how would a presentation of the battle of Agincourt, with all its buttons, properties, and accoutrements correct, help us? Good lord! you could get a man for five hundred a year who could guarantee all that. You would just dress up a crowd of supers correctly, and they would rush about and use the right historical weapons as used in the battle of Agincourt, and there would be exactly the same excitement—exactly the same degree of historical truth—as if they were fighting the battle of Marathon or the second battle of the Marne! What would be valuable to us to know would be *the quality of excitement* which existed at the battle of Agincourt, how the men fought, how they behaved in their billets, the kind of relationship that existed between officers and men, all the dear familiar things that marked it off from, or linked it to, other times, other battles. The whole of history is a record of dead dates, dead kings, dead dynasties, dead battles. It is only when the poet and the artist have stepped in that the dreary record has shown signs of vitality. And Mr. Belloc wants us to get the buttons right!

It makes us sympathize with the little girl in *Punch* who, on being upbraided by her mother for neglecting her history lesson, said: "I don't care whatever happened to anybody."

History, indeed, as recorded in the history books, has never been any good to anyone. It has fanned international hatreds, given every small boy in every country a distorted sense of his own country's virtues and achievements, and taught him to

## INTRODUCTION

worship power and glory. How splendid it would be, for instance, if Ireland could forget that she had ever had a history, and start all over again just being nice, as she naturally is! How much easier it would be in Europe if the schools of France and Germany had never been supplied with history books, and the money expended thereon had been devoted to educational tours to each other's beauty spots!

With all these facilities to hand, what a chance this seems to start history all over again. Why should we be bullied by the dead? Here we have the amazing spectacle of the whole world individually straining at the stars, collectively running down the steep place into the sea. What strange power is at the back of all this? Before the Great War came you could not have found a hundred people who would have said, "I hope there'll be a great war," and yet hundreds of millions of people were involved in it, and conducted it with religious fervour. Let us scrap the old history books, and start with our homely records of living people, so that we may see that human passions and frailties are a common heritage.

You may say, not without reason, that all this is high-falutin talk to introduce this little book of London Character Types that George Belcher and I have compounded. It may be so. Nevertheless, to attempt to formulate one's motives before setting out on any specific undertaking is at least a fault on the right side. Whether one succeeds or fails is another matter. The motive sounds ambitious—almost insolent in the scale of what has been formerly the recognized measure. It is nothing more nor less than to make a modest contribution to the historical record of our times. Upon this plane we stand or fall by the verdict of your discernment. If you say: "This is all

## ODD FISH

very well, but these people don't exist! They are not real." Then we bow our heads and depart in peace. If, on the other hand, you say: "Hullo! Why, that's old So-and-so!" or "Why, that's the girl I heard sing at the Prom. on Thursday" —then all is well. We have accomplished what we set out to accomplish. The contribution is made and accepted.

In our most sanguine moments we share a fantastic vision. It is at least a hundred years ahead. Men are "like Gods." This book has long been out of print and entirely forgotten. There is a small boy, with a large head, enjoying himself in a dusty attic. He is a very wise-looking youth (probably a graduate of biology at a National Kindergarten). He is searching for some learned tome, and suddenly, under a pile of rubbish someone had forgotten to burn, he comes across an old, faded copy of this book. He picks it up, examines it, and turns the pages idly. And then he becomes mildly interested. He forgets about his learned tome and goes steadily through to the end. When he has finished he sighs and says: "Well, well, so that is what people were like in those bad old days!"

S. A.



M. J. K. SHORE .



## MR. J. K. SHORE

THE name is obvious enough. You may see it in bold black letters on a grained wooden board above the shop: J. K. SHORE. And then, in more subdued lettering, "Fishmonger." It does not seem surprising to note the subdued character of this description, for a more unimpressive fishmongering establishment surely never disgraced any neighbourhood. Northallerton Terrace is in itself a mean little cul-de-sac of meagre shops and dwelling-houses, but even in these circumstances Mr. Shore's shop is conspicuous for its meanness. For one thing, there never appears to be any fish in the window or on view. The window is always dominated by an enormous black cat with a white shirt-front and white whiskers. Sometimes there is a pile of kippers in a yellowing newspaper, and the cat sleeps with its whiskers tickling the kippers' chests. He must be a wonderful cat to be trusted in such seductive propinquity. But he appears to regard the kippers more as companions than as a potential banquet. Sometimes he yawns, his hot breath mingling with their savoury loveliness. Occasionally the head of a cod will appear and grin insipidly at passers-by. At the other end of the slab in front of the window is a forlorn-looking aspidistra plant in a puce-coloured pot. Its leaves are brown and crinkled. It looks as though it had been intentionally overlooked in a removal. The walls of the shop are covered with a yellow sanitary paper that is peeling near the top. Hanging from nails by string are



## ODD FISH

quantities of ancient newspapers, carefully cut into squares. In one corner is a broken mirror, that distorts things in a terrifying manner, and a calendar which has to have every day torn off.

That is one of the surprising features about Mr. J. K. Shore: that he always keeps that calendar up to date. The date seems to be extremely important. When you enter the shop a bell clangs drunkenly, and he comes shuffling in from a room at the back. Now, it is no good trying to have a joke with J.K. The light-comedy side of life doesn't appeal to him. His large, cod-like eyes plead with you to desist. His drooping moist moustache works restlessly above his full lips and narrow receding chin. The upper part of his head is well modelled. He has quite a dome of a forehead, and thin grey hair hangs limply round his large projecting ears. He wears a dank slate-coloured flannel shirt and a carpenter's apron. In his hand he waves a knife, but it seems to be more a weapon of defence than an instrument for the legitimate operations of his trade. He doesn't like you. He doesn't seem to want you. You remark: "Good-morning. Have you any fish?"

"Fish!"

He recoils, startled at the unreasonable request. Fish! Now if you had asked for black pearls, motor-cars, or feather beds the position might be understandable. But to come into a fishmonger's and ask for fish must surely be the emprise of a lunatic. He backs away helplessly and stares out of the window. His eyes are filled with melancholy, disillusion, suspicion. Then something seems to stir within him. The cat nestles nearer to the kippers. The man turns and says abruptly: "What kind of fish do you want?"

## MR. J. K. SHORE

By this time all your lightheartedness has vanished. You say drearily : " Well, what kind of fish have you ? "

He looks at you keenly, his eyes searching you out. Why ? why do you want fish ? Why should he disclose the secrets of the establishment ? You are convinced that the position has reached an *impasse*. But no ; he surprises you with a despairing suggestion that comes almost in the nature of a bark.

" Got a nice piece o' cod."

This is a tremendous concession to the social amenities. You are getting on. Quite airily you join issue : " I'll have a piece, then."

What must be must be. He shuffles over to the corner where there is an iron spiral staircase. You hear him clanking away into the mysterious depths below. If you know the establishment you know that you must never be in a hurry. You will have at least ten minutes to seek amusement. You can either wake the cat up or catch flies on the newspapers. The only thing that you mustn't do is to look in that awful mirror.

At last he comes clanking back. He wheezes and gasps, and his eyes have an anxious, restless look. He conceals the fish from you until he is within a yard of your person, then suddenly he holds it up high in the flat palm of his hand, and looks at you eagerly, like an inexperienced conjuror producing his first rabbit, or a diffident artist displaying his favourite work to an unfriendly critic.

You know quite well that it would be humanly impossible to refuse the fish, whatever it is like. Anyone who would do so would be unfit for the society of decent men and women. You enjoy a fleeting glance of a white mass shot with pink, and you say " Right " and turn away.

## ODD FISH

An extraordinary sense of relief comes over you both. The rest of the proceedings are null and void. You don't notice what you pay for the fish, and it is quite certain he doesn't notice what he charges. You hand him a piece of silver and he hands you back some coppers. It is more of a ritual than a commercial transaction. By the time you have reached the door and said "Good-morning" you positively like the man. You know quite well he won't answer you, but it is pleasant to feel that you are forgiven, that your importunities have been overlooked. The bell clangs again, and you are out in the street.

It is one of the astonishing facts of social life that, however badly and inefficiently you do a thing, some people will still stick to you and believe in you. It would be idle to pretend that Mr. J. K. Shore has even a moderately flourishing business, but still, people do go there. It is partly habit, partly because they know him, and partly because they are too lazy to walk two hundred yards round the corner to the Co-operative fish-stores. And by some means or other Mr. Shore manages to keep not only the shop going, but the upper part of the mean little house. Not only that, but he manages to keep his plump, elderly wife rustling in black satin, and he sends his young son to the National School in neat, well-fitting clothes and boots. If you look into the parlour at the back of the shop you may observe that it is quite decently furnished in heavy Victorian furniture. The enigma of Mr. J. K. Shore remains. Why does he keep an unprofitable fish-shop apparently under protest? How does he manage to make both ends meet? His relationship with his wife and son is also something of a mystery. His wife is a very stout lady, who "keeps herself to herself." She never serves in the shop. The boy is an intelligent-looking

## MR. J. K. SHORE

little chap, with something of his father's melancholy reserve. Sometimes he darts out of the shop on his way to school, and the father goes to the window and watches him as though he had seen him for the first time.

It is difficult to follow the activities of Northallerton Terrace. Several families occupy most of the houses, which are jammed together in a tight wedge of clamorous unrest. One hears mouth-organs and violins wailing from open windows, the screaming of babies, and the street itself is always swarming with children from the National School. Coal-carts drift in and out, selling coal by the half-hundredweight. I seldom have occasion to go there in the evening, but when I do I always notice that Mr. J. K. Shore's shop is shut up. I believe he closes at about six o'clock—even on Saturdays!

Now you may contend—not unreasonably—that a fishmonger's shop has nothing to do with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. I grant you that, if you won't be too dogmatic about it. All I want to say is that last Friday week—no, it was Thursday (I remember that, because I went out to get a pair of sleeve-links in the afternoon, and found that it was early closing day)—anyway, in the evening I went to the Queen's Hall with my wife, and we heard the noble work afore-mentioned played by a famous orchestra, conducted by a famous conductor. They were playing that glorious slow movement, so charged with melancholy, and my thoughts for some reason reverted to my fishmonger's shop. Music which is non-descriptive—as all the best music is—has this advantage over all the other arts, in that, while you are listening to it, you can just as easily think of a fishmonger's shop as of rushing streams, lovers, and brooding mountain-crags. Moreover, a fishmonger's shop may be just

## ODD FISH

as significant, just as allied to the big, mysterious Thing. I became suddenly imbued with the curious pathos encircling the life of my gloomy friend. Life! How we flow past each other, unseeing and unknowing! . . . The lives of the poor, the really poor, all the hidden beauty and . . . unbelievable courage. I looked at the queer faces of the orchestra, representing every variety of human type, and yet unified by a common purpose, almost welded into a common expression. The violinists particularly, some thirty of them, old men, young men, strong, weak, avaricious, refined, sensual, gentle, commonplace, odd, ordinary, and yet—as their bow-arms moved in perfect unison the same expression seemed to fill the eyes as they leant forward, reading the score.

“They are unplaceable,” I thought. “Why, that old man, number seven in the second row, might even be my fishmonger!”

Transition from that reflection to the amazing realization was the work of an instant.

*It was Mr. J. K. Shore!*

The first thing that struck me was, “How well evening dress suits him!”

He seemed just right—the old-fashioned hand-tied bow, the very low collar, the steel framed spectacles. He was an orchestra player. The part fitted him so well that it was only by a fluke that I observed him. He couldn't be anything else. Fish? Preposterous! I wanted to hear him play. One could tell that he was playing only by his gestures and his eyes. They had something of that eagerness and anxiety which characterized him when he held out the piece of cod to me on the palm of his hand, but that expression was mellowed by a glow of exaltation.

## MR. J. K. SHORE

He was unaware of his surroundings; he was part and parcel of a melodic phrase. The conductor leaned forward, his arms waving towards the strings, drawing them out, thrusting them back, leading them on, shaping the music by supple gestures. The form became apparent. The haunting beauty of the melody held us entranced. On, on, a thousand desires, anticipations satisfied; melancholy transfigured by a beauty almost unbelievable. Alone on the mountain tops. Fish! Oh, my God!

**I**DA ST. ALBANS is a ballad vocalist, who practises with the window open. Everyone in Maggie's Square is familiar with the sound of Ida's voice making for that top G. You know she will get there, but the successful attainment gives you little pleasure. You wish she would sing sharp or flat, or fall altogether, or perhaps change her profession for a less declamatory one; let us say—art-needlework. It is undoubtedly a good voice, with a perfectly wonderful range. Like everything to do with Ida, it is opulent, assertive, reliable, solid, glittering, provocative. At ballad concerts it brings down the house, and Ida herself opulates, glitters, and provokes. She is never tired of saying: "Oh, my dear, they *loved* it! I thought they would never let me go!"

Her voice to her is less an instrument of self-expression than an asset of her joint-stock individuality. She has insured it for several thousand pounds. She talks of it as one might of a new Rolls-Royce, or a villa at Mentone. It is a luxury she possesses which everyone is after. She never says, "I sang well." She says, "I was in good voice. They loved it, my dear." She comes on to the platform, bowing from the hips all the way to the piano. She then takes root a few yards from the footlights, and smiles mirthlessly till her mouth suddenly opens out into a dark, menacing ellipse to emit the first phrase of a



**IDA ST ALBANS.**





## IDA ST. ALBANS

song. Her body appears to be a granite edifice of curves, projections, and shelves upon which repose masses of flowers and little sparkling jewels, which glitter as she takes her breath. The nature of the song is of little consequence. All composers come alike to her. She is utterly fearless. She knows her voice and she knows her public. All the time her eyes are saying: "They simply *love* it!"

When the last encore is over she throws kisses right and left with her short fat arms and stumpy sparkling fingers. Reluctantly she waddles back to the artists' room. She is overwhelmingly affectionate to her fellow-artists, to her impressario, to her little dogs, to the hall attendants, even to the taxi-driver. She is so frantically busy, so much in demand, so popular. She plays bridge as a mental relaxation. Indeed, her whole life is bridge and ballads. She never has a minute to read, never a minute to think, hardly a minute to practise her songs. Her conversation is entirely centred on fees, engagements, encores, calls, frocks, flowers, and hands (good and bad). Never a minute to think . . . such a rush . . . one would assume that Ida had not even a minute to feel. Only that we happen to know that, tucked away somewhere in the Midlands, in a Home . . . an Inebriates' Home . . . is the wasted husk of someone's husband. And every week Ida sends her cheque for maintenance. She never speaks of this. Sometimes, when near her, you may detect little shadows flickering around the tiny wrinkles at the corners of her anxious eyes.

Sometimes, perhaps, she has time to feel.

If only she could *sing*!

## DARCY DE LA TOUCHE

THE innate magnificence of Darcy de la Touche can only be appreciated when he is in his cups. Fortunately for the student of this magnificence—and perhaps unfortunately for Darcy—this condition is pretty prevalent. It may be said to be a static condition. Darcy is eternally magnificent. In the saloon bar of "The Green Man," where he holds court, he is known as "The Count." Without any resources of his own he gives the impression of a man eternally lavishing on others princely hospitality. And this hospitality is not confined to liquid refreshment. He distributes wisdom, favours, promises, and the chronicles of princely associations. He is confiding, expansive, humidly sympathetic, prepared to use his influence among the great to court advantage for the most casual and mean amongst his acquaintances. The fact that he has worn the same frock coat for at least five years, that his trousers spiral down to a fringe, that his boots are cracked, and his disreputable socks sag above them in swathes, does not seem to dissipate the impression of magnificent patronage. No one else could tie a white scarf round his neck with such *brio*. The back of his head, the tilt of his hat, the thrust of his shoulders denote the man of breeding.

And Darcy is undoubtedly a man of breeding. If you examine the back of his head, his ear, and just the angle of his chin you may envisage what he must have been. But then the



**DIOSY DE LA TOUCHE**



## DARCY DE LA TOUCHE

face rushes forward and bursts into pimply, purple convolutions culminating in that appalling nose. It is a nose that cannot be explained away. It could only have been acquired in one way. When you talk to him you seem to be conscious of conversing with a man who is wearing a mask, a mask of his own making. The back of the head, the ear, and the angle of the chin are what he was, the rest of his face is what he has made himself. While he is talking to you in his mellow oleaginous voice, the eyes plead with you beneath the heavy swollen lids, and seem to be eternally saying : " Yes, I know. I made this mask myself. Underneath I am a gentleman, understand. Rugby and Oxford, and all that kind of thing, don't you know. What the hell has it got to do with you ? "

Every day at noon Darcy de la Touche appears in the bar of " The Green Man." He secures a glass of beer and seats himself at the table by the fireplace. A few minutes later enter other congenial spirits : Basil Plinth, an etcher, Rodney Scales and Dean Mason, both journalists, an indeterminate old gentleman known as " Uncle Saul." They sit there, and they talk, and they talk, and they talk. Sometimes some of them will go home to lunch. But Darcy and " Uncle Saul," and usually Plinth and Scales, will remain there talking till closing time. And curiously enough they talk very well, all except Scales, who has overlapping teeth and is difficult to hear. He seems to have a double row of teeth top and bottom. He is a nuisance. The talk covers every possible range of mental experiment from art and moral philosophy to obstetrics and the best way to cook bream. Sometimes they seem to be possessed by a frenzy of research. Darcy will say : " Uncle, I was—aw—readin' an article in the—aw—*New Statesman*—referred to Aucassin and

## ODD FISH

Nicolette. I can't for the—aw—life of me remember who wrote it."

"Aucassin and Nicolette? Er, 'um, let's see."

"Maeterlinck!" exclaims a raw young man on the edge of the crowd.

"Rubbish!" ejaculates Darcy and Uncle Saul simultaneously.

"It's an old thing written hundreds of years ago."

Various names are suggested and dismissed. The company becomes fevered and restless. Strangers are appealed to. Even Lizzie, the barmaid, doesn't know. There are quite a number of barmaids in London who couldn't tell you who wrote Aucassin and Nicolette. Darcy is positively distressed. The mental defection casts a gloom over further discussion. He says, dejectedly: "I shall write to the Saturday *Westminster Gazette*."

Perhaps the keynote to Darcy's character is found in the fact that he does not write to the Saturday *Westminster Gazette*. Within a short time the fervent desire for a special knowledge has passed. Some other subject has come up. His mental equipment is choked with these short wave-lengths, which spring out into the ether and die. Nothing is followed up. His volitions are stagnant. He is a conglomerate of partial knowledge, blurred but splendid memories, fevered but feeble desires. His education and natural cleverness have been a handicap to him, because he hadn't the vision to adapt himself to them. They have swamped the man. He begins nothing and completes nothing. He is an atmosphere, a tragic atmosphere struggling to be magnificent.

They say that his father is a very wealthy old gentleman, still alive, a manufacturer of artificial manure. He has finished with

## DARCY DE LA TOUCHE

Darcy. He allows him a small remittance, enough just to live on decently. And Darcy lives in one room in Northallerton Street, and spends his life in "The Green Man," talking about Aucassin and Nicolette, conferring favours, cadging drinks. Sometimes he goes to bed, and stays there for a week. There is nothing wrong with him. He does it to save money, for he never drinks in bed. This is perhaps the most emphatic and courageous thing he does. At the end of the week he will rise and put on his disreputable clothes, tie the scarf at a jaunty angle, and sally forth. He will enter "The Green Man" with a genial, proprietary air.

"Well—aw—Uncle, how goes it? Been laid up a bit—beastly cold you know. Fit's a fiddle now. How are you, Lizzie? Give me—aw—a tankard, my dear."

And the eyes will be saying: "Yes, I know, I know. I made this mask myself. Damn it! What the hell has it got to do with you?"

He begins talking defensively, the voice coming from somewhere behind the mask. He arrests your attention by some unusual mental attitude. The thesis develops promisingly and then, alas! . . . the sudden gap. Gaps! . . . When you come to know Darcy you realize that the tragedy of his intellectual make-up is an affair of gaps, lapses, blind spots, woolly interludes. The stuff is there, but the memory deserts him, the thread snaps; he dithers. His mind is a desert of disconnected oases, pleasant and fertile in themselves, but unaware of each other's precise locality.

Incapable of sustained action or concentration, he is incompetent successfully to undertake any job. He is vacillating, surprising, unreliable, a vast reflection of shifting visions.



## ODD FISH

I once heard him say: "The—aw—greatest intellect I have ever known was—aw—Lord Lister."

The stupendous remark left one spellbound. One was tongue-tied by the arrogant assumption of intellectual judgment. It seemed like the despairing chant of a man drowning in a morass. It was quite patent that somewhere, at some time, Darcy de la Touche really had met and probably conversed with Lord Lister, but how should he know exactly how intellectual the great scientist was? We were subtly intrigued by the query as to what Lord Lister must have thought of Darcy! And looking down at the spiral trousers, the pendulous waistcoat, in the crevices of which tobacco ash and bread crumbs snugly reposed, the cracked boots and the sagging socks, and one's eye wandering back to the incriminating nose, it was impossible for one's mind not to register a disturbing comparison—the intellect with gaps and the intellect without gaps. Of what use is a brain to a man where it is as full of holes as a sieve?

Darcy poses as a misogynist, and it is not surprising. Years ago, they will tell you, he was engaged to a young, charming, and well-known actress. They were devoted to each other. She was a simple, ingenuous girl, and no fool. And then Darcy began to detect the expression in her eyes as she tried not to notice the mask he was slowly making for himself. They say he broke off the engagement himself or the girl's mother did. She left the stage. He never speaks of her, but he talks contemptuously of the unattractiveness of the sex.

He turns feverishly to the tankard, swirling the liquor lovingly around, holding it, regarding it as one might the only friend one has, and you holding her hand at a departure platform. And suddenly the hunted, despairing look creeps at the

## DARCY, DE LA TOUCHE

back of his eyes ; hunted and despairing, but struggling even then to snuggle within the confines of a code. Such an expression as one might envisage on the face of a man when the ship from which he has fallen has vanished over the horizon, and the dark wastes of pitiless water are engulfing him, every vestige of hope is lost, there is nothing left to cling to but—the Oxford manner.

## SIR ALFRED CLAPPE

ONE of the most deceiving illusions in the whole social equation is the busy-ness of the business man. If you were to suggest to Lady Clappe that someone might invite Sir Alfred Clappe to tea, or that he might be persuaded to present the prizes at a Girl Guides' Club, or indeed do anything that was at all uncongenial to him, she would instantly reply : " Oh, my dear, it's quite out of the question. Sir Alfred is far too busy! "

If you were to suggest the same thing with regard to an eminent landscape painter, or a poet, or a professor, the thing would be conceded as quite natural and reasonable, but for a manufacturer of accordion pleating—I believe that is what he is, or something like it—it appears to come almost in the nature of an affront. Sir Alfred is probably more than a manufacturer. In any case he attends all kinds of board meetings. He is not one of those captains of industry, but he is a successful business man, with many commercial interests and investments. He employs labour, and even has the ear of members of parliament. He is so busy that he doesn't have time to do anything at all, except a few things which satiate his lust for excitement.

If you follow his day through, what strikes you is that from bedrise to bedset he does nothing unpleasant. He doesn't fill his own bath, or strop his razors, or bite the ends off his cigars. He is far too busy.



*Sir Alfred Clappe.*



## SIR ALFRED CLAPPE

His home at Cheam is a model of efficiency. His wife is a large, breezy, efficient woman, with "no nonsense about her." She is indeed so relentlessly sensible that she would jar the sensibilities of anyone less relentlessly competent than Sir Alfred. They have five large, healthy, relentlessly sensible children. It is impossible to remember their names, but you know by their clothes that two are boys and three are girls. The house is run on relentlessly sensible lines. It is a hive of labour-saving appliances. One sometimes wonders what they do with the time they save, because there never seems a moment to spare. From an uncomfortably early hour in the morning until a comfortably late hour in the evening the numerous bathrooms seem to be fully employed. There always appears to be someone either going—or accompanying someone else—either to or from a bath. Relentlessly competent maids, nurses, and helps, glittering in clean linen and robust health, pass inwards and outwards.

Lady Clappe—known as "Vi" by her friends—spends the day doing good works, superintending the household, supervising the education of the children, devising banquets for Sir Alfred's business acquaintances. She is an accessory before the fact of his busy-ness. She sees to it that he is so busy that he shall not be expected to do anything. Her attitude towards him is one of frigid adoration. He is perfect, perfectly conceived, perfectly executed, perfectly poised. And yet you feel that if someone came and told her that he had been killed in a railway smash she would go white to the lips, put her hand to her heart, take three deep breaths, and then ring up the family lawyer and say: "What about it?" The house would function in the same relentlessly perfect manner.

## ODD FISH

And that is all as Sir Alfred would wish it. It is part of his social conception. And yet he is not conservative in the narrow sense. He is always impressing upon you that he is a "man of ideas." He studies political economy, treats his employees fairly, indeed generously, and is always devising schemes for their welfare. His business is conducted on enterprising lines. In his offices and factories he adopts an attitude of mirthless breeziness. He is self-consciously free and easy. His passion for patronage and popularity is his outstanding weakness.

Sometimes his vitality runs away with him. He gives the impression of being a bigger personality than he really is. It even applies physically. He is a little over forty and is heavily built. His round, clean-shaven face and large eyes give the impression of power and breadth. But he is neither so powerful nor broad as he appears. In this regard it is noticeable how people are affected by their first meeting with him. They always exclaim afterwards : "What a ripping chap Sir Alfred is!"

He is ingenuous, communicative, vital, disinterested. It is only after considerable acquaintanceship that one detects that a great deal of this attitude is a surface attitude. Men, women, and ideas ; he welcomes them, embraces them, and then sheds them. A bee loves clover—in the abstract. When he returns at night with the rich skeins of honey wound round his person, you cannot say that he has any real affection for any individual blossom. The bee leads a busy life ; he has no time for special passions. So it is with Sir Alfred. He is fascinated by his own abstract powers. He is always discovering something new and surprising in himself. He will promise anything quite sincerely.

## SIR ALFRED CLAPPE

And here we come to the serious blemish on his character, a blemish none the less serious because unwittingly conceived. It is a blemish, fostered and encouraged by his wife. They are so good, so vital, so busy, that they make no allowances for the frailties of human nature in others. The average being is not particularly good, not strikingly vital, and simply hates being busy. On the other hand, the average human being is an individual, with his or her own life to lead, and with all things conceived in a reasonable proportion. The average being is not concerned with abstract propositions. Moreover, the average being detests broken pledges.

Now one evening Sir Alfred and Lady Clappe will meet some young man. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that he is a very promising young landscape painter. They will meet him in the house of a mutual friend. He is charming, talented, and he has some drawings with him. (His hostess will have seen to that.)

"But this is magnificent!" exclaims Sir Alfred, examining the second sketch.

"Wonderful!" echoes Lady Clappe (known as "Vi" to her friends).

Their mutual enthusiasm is contagious. The young man flushes with exuberant hope. Sir Alfred is full of ideas. They will arrange a private view for him in a large studio belonging to a lord. They will get half London there. They quote great names, wealthy people aching to encourage talent. The young man goes home tingling with excitement. He is made. He buys a new suit for the private view and purchases elaborate painting materials. He waits impatiently for the all-important letter. But the days pass and the weeks and the months. And



## ODD FISH

then one day he writes to Lady Clappe and reminds her of her husband's promise. And Lady Clappe writes back :

“ MY DEAR MR. GAMBOGE,

Please forgive us not writing before, but my husband has been so *frantically* busy he has not had a moment for anything. He is going to Scotland next week for a month. When he returns I will remind him about you. We were so impressed with your drawings. I'm sure you have a great career before you.

Yours sincerely,

VIOLET CLAPPE.”

“ Damn! ” exclaims the young man, and becomes a cynic. And it is not in this case that Sir Alfred and Lady Clappe are insincere. At the moment they quite believe in, and intend to do, what they say. It is only that to-morrow's sun brings forth some other hope. Another painter has come on the horizon, another claimant for patronage, another idea has usurped the place of all previous ideas.

They are going to build a model farm or a model laundry, or finance a young scientist who is on the eve of a new discovery concerning sheep dip. They are going to pay for the musical education of a little East-end Jewess—a genius in embryo. The young landscape painter finds himself a unit in a sequence of facile promises, indefinitely postponed because the promiser is definitely in a state of “ frantic ” busy-ness. He is the business man, the one being removed from the tyranny of all social and civil obligations. Why, he does not even make his own appointments. A thin woman in rimless glasses, down at

## SIR ALFRED CLAPPE

his office, says : " You have the North Borneo Coal Concession Board at two-thirty, Sir Alfred," or " I don't see how you can see Mr. James Minns to-day, Sir Alfred."

And Sir Alfred smiles wickedly. It is the supreme note of his social conception. It gives him a peculiar sense of gratification to be able to say : " See what you can do with Miss Tripping, will you ? " He is in her power. If he spends three hours lunching and playing billiards with an old school friend he knows that under Miss Tripping's aegis he is quite safe. Patting the leather diary with a gold pencil she will be puckering up her brow and shaking her bobbed hair at the unwelcome interloper, she will be explaining that Sir Alfred is " far too busy this week to go into the matter."

## LILY BATES

LILY BATES is just nineteen, and she works for Mrs. Postling. Now, Mrs. Postling is a widow who pays her rates and taxes, votes for the Right Party, goes to church every Sunday evening, is loyal to the King, and has never been drunk; consequently we do not want to tear her character to pieces. But there is no denying that Mrs. Postling has not done the right thing by Lily. She got her from the Foundling Hospital when she was fifteen, and she said: "I will bring her up like a daughter."

The only reflection one may make upon this facile promise is that it is fortunate for the unborn child's sake that Mrs. Postling never had a daughter. When Lily first went to her it was understood that she was to help the parlour-maid, learn to sew, and generally make herself useful. There were at that time five lodgers in the house; two married couples and an uncle of Mrs. Postling's who was eaten up with gout and erysipelas. He lived in a room on the second floor, never went out, had to have his meals brought up to him, and was always in a bad temper. There was also a cook, and a housemaid. The novelty of this new life, with the large house and its varied personalities, excited Lily. She could not do too much for everyone. She had young legs, as Mrs. Postling explained, and they were employed racing up and down stairs. No sooner had she reached the top floor than either Mrs. Postling or the cook



LILLY BATES .



## LILY BATES

—who never moved from the kitchen—would call out, “ Lily! ” And Lily would exclaim “ Oo-er! ” and dash downstairs. No sooner had she reached the basement and begun to do whatever she was ordered to than Mrs. Postling’s uncle would come out on to the landing and bawl out : “ Lily! where’s my noos-paper ? ” and Lily would exclaim “ Oo-er! ” and dash upstairs again with the paper. She commenced her duties in a humble way by cleaning boots, chopping wood, scouring the kitchen floor, answering the bell, taking up meals to three different sets of people, turning out dark cobwebby cupboards in the basement, doing the fireplaces, polishing the grates, peeling potatoes, and running errands. But so efficient did she prove herself in all these offices that at the end of a year she was promoted. In other words, the housemaid left, and all the duties of the household devolved upon her, with the exception of cooking and a little light dusting which Mrs. Postling herself found time to do. Lily was very proud of her promotion, especially when Mrs. Postling said that she should now have fourteen pounds a year instead of twelve. Fourteen pounds! Lily pursed up her small mouth and exclaimed : “ Goo on! Blimey! ”

This was a favourite expression of hers. The following winter, two more lodgers arrived and occupied the attics, and the household has remained in this condition ever since. Lily is up at six, and she goes to bed at half-past eleven, and somehow she never seems to get tired. It’s all so exciting, you see. Such a responsibility, such a rush of living movement. Sometimes a whisper from this dangerous modern world gets through to her. As when Emma Brown, a daily temporary—who came for a week when the cook was ill—said to her : “ You’re a blanketty little fool, the way you work. Why, don’t you know girls are

## ODD FISH

getting a pound a week now for working six hours a day, with Sundays and one afternoon off ? ”

And Lily puckered up her face, and dabbed at a smut on her little snub nose, and exclaimed: “ Goo on! Blimey! ”

But the statement only seemed to her a blinding generalization, not a hint to be acted upon.

Lily's chief characteristic is eagerness. Sometimes you may see her in the kitchen, peering up into the street through the iron bars across the window. Her lips are parted, her hair awry, her eyes shining with the light of a person who holds some profound and wonderful secret. It is all tremendous, exciting, terrific . . . the world outside, the world inside, moving, rushing along. In a moment the milkman will come clattering down the area steps, and then Mr. Budd will want his tea and kipper. Happy.

Is it only because she is nineteen ? Or has Lily some wonderful secret ?

One can imagine her on the Day of Judgment being heralded before a committee of angels and seraphim, and a voice coming out of the brightness : “ Lily, in that world below you were badly treated, overworked, bullied, taken advantage of. And you always accepted it with cheerfulness, fortitude, and sublime courage. Come, child, those days are over—the glistening mansions are prepared for you.”

Yes, and you can hear Lily's voice replying in familiar accents : “ Goo on! Blimey! ”



*John Chortleband.  
11 Park St. Mayfair.*





## JOHN CHORTLEBAND

JOHN CHORTLEBAND is a bachelor. When you enter his hall the first things that catch your eye are—oars. There are several oars fixed up on the wall above the dark oak coffer, and on the oars are painted names and dates. One of them indicates that John rowed for Cambridge fifty-seven years ago. In the dining-room are silver cups, goblets, and shields. Boxing, athletics, fives, cricket, fencing—all these things John Chortleband excelled at fifty-seven years ago. Even now, if you observe his tall, perfectly erect, perfectly groomed figure walking in the park, you realize that he is a man you would rather have with you than against you in any kind of rough-and-tumble. His close-cropped white hair and heavy white moustache emphasize the pinkness and plumpness of his rather bucolic-looking face. It is only the eyes, sometimes twinkling kindly, which save it from being a fiercely inimical face. And old John *can* be peppery, too. We remember one evening at dinner, the butler served a sweet sauce with grey mullet . . . but there! we would rather forget that unfortunate episode. He is an octogenarian sportsman, and part of that acerbity of expression which has crept into his face in recent years is due, perhaps, to the fact that although he understands sport he does not understand octogenarianism. It riles him that he can no longer run, and row, and box. Oh, that tragic slackening of nervous energy!—what does it betoken? One by one the more

## ODD FISH

strenuous sports discarded, reduced in effort and in period. Lawn tennis instead of cricket, golf instead of Rugby football. What a decline!

Then—no more running, please! Heart a little—well, shall we say a murmur? Gentle walks, plenty of rest. And so in time to leave the arena and referee for others. Still a power, though, in the world of sport. . . . On all the big committees, National Sporting, The Kennel, The Sports, The Fly-fishers, many others . . . always in demand to referee a fight, to settle a dispute about the rules and etiquette of any game. Still a power.

Memory—not so good as it was, you know. Younger men coming along, more energy. Even on a committee one has to remember, remember what was said and agreed upon. . . . Damn it! doesn't he know what's what? doesn't he know the rules, eh? Still a power, a power by the force of tried experience, a sportsman's intuition.

One by one the committees filled up, the fight governed by a younger man, the rules of sport altered by strangers . . . even foreigners invade the field. Foreigners! Sport? . . . Bah!

Eighty years. Alone with memories, his cups, his oars, his old school caps, the gloves he wore when he boxed Charlie Ledbright. This new generation. . . .

The step is slower, but the figure still erect, as he goes across to his favourite club in Piccadilly, and finds his favourite seat in the bow window. Memories. Forgotten the rules, eh? Rules? There is only one rule in this life—to play the game. Oars, cups, goblets, and shields. Are there no tokens that a woman has ever entered his life? Who shall say? He sits there staring into the park . . . alone with his memories, the old sportsman.



*M<sup>rs</sup> Briskett.*



## MRS. BRISKETT

MRS. BRISKETT moves in a circle of nebulous relationships. Indeed, you cannot precisely locate the exact nature of any of them. In the bar of "The Sheet Anchor" her voice whines with a penetrating kind of weary excitement above the friendly quatern of gin, and creates an atmosphere wherein move gigantic figures of passion, disillusion, cynicism, abandon. There is—or was—a husband, certainly, perhaps two, perhaps three; the description seldom tallies with former descriptions or hints. Her sentences usually begin in the middle and never end at all. She drinks gin; drinks it hard and properly, sometimes stout, sometimes beer, never anything else. You might meet and talk to Mrs. Briskett every day for a year and not discover that she had a married daughter with four children. On the other hand, you might find out the following day that she hadn't a married daughter at all, or that the daughter hadn't four children, but six, or one, or none at all. She is extremely difficult to follow. She assumes that you know all about her, all the details of her domestic life. When she says: "Fancy Joe letting that girl 'ave both them chairs, when Liz 'as to go out to work to make money for Dot's boots bein' mended and that——" you are handicapped because you are uncertain of the relationship between Joe and Liz and Dot, and you haven't any idea who "that girl" is. Neither is it any good asking her. She only becomes more confidential, more intimate, more

## ODD FISH

involved. Other figures appear on the screen, an "Uncle Walter," "Fanny's policeman," "Bert," and the "Major." And yet, if you follow her closely, you are aware of one central figure which dominates her weariness. "The boys used to call him Uncle Joseph."

But he was not *her* uncle, that is certain. He is a strong heroic figure, a creature by the standard of which she judges humanity. You gather that he has passed out of her life, but that he still dominates it. Whether he *was* her husband, or her lover, or only her dream-lover you can never determine. When the fumes of gin have done their work, she sways restlessly on the wooden bench. She suddenly behaves extravagantly. She calls out to Mr. Hoskins behind the bar: "'Ullo, fish-fice!"

And Mr. Hoskins ignoring her, she confides to her friend: "Gawd! men 'ave no life nowadays, no go. If that 'ad been Uncle Joseph 'e'd 'ave 'eaved a quart at my 'ead before the words was out of my mouf." With melancholy regret at some dim image of the past, she raises the glass to her lips.

"'E was a man, 'e was. Gawd! 'e *was* a sossidge, 'e *was* a sportsman."

At moments the reminiscences become more detailed.

"Do you know what 'e used to like to do, dearie? 'E used to take me and the kids all to the Zooeylogical Gardings. 'E'd go there and sit in the snike-'ouse. I've known 'im sit in the snike-'ouse all day. 'E *was* a sportsman."

The intrepid character of a man who would sit in the snake-house at the Zoo all day long seems almost too much for her. She snivels, flicking the tip of her large moist nose with the hem of her shawl. Sometimes she indulges in philosophic reflections with her friend Mrs. Hemingway.

## MRS. BRISKETT

"Do you know what it's like, dearie, when beer's no good to yer? Last Saturday week I went down the Walworth Road with Mrs. Stevens. We 'ad pints and pints and pints. It wasn't no good to me—simply felt tired. This mornin' I've 'ad 'arf a glass, and I feel all right. Funny, isn't it?"

Where does she live? You cannot follow her. From "The Sheet Anchor" she drifts to "The Duchess of Leeds," and then to "The Snail and Wombat." Then she will meet a friend, and drift back again. Sometimes she wears an apron; sometimes she rustles in a rusty, beer-stained, black satin skirt, that at some time or other must have been a well-fitting garment. Sometimes she talks of "the people in our 'ouse." Always contemptuously. In her weary voice she deplores their lack of energy and go, their greed, stupidity, and ugly manners.

"Gawd! that man, now—Smithers, on the first floor—Gawd save us! what a specimen! I should think 'e's a poet or somethin'."

The acid contempt in this indictment delights even herself. She chuckles feverishly. "All 'e seems to do is to stand outside 'The Dolphin,' listening to a cornet solo—never 'as any money. What a specimen! I can't stand 'im. Whenever 'e comes into the 'ouse I go out and slam the door!"

There is a man who sells newspapers whom she describes as a journalist, and a portentous figure connected with the ham-and-beef industry, a railway porter, and a lavatory attendant. All these people may have some small compensating qualities, but they are swamped by the overwhelming, Homeric figure of "Uncle Joseph."

Only once did I hear any reference to Uncle Joseph's normal activities. It was when she confided to Mrs. Hemingway that at



## ODD FISH

one time, after getting the sack from the gasworks, where he always used to toss the cashier whether he'd pay him double or quits, he used to "go about 'olding 'orses' 'eads."

Then, of course, crash! The motor industry came in. He must have been like a man whose profession is that of shovelling snow when he sees the spring approach. Apparently he made a stern fight of it. He ran after four-wheeled cabs, chased one-horse victorias right out to the suburbs, but alas! horses became fewer and fewer. The commendable form of activity dried up.

"'E dried up, too," concluded Mrs. Briskett. "I've never seen 'im since."

Fires rage within her, fires of remorse, bitterness, and regret. Her discernments become acrid. She is like a woman who has seen all the splendour and the beauty of the world in a flash of revelation. By it is the standard set. These others! ugh! The fumes rise upward, making tolerable the melancholy spectacle of her environment. The procession shifts from bar to bar, from memory to memory, from phrase to phrase; nothing complete, nothing connected, nothing articulate. Gin! On that mental plane tremendous facts impress themselves.

"'E'd never eat a egg that wasn't boiled as 'ard as a bullet."

"What 'e liked was a cold stoo with raw onions."

"'E threw the major out of the first-floor winder, and 'is 'ead on'y missed the railin's by six inches. Gawd! 'e was a man!"

"'E'd sometimes never 'ave any money for weeks, and then 'e'd bring 'ome nine quid, and spend the lot on Saterdy afternoon. 'E'd take an 'ansom cab and drive down to Epsom."

The proudest possession Mrs. Briskett has, and she will only show it to you when you become really intimate, is the third

## MRS. BRISKETT

finger of her left hand. It is broken. Uncle Joseph did it when he struck her with the butt end of a carving-knife.

Eerily, wearily, she crawls through swinging doors, through thirsty years, hugging her protestations, her spirit sustained by inflamed reminiscences. She goes on living because everyone else goes on living, and she is part of this living thing. And there burns within her a fierce pride—a pride of visions these others have not had.

## THE DUKE OF EAST ANGLIA

TIME was when dukes and bishops were solemn, pontifical figures. The very term "His Grace" had a way of affecting people's spines. The way was cleared for them, and men sat in rapt attention to listen to what they had to say.

Now, alas! there is something slightly comic about the gaiters of a bishop or the strawberry-leaves of a duke. If he is to succeed he has to do so in spite of the gaiters or the strawberry-leaves.

The bishop has a distinct pull over the duke in that he has a definite vocation disciplined by ritual and routine. But to be a duke at the present day must be extremely difficult. He doesn't quite know what is expected of him. He is like a "blood" at a public school who finds himself entirely surrounded by new boys.

With so many new boys the situation becomes unmanageable. There should be a gentler gradation, so that some Smith minor, after banging one of the smallest new boys on the head, should be able to whisper, "Hush! Look out. See that fellow over there? He's a Blood!" And then the awe-inspiring realization will slowly percolate through to the wretched new boy's mentality.

Around the Duke of East Anglia there is always an atmosphere of detached bewilderment. He is extremely anxious to be a really nice duke, but the new boys crowd him so. Above all things he is eager to be familiar with this astounding youngster Democracy.



THE DUKE OF EAST ANGLIA



## THE DUKE OF EAST ANGLIA

He finds the temperamental differences between himself and the fellow fairly easy to adjust. He doesn't altogether dislike him; indeed, in many respects the young man makes life easier for him, more entertaining and less rigid. The bewilderment is less an affair of temperament than of intelligence. The complications arising from his association with the strong young man make things so deuced difficult to understand.

There are certain people who terrify him—his mother, who is a born agitator; his septuagenarian uncle, who is in the Treasury and writes articles on land values for the *Nineteenth Century*; his wife, who is an American, and has an alarming habit of plain-speaking; and, most terrifying of all, his lawyer, Sir Thomas Thring.

The periodical visits of Sir Thomas Thring are a nightmare to him. Sir Thomas is a fierce old gentleman, with a bald head, black, menacing eyebrows, and tortoiseshell spectacles. He is the chief administrator of the duke's estate. And now and then Sir Thomas arrives with a dispatch-case, which he bangs down on the little satinwood table and opens. He bawls out:

“Now, sir!”

His whole attitude is inimical. He gives the duke the impression of a man struggling against superhuman difficulties, all of which are the direct result of the duke's stupidity in having an estate at all. He plunges ahead into abstruse details about revaluations, forfeiture, entails, and insurance. Neither is he satisfied with the perfectly sufficient word “Quaytel” repeated half a dozen times. He suddenly comes down with:

“Now, sir, what would you do about that?”

It isn't fair. The duke has done nothing to this man to deserve it. And he has an appointment to play squash racquets

## ODD FISH

in twenty minutes' time. The stereotyped formula, "I should do whatever you think best, Sir Thomas," appears merely to infuriate the other man more. Why can't people leave him alone? He knows quite well that the value of his estates has diminished by nearly half since his father's time, but is that his fault?

The old lawyer's opinion is perfectly clear. The estate was won in the first place by fighting, and by fighting has it got to be retained. Perhaps so, but these weapons are distasteful to him, the mode of fighting strange and bewildering. In the Great War he led his brigade all right, was slightly wounded at Bapaume—all quite simple, understandable fighting; but this other——!

He moves across to the mirror to see whether his face may reveal the secret of these disturbing persecutions. The sight comforts him. The slender, well-groomed figure, the fair, clean-cut features, slightly reminiscent of his grandfather, the long broad fingers—all quite in order.

"I'm looking very fit," he thinks.

"There will have to be great retrenchments," says Sir Thomas, fiercely.

Retrenchments! Well, why not? The more of these retrenchments the less difficult the problems. His wife is not extravagant. She often uses the Overland in order to save the Rolls-Royce. She has even been seen going about the country in a Ford! A duchess in a Ford! What a girl! The duke is enormously proud of her. She is an American, but not one of the wealthy ones. She only inherited a few odd thousands a year. He married her for love.

## THE DUKE OF EAST ANGLIA

"I should do whatever you think best, Sir Thomas. I really must go. I have an appointment at the Bath Club."

Phew! What a relief to get out into the bright sunshine. He strolls round the park into Piccadilly. Delightful! No one knows him. None of the new boys nudge each other and say, "Hush! See that fellow over there? He's a Blood!"

Oh, no; it's all quite pleasant, normal, and safe in London. He is as inconspicuous as a tramp—more so, in fact—in Piccadilly. Newsboys come racing along, bawling out:

"Three-thirty—winner!"

And the placard they carry says, "Revolution in Portugal."

Queer and—bewildering! Revolution in Portugal! Thrones upset, fighting in the streets, lives lost, a new dynasty established, and yet there they are—darting out of doorways, dashing up side streets, all these fellow-citizens, consumed with only one thought—which horse won the three-thirty stakes at Bath! . . . Bewildering!

Why, yes; he too—he remembers that he was persuaded to back a horse named "Strive" for the three-thirty stakes; a dead certainty, Jimmy Lockwood said. He had backed it for a hundred for a win or place. Indolently he arrests the onward rush of the next newsboy and proffers him a penny. The glaring placard still announces "Revolution in Portugal," but, as the boy hands him the paper, he murmurs with that confidential tone that permeates the camaraderie of sport:

"Strive."

"Strive," eh? He opens the paper and looks at the result. Yes, "Strive" has won, and the odds—nine to two. Nine to two! A hundred pounds at nine to two? Oh, dear! How very difficult to work out! Several hundreds, anyway. He



## ODD FISH

lights a cigarette and crosses the road. A man without any legs is seated in a wheeled cart, and is singing in a shrill voice: "It was only a beautiful picture in a beautiful golden frame." . . . Bewildering!

Crossing Grafton Street, he meets his tailor, the only unpleasant moment of the morning, for the fellow bows nearly double, and cries out in his sycophantic voice: "Good MORNING, your Grace. I hope you are in the best of health, sir." Confound the fellow! Shan't go to him again, monkeying about in the street like that! They are repairing the road at the corner. A gang of three men are driving a steel stake into the road, taking alternate blows with their hammers. He stops for a moment, lost in admiration of their precision and the splendid swing of their fine bodies.

"Those fellows ought to be able to play polo," he thinks.

Why do some people expend their energy driving a stake into a road, and other people expend the same energy playing polo? One is work and the other play. Queer! Social, economic, moral problems . . . unsolvable. Sir Thomas would solve them, of course, and his mother, and his uncle, and that Labour man—what was his name? But they all disagree, go round in circles, get so bad-tempered about them.

Everything is so difficult to understand. Terrific forces always invisibly at work; upheavals, movements, ugly passions. Whither? One can only do what one can within the confines of one's code. When the call comes it shall find him the master of manner rather than of matter. The matter is too bewildering and is controlled by these others, but the manner is his own. They cannot take that from him. What is it that always keeps England four-square when everything appears about to

## THE DUKE OF EAST ANGLIA

crumble up? The three-thirty winner, the Test match at Lord's, the Cup final, the rules of the National Sporting Club—all these things are above the attacks of matter. For whatever they may be worth, they symbolize the spiritual gesture of a people. They do not change or fluctuate.

The duke is comforted by these reflections. A bedraggled woman with a baby in her arms is selling matches outside the Tube station. A little shamefacedly he slips a half-crown into her hand and hurries on. He is terrified that she may run after him and thank him. Damn it! Why should he be persecuted by these bewildering, unsolvable problems?

In Dover Street a terrific surprise! His wife, his two little girls, and the boy coming out of a photographer's! Oh, the excitement! He grins happily in the centre of a swirling maelstrom of vitality. The wife and the children all talking at once; terrific adventure visiting a photographer's!

His wife, with that playful, familiar gesture, holding the lapel of his coat:

“Where are you going, Freddy, darling?”

“I was going to play squash racquets at the Bath Club.”

“Well, see here, hurry home to tea. I've got that awful pretty girl, Maisie McGovern, coming. You'll fall head and ears in love. She's a perfect peach.”

Adorable creature! Fall head and ears in love with Maisie McGovern! What a notion! Surprising, bewildering, adorable creature.

“I'll be home in an hour—sure!”

“Don't try to be American. You can't do it. Who are you playing with? Colonel Beaconsfield? Bring him along, too. Poor old man! He's been awfully down since his wife died.”

## ODD FISH

Glorious, loving, sympathetic darling! He squeezes her hand. The small boy insists on kissing him. Kissing him in Dover Street! Anyone might be passing. He stoops, rises, looks anxiously around—Coward!—readjusts his hat, waves it, and strides away. He turns the corner, his lips still pleasantly tingling with the contact of the small boy's fat, pink cheeks.

No problem here, nothing bewildering, only that slow, deep rustling of vital essences which binds all men together.



WILBUR G. KELMER.  
*Koran Studios, Chelsea Embankment.*



## WILBUR G. KELMER

**M**R. WILBUR G. KELMER is an American, and we do not like him. Let us rush in quickly and add that it is not because he is an American that we do not like him. On the contrary, we are very fond of Americans. In fact, we might almost say that we dislike him in spite of his being an American. For the straight American citizen we have every affection and respect ; but Wilbur is not one of these. Indeed, we suspect him of being a little ashamed of being American. He thinks it is a shade provincial, colonial. He has come over here to be gently Europeanized. He speaks English with hardly a trace of American accent. He drifts around all the centres where art and culture are supposed to flourish. Every year he goes to Rome for a month or two. In Paris he is very much at home. He also likes to visit places like Seville, Vienna, and Munich. Between times he lives in Chelsea in an extremely bijou little house with a large studio. For Wilbur G. Kelmer, you must know, is an artist. O lord! yes, he has the most wonderful studio, with genuine old tapestries on the wall, elaborate easels and lighting arrangements. He has a bewildering stock of beautiful pigments, canvases, panels, water-colour boards, and brushes. And what is surprising is that Wilbur doesn't really paint badly. He does refined landscapes and interiors. They just fall short of being really very good. Everything that Wilbur does is like that. He does nothing really badly and nothing really well.

## ODD FISH

He is *au fait* and *au courant* (two of his favourite terms) with movements, current opinions, personalities of the hour, publications, even religious tendencies and the fashion in women's clothes. You may see him in his own studio, surrounded by well-dressed women, holding forth on Augustus John, Stravinsky, Einstein, the Sitwells, Coué, Strindberg, Shaw, or *The Little Review*. His pointed beard is greying at the tips, and he speaks in a dead-level voice on rather a high key, but without emphasis or real enthusiasm. He talks well. That is to say, he begins to talk well, as though the ground has been carefully prepared. He surprises you with an unexpected array of novel theories; but if you follow the matter up, you find that he suddenly fluffs out and changes the subject. He laughs nervously and appears to resent you taking his lecture seriously. His father made a large fortune out of some invention to do with making waterproofs. That is the essential trouble with Wilbur. If he had had to earn his own living you feel that he might have been quite a nice man. As it is——

Oh, but his wife is a perfect dear! And the annoying thing is—she adores Wilbur G.! Women are very provoking. You may accuse us of being jealous of Wilbur G.

Well, after all, there he is, with all his wealth, his large studio, his enormous self-complacency, his son at Harrow (if you please!), his quite obvious intelligence, his capacity for wallowing in negative attainments, his social *flair*, his eternal satiation in aesthetic pleasures, and—well, we say, he might at least have had a wife who hated him!

But, oh! no. You should see Lynda hanging on to his words. She is much younger than he, with pretty pouting lips, and deep grey eyes that are just saved from being sentimental by a touch

WILBUR G. KELMER

of whimsicality. And just when you are thinking you have caught her eye and held it, it drifts away and fixes on this amorphous oaf, who ought to be manufacturing waterproofs in St. Louis.

It isn't fair!



P.C. 4463K

THERE is a clank of keys, and a sound of approaching footsteps along the tiled corridor. Long before he appears you seem to know the man's whole character by that walk. It is almost unbelievably deliberate, even, leisured, the calm beat of the constitutional pulse. It is not a walk that is leading anywhere, or that has come from anywhere, or that takes any account of time or the exigencies and frailties of human nature. If one of the showcases in the Museum suddenly exploded and turned into a bunch of lilies, you know quite well that that walk would not deviate a fraction from its normal rhythm. It would come ponderously on, and approach the amazing transformation. Then it would stop. There would be a cosy sepulchral mumble round a larynx, a recognition of the fact that an official act was about to be performed. A notebook would be produced, and a stump of pencil. He would never, in any circumstances, let you see that official notebook, but you imagine that after due deliberation there would appear some such entry as this: "Case Number 661. Assyrian pottery. Exploded and turned into a bunch of lilies. Time noted, 11.37."

In the fullness of time the matter would be reported to the proper authorities. You must not imagine from this that P.C. 4463K is callous about his duties. On the contrary, the incident about the case of Assyrian pottery would be a subject of enormous interest to him, a veritable *bonne bouche*. But



P.C. 4463<sup>K</sup>.



everyone has their own way of displaying their enthusiasms. With P.C. 4463K the matter must take some days to sink in. The steady order of constitutional authority must not be disturbed. The first thing to be done is to report. When everything is in order, and the executive side of the matter has passed out of his hands, he will ponderously approach the Man at the Door. He will sigh, wheeze, gasp, and settle immovably into a pleasant conversational stance. In his deep languid voice he will draw out : " Um! Seems a funny thing, Tom, about that there case. It was all them Assyrian pots and vases, now it's turned into a bunch of lilies. Can't think how it could ha' happened. I was a-goin' along the corridor—— "

And he will talk about it for days, nay, for years. He is a great conversationalist. There is no doubt that this mental attitude of his has been considerably influenced by the effect of the Museum itself. Everyone who enters the Museum is immediately shrouded in a kind of somnolent detachment. They are in the presence of ghosts, and they adjust their behaviour, even their voices, to this condition. Old lace, old carving, old armour, a thousand objects fashioned by people long since dead, and they come whispering to you across the ages. Visitors glide furtively from corridor to corridor, from case to case, as though haunted by the dread that they might be overlooked at closing-time and shut in for the night. Students with sketch-books are drawing old carved coffers, with melancholy helplessness, as though not quite convinced that they are not wasting their time. The effect of all this beauty and skill and antiquity is overwhelming. You feel that nothing really important can ever happen again. On the other hand, anything might happen and it wouldn't be surprising. To see one of the cases turn into

## ODD FISH

a bunch of lilies would not seem especially remarkable. You are lulled into a pleasant state of indifference.

P.C. 4463K knows this. He tries to stand no nonsense from these ghosts, but the spell is too much for him. It has the narcotic of a garden of sleep. Moreover, it is one of the cushy jobs of his profession. Only a man of very long service and exemplary character reaches the *ultima thule* of this human mausoleum. The pay is better, the conditions of service more comfortable. No wandering about in the rain or the blazing sun; no slums to get bashed in; no hooligans or harridans with hatpins. Oh, a quiet, lazy, cushy job! . . . The people who come there are quiet, studious people, dazed by their environment. Sometimes a crowd of small, dirty little boys will drift in. They have no reverence for the past, and they are inclined to shout and prance, and then P.C. 4463K bears down on them ponderously. His voice booms and echoes through the corridors: "Now then there! None of that, or out you go!"

It is the only opportunity he gets to exercise his authority as custodian. The children whisper and fade away. The condition of static calm is reasserted. The Man at the Door is a taciturn, unresponsive person. There is upon his face an eternal expression of disappointment. He watches the door anxiously, as though expecting some surprising invasion, and the quiet, negative people who enter jar his sensibilities. Nevertheless, he does to talk to.

P.C. 4463K says: "Quiet 'smorning. Only counted nine through since ten o'clock. Um!"

A long interval, and then: "Looks as though we're goin' to 'ave trouble with these 'ere Turks. [A rattle of keys.] Of

course, I doan't know—maybe, may not be. Um! I says to my missus this mornin' at 'alf-past six—— Noa! it must have been about—ten minutes to seven—it was just after little Willie fell out of bed into the bacon—I says to 'er, I says, 'Effe, it looks as though we're goin' to 'ave trouble with these 'ere Turks.' ”

There is another long pause, during which brain-waves seem to be searching amidst the antiquity for an answer to this modern conundrum. The Man at the Door doesn't know, he's sure. Of course there might be; on the other hand, there might not be. The *Daily Mail* says——

The door is watched anxiously. This corner of the Constitution is functioning, in any case. There is a destiny which shapes our ends. P.C. 4463K is saying: “See that young feller what was in 'ere yesterday a-drawing a Chippendale chair? 'E seemed a nice kind of young feller. I says to 'im, 'Who was this 'ere Anne Teek? Did she come afore this 'ere Chippendale, or after 'im?’ He says, 'Afore. She used to keep an old furniture shop in Cheapside.’”

“Anne 'oo?” says the Man at the Door.

“Anne Teek.”

A curious, doubting expression creeps at the back of the eyes of the Man at the Door. He seems about to argue the matter. He glances dejectedly at a fourteenth-century Flemish pulpit. Anne Teek. What does it matter, after all? He sighs, and looks back at the door. P.C. 4463K swells out his chest, yawns, stretches his arms languidly, and mumbles: “Nearly time for my glass of lemonade!”

At that moment you realize that here is the one perfectly satisfied man. P.C. 4463K is indescribably happy. Every-

## ODD FISH

thing functions as he desires it. Everything is ordered, regular, and safe. His large frame betokens a generation of good and regular meals, the glass of beer at regular intervals, all the organs functioning regularly. There is Effie and little Willie, the home somewhere, the regular walk and talk, the comfortable knowledge of duties, a pension to come, perhaps promotion, the sense of unity with a Constitution that is so colossal and impressive that it ceases to be a subject for argument. It *is*. When he gets to that room in the other building, there will be the glass of beer, and old Tom or old Sam, and the comfortable chat about the murder in Smithfield, or whether there's going to be trouble with "these 'ere Turks." Nothing requires analysing or doubting. The machinery exists ; one has only to keep one's own part of it oiled. Even the ghosts are comfortable official ghosts. The Constitution protects them, is part and parcel with them. Scotland Yard and the Medicis shake hands across the centuries. With P.C. 4463K happiness is largely a matter of familiarity. Although the Museum ghosts lull him to sleep, they enlarge his sense of the security of the Constitution. His clear ingenuous eyes regard the phenomena of existence with an almost passionate veneration. The mother fondling her babe does not concern herself with the whys and wherefores.

"Now then there! None of that, or out you go!"

The terrific power of this menace with all the weight of the Constitutional law behind it! It dazzles him. And he loves it because it is so familiar. It is like his wife's face or the colour of good brown ale. It doesn't require dissection or qualification. He strolls across the Museum quadrangle and blinks pleasantly in the sunlight. One of the directors bustles past him with some papers. P.C. 4463K touches his hat. The act

P.C. 4463K

of doing so gives him a queer sense of delight. Just as it should be—authority, order, regularity, familiar symbols, the good blood pumping through his veins, the certainty that nothing unusual is happening, or likely to happen. He makes a queer noise in his throat that might be a rumble of delight, or the opening bar of a song. The imperturbable figure passes through the door and vanishes. . . . Thank God for the one happy man!



## COMMANDER SINCLAIR SOUTHBOUND, R.N.

A NAVAL OFFICER never seems to be part of the social fabric. He is a visitor. He suddenly appears, examines the fabric critically, and then vanishes again. The military officer we know intimately. We may see him on the parade ground, at manœuvres, on the march. He comes to dinner with us after his day's work and chats about it informally. But a naval officer is an alien proposition. He takes a train to some port and disappears. When he comes back, he gets a little self-consciously into mufti and stares about him. He is bewildered, critical, and anxious not to be too contemptuous. Sometimes in dock we may visit one of these grey monsters where his life is lived, but it doesn't bring anything home to us. The thing seems to have its eyes shut. It is laughing at us. Everything is inert, meaningless, secretive. A fat man in the galley is cooking sausages for other fat men who are reading *The Daily Mirror*. The whole ship is pulling our leg.

What kind of life is this? I can never get it out of Sinclair Southbound. I only know him when he is trying to adjust himself to the social equation. He tries very hard—and never quite succeeds—in showing his contempt for me. He is a man of infinite precisions. You have only to watch him do any single thing, play billiards, tie up his bootlaces, wind the clock, to realize that he is a man whose faculty for handling automata is on a different plane from that of one's normal fellow creatures. For one thing, he never hesitates. At snooker pool he glances



**Commander SINCLAIR SOUTHBOUND R.N.**



## COMMANDER SINCLAIR SOUTHBOUND, R.N.

at the ball, raises his cue, and bangs it in. He does not excel at any game, but he plays every game well, with judgment and precision. He is mentally and physically wonderfully poised. He likes jumping off 'buses when they're travelling at top speed. He invites me to punch him in the stomach while he's drinking a glass of beer. I somehow cannot bring myself to do this, but I have seen other men do it, and he doesn't turn a hair. He can mend clocks, hang wall-papers, devise contraptions to meet any emergency. That indeed is the absorbing passion of his life. He loves difficulties. If he turns up at a cricket match he would prefer to find that the authorities had forgotten to supply pads and stumps and bats. Somehow or other he would conjure these things out of the ether. You cannot conceive his getting flustered or angry. His clear, ingenuous grey eyes regard the phenomena of existence as the lawful playthings of his perfections. He never argues. At least, he never argues about abstract theories. He will argue by the hour about the best kind of dry fly for fishing in the Dee, but if you put up an argument that democracy is (or is not) destroying civilization, he regards you with cold disdain. Sometimes he infuriates me with his patrician insolence. It is as though he embodied in himself a living epitome of the belief that it doesn't matter what you do, so long as you do it—well, not exactly perfectly, but “as we do it in the navy.” He comes back from his mysterious journeyings and mothers us. We are all wrong, hopeless, muddled, incompetent; he has given up hope of making us better. His business is simply to look after and protect us.

Towards the arts he adopts an attitude of rigid tolerance. He is very silent and solemn about it all, as though he were overlooking the amiable weaknesses of spoilt children. He

## ODD FISH

rather likes to go to the Royal Academy, where he can absorb in his incisive way the glamour of realities. He enjoys revues, and plays where there is no attempt to analyse the emotions. But I have seen him when he has been listening to music—Brahms, I believe it was—when there crept into his face an expression of profound solemnity, as though he were doubting. . . . “After all, perhaps the bally business is worth protecting” . . . “perhaps there’s something in it.” When it was over, the lines of the face sharpened. He seemed clamorous for movement. (He has a perfect genius, by the way, for getting a taxi, when everyone else is rushing about and blowing whistles.)

Has he a mental attitude towards life? or is he a vehicle of technical accomplishments? He annoys us because he won’t come out into the open and discuss the thing. Only with his colleagues does he become garrulous, and then the conversation is mostly about personalities—“old So-and-so” or “young Sandy”—scandal, yarns, or technical dissertations wrapped up in a vernacular of their own.

They have a moral code of their own, which is natural in view of the conditions which control their lives. If one might sum it up in a phrase, it is that a mother is more sacred than a wife. Sinclair Southbound is married. His wife is a pretty, fluffy little thing who lives at Guildford, plays golf, and presides at tea-parties to Girls’ Friendly Societies. They have two sturdy, Elizabethan-looking children, who enjoy pulling the legs off flies. It is a noisy, robustious household, with glittering bath-rooms, spruce nursemaids, taps running all day, Mrs. Southbound in biscuit-coloured holland, with a bunch of keys suspended from her waist, very managing, very brisk—oh, so efficient!

## COMMANDER SINCLAIR SOUTHBOUND, R.N.

And when Sinclair comes home he appears as a fugitive, unexpected guest. He likes to hear the taps running, and the children yelling, and his wife calling him "old thing." It's quite all right. He nods approvingly, but he never seems part of the show. It is all only a little scrap of that alien world it is his mission to mother and protect. I believe he is devoted to his wife. He would face a Bengal tiger, bare-handed, to protect her. He would work his flesh to the bone to keep that household going (and the taps running); but he makes no attempt to be faithful to her. He considers the grasping of certain opportunities his lawful perquisite. Some things *are* done, and some things are *not* done, and there it is. The code must be respected. How can these strangers, city-bred, land-bred, golf-bred people understand? But in his pocket-book he keeps a photograph of his mother. I have seen him looking at it when he thought no one was about. The action gave him away. I believe the man is a colossal sentimentalist. He simply cannot trust himself.

The vision of Southbound looking at his mother's portrait made me suspicious. This aspect of superb control is all nonsense. The man loves things. My suspicions were confirmed when I met him one day in Jermyn Street, furtively eating sweets out of a paper bag. I believe he loves barrel-organs. I shouldn't be surprised if he goes to the pictures and cries all alone in the dark. I shouldn't be surprised if he loves his country. He is still a young man, but his hair has gone quite grey. The war did that. He found the war dull, disappointing and monotonous.

He was in the battle of Jutland, and he declared that he didn't enjoy even that. He was frankly bored.

## “ UNCLE JAMES ”

**I**N order to visualize Uncle James you must first of all have some kind of conception of the whole of the Potton family. Now, since Uncle James went to South Africa, the Potton family has been a very difficult problem to conceive, for the reason that it has been so disunited and disintegrated. There was Herbert, with a family of five, who was a buyer for a large fishmonger in Hornsey. There was Albert—my friend, to whom I owe most of the details of this record—who was something in the greengrocery world. He was also married, with four healthy children. There was Annie, married to a stationer in Holloway, with no less than nine children living. There was an unmarried sister, named Rose, living in Camden Town, and another brother, Henry, who went to Canada and has not been heard of since. These were all Uncle James' brother's children. James had no children of his own and, as far as one knows, was never married. Apart from that there were numerous cousins of various degrees of removal. There was no unity in this family at all. Occasionally somebody would remember somebody else's birthday, or there would be a sketchy family Christmas party, but all were too concerned with the serious problem of making both ends meet to bother with these sentimental problems.

And then Uncle James turned up.

He had gone out to South Africa thirty, thirty-five—or was it



UNCLE JAMES.





## “UNCLE JAMES”

forty?—years ago. The whole Potton family had forgotten all about him, or they thought he was dead. From the day he left England to the day he returned he had not sent a letter, a word, not even a picture-postcard.

And then suddenly he turned up, and bought that large house on Sydenham Common, with its acre of glasshouses, croquet-lawns, fountain with plaster fauns, geranium-beds, and wall-fruit. You never saw such a place. It had little battlements, and turrets, and circular bowed windows, projections, recesses, and coruscations. The interior was the embodiment of gaiety. White paint, and hundreds of little carved brackets holding pots, brilliant wall-papers of grape-vines and magnolias, carpets that leapt up at you with their floral realism, hundreds of bright pictures in gold frames, mirrors, chandeliers, lights. Lights! you never saw so many electric light globes. There was not a corner in the house not brightly illuminated. As Albert said: “Even his bedroom was like a saloon-bar, all mehogannny, an’ plush, an’ mirrors. Not that ’e drinks, mind yer; never touches a drop, but there’s all the stuff in the ’ouse.”

Now this was one of the noticeably queer things about Uncle James. You would have thought that, returning like this in triumph, displaying so much apparent wealth, he would have sat down and let his relatives find him out. But, oh no, it was quite the contrary. In spite of his riches, he seemed to crawl back in a humble, contrite manner; above all things, he was avid for the affection and attention of his own people, his own flesh and blood. He sought them all out. He besought them to come and visit him. As Albert said: “’E’s never so ’appy as when ’e gets the children round ’im. You should come in one Sunday night—open ’ouse, anybody welcome.

## ODD FISH

You should see Uncle sitting there at the 'ead of the table, with all the youngsters round 'im, laughin' and talkin' and jokin', 'is little towled 'ead noddin' and bobbin', 'is little beady eyes winkin' and blinkin', and 'e rubs 'is 'ands and says, ' 'Erb, get yerself another bottle of stout, old boy,' or, 'Agnes, pass the 'am to yer aunt.' And then, all of a suddin—— ”

Now this appeared to be the great enigma about Uncle. He would go on as Albert has described, and then, all of a sudden, he would stop and he “ would stare and stare and stare.” In these moods they could get nothing out of him ; he appeared oblivious to his surroundings.

They must have been terrific days for the Potton family when he first returned. They were all agog. Naturally the little old man had no difficulty in attracting their society. They were all over him, each watching the other to see that they didn't get too much, all a little doubtful whether the whole thing wasn't a dream. But no, they quickly found that his was not a show of superficial affection. It was not all only geraniums and Sunday suppers. Within a month he had set Albert up in the greengrocery line; he had bought Herbert a fish-shop; he had established Annie's husband in a larger stationer's shop near the Crystal Palace; he had made Rose a comfortable allowance; he had cabled to various parts of the world to try to find Henry. And the more distant relatives were also not overlooked. Oh, yes, the little man was solid enough, not only solid, but fair. Not one of them could say that he was not being treated equally with the rest. And for the children there were always toys, and sweets, and cakes, and parties, and such a to-do! The house seemed to be always vibrating with pianolas, piano-organs, gramophones, and people singing; all the

## “UNCLE JAMES”

electric lights were always on, and the tables groaning with good food and every kind of drink. And in the midst of it all Uncle would dart hither and thither, nodding his head, and saying, “That’s right, boys and girls, enjoy yerselves! Enjoy yerselves!”

He seemed to be in a fever of excitement to spread enjoyment among these people, either as though he were trying to atone for some past lapse, or fearful that the opportunity might be snatched away. Who could say?

It was only Albert—the over-sensitive greengrocer—who sometimes got nery about it all. It was he who first came and told me about Uncle James, and who took me there on one of his famous Sunday “do’s.”

“Of course, I’m not goin’ to ask no questions,” Albert exclaimed, a little recklessly. “’E done me all right; set me up in the greengrocery line, and bought ’Erb ’is fish-shop, but——”

It was the same trouble again. That Uncle “would stare and stare and stare.” What did he do in Africa? You couldn’t get a word out of him. He kind of shivered and changed the subject.

And Uncle has been back now three years. I’ve seen the little old man. He has aged enormously. I have seen his “little towsled ’ead noddin’ and bobbin’, and ’is little beady eyes winkin’ and blinkin’.” He is still feverishly lavish with his hospitality and goodwill. It is doubtful whether the result has been a complete success. Herbert is very apt to neglect his business and go to the races. He knows Uncle will always come to his help. Annie’s husband has quite definitely taken to drink. Albert’s nervous system is going to pieces. Rose

## ODD FISH

stops in bed all day. Henry has not been found. But still the suppers go on, and the gramophone, and the gay lights. And still the little old man stares, and one discovers that he doesn't like strangers. You must be well vouched for by Albert, or Herbert, or Annie, to be a welcome guest. The money must be there all right, but he never lets on how he made it, or how it's invested.

"Anything I can do for yer, Alf?" "Want a bit more money in your business, 'Erb?" The prodigality at times becomes almost embarrassing.

One day just after Christmas Albert came to me, and he seemed more jumpy than ever. He said: "I 'ad a funny 'sperience Christmas night. We was all there, all my lot, all Herbert's, all Annie's, Rose—all the blinkin' lot of us. You never saw a spread as we 'ad. The table was piled up with turkeys, sausages, 'am, tongue, anything you fancy. And on the sideboard was rows of bottles of stout, whisky, claret, port, every old dope. And after we 'ad singin' and dancin' and charades, and Uncle was the life and soul of the party. Later in the evenin', 'owever, I was goin' through the conservatory, and I comes across Uncle, and 'e was sittin' all alone in the dark, starin' into space. I felt kind of desperate like, and so I ses, 'Ullo, Uncle,' I ses. 'E gives a kind of start and ses, 'Ullo, Alf, my boy, everythin' all right? Anythin' I can do, Alf?' And then I ses, kind of casual, 'Uncle, what sort of place was Efrica?' At that 'e gives a start and looks at me very queer like. And after a minute 'e ses: 'Efrica? Efrica, Alf! Oh, it's a big place, a big place. In the cities one man gets on, and another man goes under.' And then 'e turns to me with that sort of little pleadin' way 'e 'as, and 'e ses: 'Yer can't 'elp it,

## “UNCLE JAMES”

Alf, can yer, if one man gets on and another man goes under ? ' I didn't say nothin', and then he stares, and waves 'is little arms, as though 'e was talkin' to 'isself. ' Then yer get out on the karoo, 'e ses, ' and it's all big, and solemn, and silent, and—— ' And then, by God! 'e stops and 'e stares, and 'e stares, for all the world as though 'e was *seein' somethin' 'appen out there on the karoo!* ”

Albert stopped, and licked at the ends of his drooping moustache. He shrugged his shoulders half apologetically and added in a changed voice: “ Of course, I'm not goin' to say nothin'. 'E done me all right ; set me up in the greengrocery line, bought 'Erbert 'is fish-shop, but—— ”

And Uncle stares, and stares, and stares.

## GEORGE BELCHER

THE silly thing about George Belcher is that he is living in the wrong age and in the wrong environment. He would be all right on some picturesque exploit connected with the recovery of a stolen inlaid casket from the minions of Vasco da Gama. He would be all right strolling the quays of Rotterdam with Vermeer. He would do quite well as the Governor of Maryland when it was an English colony. You can visualize him at Crockford's in the days of Thackeray, idly bemused by the follies of others. He would have made a splendid chairman at the old Cockpit Theatre, with a long churchwarden pipe and a tankard of black porter. He would have been an ideal referee at the fight between Sayers and Heenan.

He looks well in the black wastes of his studio, towering above easels and tables and models, or in a stately ghost-ridden Georgian room. Better still in a country ale-house, or on the back of a chestnut mare, cantering across the downs. But in any ordinary social environment, as, for instance, a modern drawing-room or a teashop, he won't do at all.

You feel that he is a man to whom all the physical manifestations and phenomena of our social life since at least the 'nineties have no significance. He has no use for them. He only recognizes the permanence of human character, which he vitalizes with his own visions.

An artist of extreme sensibility, subtlety, and refinement, his



STACY AUMONIER.



## GEORGE BELCHER

favourite haunt, where he draws contentment and spiritual repose is—the National Sporting Club! This is largely the outcome of a detestation of artiness.

If you get him in the mood he may tell you—a lot of these painting fellows will tell you that—that he goes to the National Sporting Club because he “likes to see muscles in action.” Don’t you believe it. What George really likes to see is a jolly good scrap. And yet a more genial and unquarrelsome soul never breathed. What it amounts to is a passionate love of life as expressed in its most vital and significant forms. Everything that he observes lives, has a story to tell, becomes a mirror wherein is reflected the humour and the poignancy of human character.

A large man, heavily built, half Devonshire yeoman, half poet, he plunges through life in a frenzy to capture these visions and to pin them down. He appears to be oblivious to his surroundings, entirely concentrated on objectives which will brook neither diffidence nor delay.

To an outsider his studio appears to be a wilderness of lost objects. But if you start talking to him about people, he will suddenly exclaim: “Why, yes, old thing, I knew a girl of that type seven years ago. I made a drawing of her one afternoon. It was in April.”

And he will go over to some old dusty folio in the corner, and to your surprise put his hand at once on the sketch he wanted. And he will tell you all about the girl, how she looked in certain lights, what her face expressed, her story, in fact. And as he fondles the drawing, you realize that the secret of the man’s work is that all these people he has drawn with such devotion have reacted in some queer way upon himself. He has not

## ODD FISH

created them, but through them he has become a creator. The realization fills him with childish glee. And, like all the best creative artists, he is a complete child. He likes make-believe, dressing up, dancing, acting, Punch and Judy, or a glove-fight. Above all things does he love to ride a horse. If it were a rocking-horse it would serve his purpose almost as well. For he sees all life in movement, and in that movement is expressed his graphic understanding of human beauty. The horse is a glorious beast, and a man upon its back is the right and proper accent in his conception of the cosmos. In congenial company he will describe a cricket match in Devonshire. There is movement in this, the vital interplay of rustic character, the dialect scored with ruddy earth, green fields, the smell of sheep, the contact of simple souls.

With his models he is merciless. While he is drawing you he growls like a dog. I believe he would make Lloyd George stand on his head for two hours in the corner, if by doing so he thought he could improve the portrayal of his eyebrows. This is not cruelty, nor would it be callousness to poor Mr. Lloyd George's comfort. It is simply that for the time being those eyebrows have eclipsed every other consideration. They are an indispensable accessory in the fact of creation.

George Belcher is one of those people who have developed the genius for going about the world with an attitude of amiable helplessness in mundane things. Have you ever noticed what an invaluable asset this is to any man or woman? How these people get mothered and looked after! George is one of these.

In this human aquarium, where conditions tend to standard-

## GEORGE BELCHER

ize the character of fishes, one observes him floating serenely, calmly pursuing the attainment of his prescribed purposes, and one is a little resentful that the odd fish are becoming rarer.



LONDON : CHARLES WHITTINGHAM AND GRIGGS (PRINTERS), LTD.  
CHISWICK PRESS, TOOKS COURT, CHANCERY LANE.











