

By the same Author

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THE NUMBERS GAME

by

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PR

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PUTNAM

GREAT RUSSELL STREET
LONDON MCMLXII

I was sure I could, and it seemed that I understood his requirements too well for here it is, staring up at me from a faded cutting—'Buenos Aires As It Really Is'. 'What the Prince May See'. 'In the Boca'. 'The Foulest Slum in the World'. These were but the headings, the sub-headings were even more lurid. But it was in double column on the front page and it carried my name. I was passed on to the *Daily Express*, too, for on the Thursday appeared *Victorian Girls of Argentina*, while on the following Sunday there was 'The Prince Among the Gauchos'. 'Cowboys Who Fight Knife Duels'. 'Guitars and Love', single column this time but still on the front page, four guineas instead of five.

Nor did I stop there. The Prince of Wales did what I had never done and crossed to Chile but an intimate knowledge of the country seemed hardly necessary for this sort of thing and I made double columns again in the *Sunday Express*. 'Where Tomorrow Does Not Matter'. 'Chili the Land of Laughter and Flowers'. 'The Prince'. 'Spitfire Girls Who Conduct the Trams'. While duly the *Daily Express* published 'The New Girls of Chili'.

Dear, how important it all seemed. And it was important in one way for this was the first money I had made from writing and though it could not go on—for the Prince drew the line at Paraguay and Bolivia to which I should certainly have followed him—it was rewarding while it lasted.

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What seemed at the time an even more momentous achievement was that I broadcast some talks. This came about through a writer named Derwent Miall whom I had met two years earlier aboard the ship on which I travelled to Argentina.

He belonged to a species not uncommon in those days when there were almost as many periodicals published in Fleet Street as there are in the whole country today—he was a jobbing journalist, giving editors whatever they required at the moment in a bright readable form. He was responsible for a large part of the contents of *London Opinion* and two or three paragraphs weekly in the Charivaria column of *Punch*. A humorist of the Jerome K. Jerome school, he could write smart short stories with a comic twist for the magazines and had worked himself to a serious illness some years earlier by trying to produce enough of this stuff at two or three guineas a thousand words to maintain a home for his wife and family.

He was now in his fifties and had started his literary life as one of the Ernest Dowson circle of the Nineties but faced with the necessity of earning a living had disciplined his talents to produce a commodity perennially saleable—light romantic fiction. He wrote boys' stories with the same kind of success—which meant that he knew his market so well that he never wrote anything not afterwards published, for he could not afford to do so. His boys' fiction was about Canada and the North West Mounted Police and he usually had a serial running in one of the many juvenile periodicals of the time. He told me with charming modesty and slightly pained amusement how, after his trip to Argentina, he went to the editor who usually published his boys' stories and admitted frankly that he had never been in Canada and never seen a Mountie. Would it not be better for him to write a story with the authentic background of the Argentine pampas?

The editor showed no surprise at his confession but pointed to a chart on the wall which distributed the fictional areas of the world among his contributors, Australia and its bushrangers to Mr. A, the Wild West to Mr. B, India and the Mutiny to Mr. C, and so on.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Miall,' he said, 'but we can't let you leave Canada. Our boys expect it of you.'

So Miall continued to chronicle the deeds of the Mounties as faithfully as for other papers he recounted the misadventures of sprightly young ladies in London offices. For a quarter of a century now he had ground it all out with no more reward than a meagre income and a name little known except to editors who regarded him as a reliable standby. Even his brother Bernard who did nothing but translations was better known.

But Derwent Miall had never lost a certain brilliance in his turn of phrase both in writing and speaking. Sweetest natured and kindest of men, he had been exploited by the case-hardened bosses of contemporary Fleet Street but he remained a gentle, humorous person and a delightful companion. There was a certain nobility in his character and appearance which he would have been the first to smile away. He was tall with a thin aquiline face and keen eyes; his features were strongly lined and at first glance he looked a haughty even a bitter man, but his smile dispelled that and charmed everyone who knew him.

He had befriended me on the voyage we had shared when I was going to find a fortune in Argentina, and he, through the good offices of a director of the Lamport & Holt Line who was a connection of his wife's, was making the round trip to Buenos Aires as a much needed holiday after a breakdown. Now we met again by appointment in a Fleet Street pub.

There was about him, I think now, an air of Edwardian London. There was nothing to suggest his Ninety-ish youth, but in his dress, even in the shape of his bowler and his collar, in his nostalgic memories of the music halls and in his speech, there was something which made me think of a London I never knew, of hansom cabs, gaslight, Dan Leno and the *Pink 'Un*, of fine feathers in women's hats and Parma violets in men's frock-coat button-holes.

He took me to lunch at a Fleet Street eating house then, to fulfil an old promise made at sea, we went to visit the very café to which Dowson had come nightly to stare at the proprietor's daughter, a sluttish Italian girl, said Miall, who was Cynara to

him. This was number 10 Cranleigh Street, at that time, though it was overshadowed by Regent Palace hotel, having an exterior pretty much as Dowson knew it. It had become 'a good pull-up for cabmen' as Miall said, using a phrase already dated, but in the Nineties it had been one of those cheap Italian restaurants which were everywhere in London and the atmosphere was an intimate one. The proprietor's wife used to dry her washing at the stove, for the restaurant was their only room except for a small bedroom above.

I looked at the place, in which we had a cup of hot, milky, sweet and otherwise tasteless coffee, with a high sense of privilege. And why not? 'They are not long, the days of wine and roses' I had repeated as a rune since early boyhood, and 'Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine' seemed to me all music, all beauty and all passion. Dowson, if he had lived, would have been no more than fifty-eight that year but to me he was as much a part of English Literature as Tennyson or Browning and more so than Swinburne who had been living when Michael Fane was a boy. Anyway, the café and all its surrounding buildings have long since been pulled down to make way for others which will soon, it is said, be swept away in their turn for yet taller and more useful edifices.

When I had gazed long enough, Miall took me down to Savoy Hill where he had made an appointment for us both with Mrs. Ella Fitzgerald who was in charge of 'afternoon programmes' at 2 L.O. She had wanted him to broadcast some talks on South America, it appeared, but his voice, which had a way of cracking like a boy's, was found unsuitable and he had suggested that I should take his place.

This was arranged and during that and the following year I broadcast a dozen or so fifteen-minute talks for which I was paid—for material, broadcasting and expenses—three guineas each, though one, on Paraguay (to which country I had never been), earned me five guineas.

Broadcasting then was not without its vicissitudes. The first