EXTREMELY ENTERTAINING

SHORT STORIES

from World War I & the 1920s

by Stacy Aumonier

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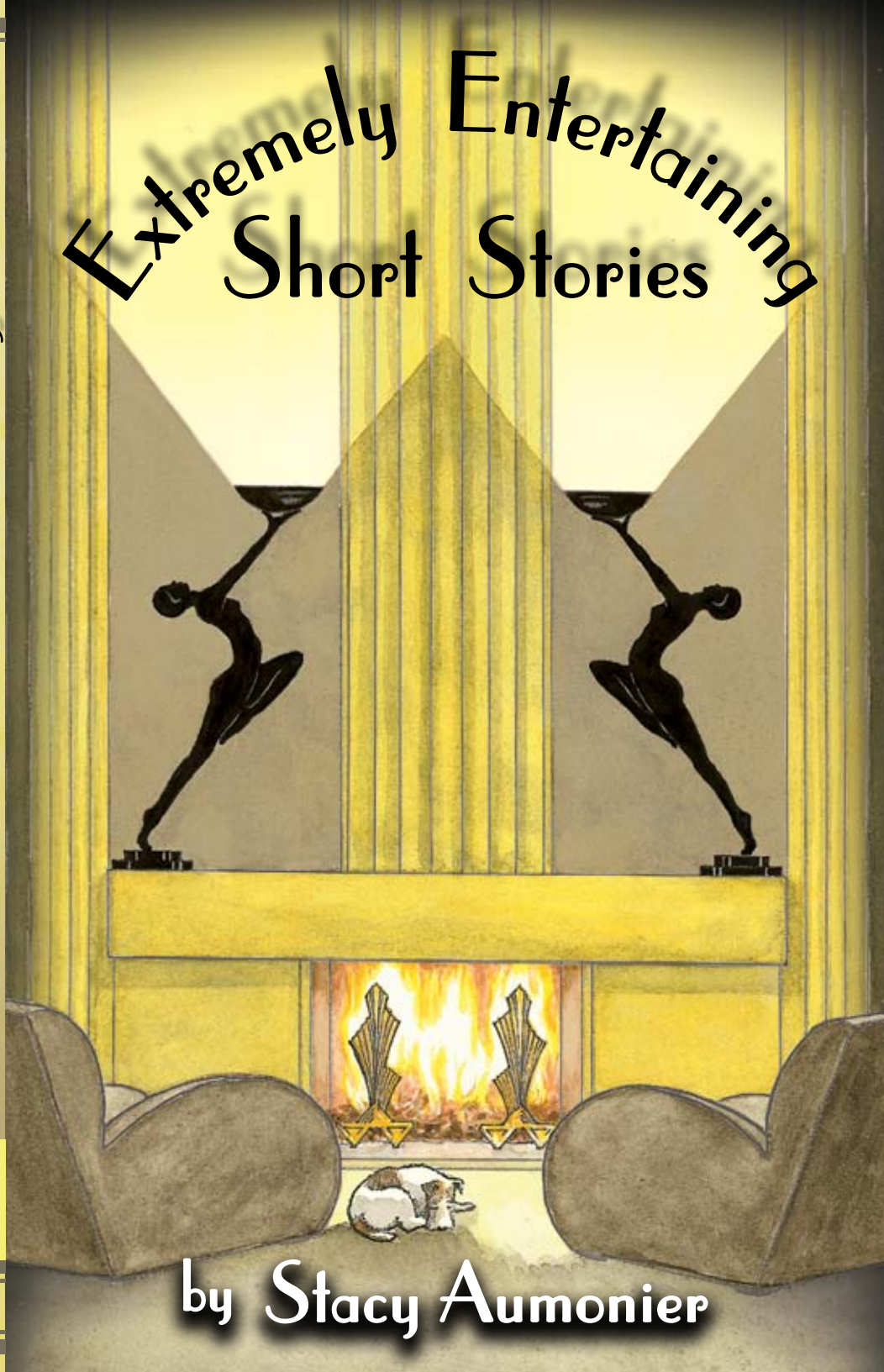

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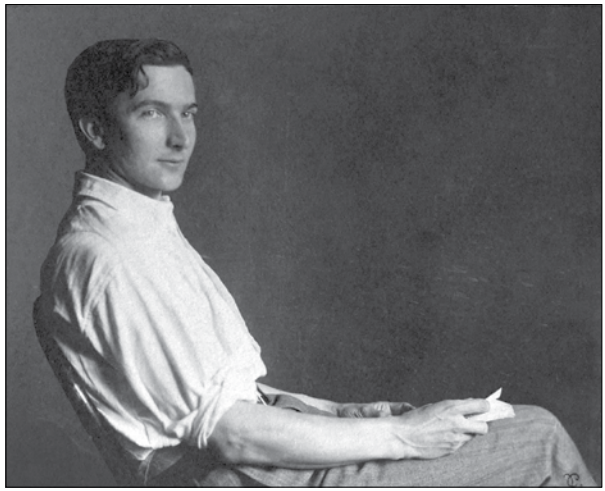

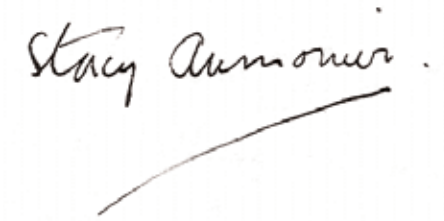

Extremely Entertaining Short Stories

from World War I and the 1920s

—Classic Works of a Master—

by

Stacy Aumonier

PHÆTON
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Extremely Entertaining Short Stories

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Introduction

For many decades, this most entertaining and insightful of writers has been forgotten, and his wonderful stories out of print.

'A real master of the short story,' John Galsworthy wrote of Stacy Aumonier, '…never heavy, never boring, never really trivial. His humour is sly and dry and frequent…And can't he write.'

Aumonier's comic stories are among the funniest ever written. His serious works observe the human condition with wit and elegance. All are page-turners, full of perception and humanity.

Alfred Hitchcock was an admirer, and had some of his stories adapted for television in the 1950s, including the classic 'Miss Bracegirdle Does Her Duty'.

So what happened? How could a writer so smart, so perceptive and with such a show-stopping turn of phrase have just vanished from memory? In writing a foreword (quoted from above) to a collection of short stories published just after Aumonier's early death at age 51, John Galsworthy finished with what has to be one of the most poignant and, unfortunately, least prophetic sentences in twentieth-century writing: 'But his shade may rest in peace, for in this volume, at least, he will outlive nearly all the writers of his day.'

Inexplicably, that did not happen—and why it did not is one of the sad mysteries of twentieth-century fiction, because his writing was singular: always compelling,

sometimes dazzling, and combining great heart with an unprecedented gift for the killer line:

> He was like a man utterly bored with every human experience—except perhaps drink. [THE ROOM]
>
> Was life a rag—a game played by lawyers, politicians, and people? [WHERE WAS WYCH STREET?]
>
> Thus you may see what a domineering personality, backed up by evening dress, may accomplish. [JUXTAPOSITIONS]

Ironically, two of his great strengths—his lightness of touch and his versatility—probably worked against his reputation. He never appeared to take himself seriously and he could not be pigeonholed, writing with ease and skill in a multiplicity of styles. Most of his best stories are comedies. At the same time, the poignant 'The Funny Man's Day' is about as perfect a short story as exists, and 'Burney's Laugh' is an insightful lament for life's inevitable trade-offs. He also wrote detective stories, adventure stories, and a memorably subversive Gothic story ('Old Fags').

About a third of the stories in this volume qualify as classics, and will never be forgotten by anyone who reads them. The rest are first-class, gripping entertainments. All have enough depth and detail to be read repeatedly. It is unusual for purely comic stories to be even funnier on a second reading, but 'The Landlord of The Love-a-Duck', for instance, has so much lurking beneath the surface that it demands to be read more than once. Taken together, these stories add up to to a master-class in short-story writing.

Stacy Aumonier wrote during, and in the decade after, World War I, and that war's battlegrounds and trenches feature in many of his stories. His views on war in general, and what he perceived as the hypocrisy of its rules and values, are summed up movingly in the musings of the naïve protagonist in 'Face':

> He had never conceived that a war could be like this. Sometimes he would lie awake at night and ruminate vaguely on the queer perversity of fate which suddenly made murder popular. He had been turned out of England because he had quite inadvertently killed his father for kicking his mother across the shins, and now he was praised for killing five men within a few minutes. He didn't know, of course, but perhaps some of those men—particularly that elderly plump man who coughed absurdly as he ran on to Caleb's bayonet—perhaps they were better men than his father, although foreigners, although enemy. It was very perplexing…

Impressively, out of the infamous trenches of that war, Stacy Aumonier was able to produce one of the funniest short stories of all time, 'A Source of Irritation'.

He took his characters from every rung of society (sometimes in the one story, as in 'The Octave of Jealousy') and from every walk, and every age, of life: sons who've wasted their inheritance; criminals; farm labourers; a clergyman's sister; gold-diggers; an effective little tyrant (aged 4 or 5?) in 'The Song of Praise'; a divinely-depicted music-hall comedian in the exquisite 'The Funny Man's Day'; the hapless fish-and-chips trader in the hilarious 'A Good Action'.

His talent for putting flesh on those characters in a few words was remarkable, such as in his portrait of the daunting club habitué in 'Juxtapositions':

> In spite of his missing limb, St Clair Chasseloup was the kind of man who always looked as though he had just had a cold bath, done Swedish drill, and then passed through the hairdresser's on his way to your presence.

or of the house-party guests being assessed as the possible perpetrators of a crime in 'Freddie Finds Himself':

> They all looked well off, well fed, and slightly vacant, entirely innocent of anything except the knowledge of what is done or what is not done.

> colds the whole time. When I spoke to Dr — about it, he acknowledged the dampness but said it didn't do the patients any harm. Then he talked about 'the men in the trenches'. I could never quite see the force of this comparison…If well enough, I expect to go to Switzerland in October for the winter.

He and his wife did travel to Montana in Switzerland for the winter of 1928. On 21st December 1928, however, he died of the 'fell and vindictive' disease in the beautiful setting of Clinique La Prairie, Clarens, by Lake Geneva.

The 29 stories included in this volume have been arranged—deliberately—without grouping in relation to style or topic. War stories, thoughtful stories, purely comedic stories are intermixed—and the criterion for their selection was the title on the cover.

For these really are *Extremely Entertaining Short Stories*, and they come with a guarantee. They will compel and amuse you. For a long tedious journey, a sojourn laid up in bed, or just hard times, this book is a sure thing.

S. J.

From a Foreword by John Galsworthy (winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1932) to a collection of some of Stacy Aumonier's short stories. He wrote it in 1929, the year after Aumonier's death.

I WRITE this Foreword with enthusiasm, for these are … tales of a real master of the short story. The word 'great' has been so overdone, and the word 'genius' is so fly-blown, that I shall use neither. Suffice it to say that Stacy Aumonier is one of the best short-story writers of all time, and that there is certainly no one more readable …

The first essential in a short-story writer is the power of interesting sentence by sentence. Aumonier had this power in prime degree. You do not have to 'get into' his stories. He is especially notable for investing his figures with the breath of life within a few sentences. Take a short story like 'The Funny Man's Day'—how wonderfully well we know that funny man not as a type only but as a human being! How remarkably Miss Bracegirdle, in twenty minutes of our time, becomes a permanent acquaintance! …

There was … something Gallic in Aumonier's temperament, or at least in his talent—not in his style, which is very English, but in his way of envisaging his subjects. This is not remarkable, considering his name and his face; but in spite of his French look and his Huguenot origin, he was truly English in his humour and attitude to life. French in mind, he was English in heart; for no Frenchman—not even Monsieur André Maurois—could have conceived Alfred Codling—'the man of letters', or 'the Great Unimpressionable', or 'The Grayles' …

A short-story writer is always beset by the temptation to be inventive rather than creative or even recreative. This is a temptation to which Aumonier rarely if ever succumbed. He was profoundly in love with life, and impregnated through and through by curiosity about life and its manifestations, whether simple or queer. All types were fish to his net; and he has given us the fruits of his passion for, and his curiosity about, existence with a deft and always interesting fidelity. And with what sympathy he can hit off character!... His humour is sly and dry and frequent and wholly delightful. And how he puts his finger on weak spots! Yet with what restraint he satirizes!

Stacy Aumonier is never heavy, never boring, never really trivial; interested himself, he keeps us interested. At the back of his tales there is belief in life and a philosophy of life, and of how many short-story writers can that be said? He understands the art of movement in a tale, he has the power of suggestion, he has a sense of line that most of us should envy; he is wholly uninfluenced by the dreary self-consciousness of novelty for novelty's sake. He is not tricky. He follows no fashion and no school. He is always himself. And can't he write? Ah! far better than far more pretentious writers. Nothing escapes his eye, but he describes without affectation or redundancy, and you sense in him a feeling for beauty that is never obtruded. He gets values right, and that is to say nearly everything. The easeful fidelity of his style has militated against his reputation in these somewhat posturing times. But his shade may rest in peace, for in this volume, at least, he will outlive nearly all the writers of his day.

John Galsworthy

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—I—

Miss Bracegirdle Does Her Duty

'This is the room, madame.'

'Ah, thank you…thank you.'

'Does it appear satisfactory to madame?'

'Oh, yes, thank you…quite.'

'Does madame require anything further?'

'Er—if not too late, may I have a hot bath?'

'*Parfaitement*, madame. The bathroom is at the end of the passage on the left. I will go and prepare it for madame.'

'There is one thing more…I have had a very long journey. I am very tired. Will you please see that I am not disturbed in the morning until I ring.'

'Certainly, madame.'

Millicent Bracegirdle was speaking the truth—she *was* tired. In the sleepy cathedral town of Easingstoke, from which she came, it was customary for everyone to speak the truth. It was customary, moreover, for everyone to lead simple, self-denying lives—to give up their time to good works and elevating thoughts. One had only to glance at little Miss Bracegirdle to see that in her was epitomized all the virtues and ideals of Easingstoke. Indeed, it was the pursuit of duty which had brought her to the Hôtel de l'Ouest at Bordeaux on this summer's night. She had travelled from Easingstoke to London, then without a break to Dover, crossed that horrid stretch of sea to Calais, entrained for Paris, where she of necessity had to spend four hours—a terrifying experience—and then had come on to Bordeaux, arriving at midnight. The reason of this journey being that someone had to come to Bordeaux to

meet her young sister-in-law, who was arriving the next day from South America. The sister-in-law was married to a missionary in Paraguay, but the climate not agreeing with her, she was returning to England. Her dear brother, the dean, would have come himself, but the claims on his time were so extensive, the parishioners would miss him so…it was clearly Millicent's duty to go.

She had never been out of England before, and she had a horror of travel, and an ingrained distrust of foreigners. She spoke a little French—sufficient for the purposes of travel and for obtaining any modest necessities, but not sufficient for carrying on any kind of conversation. She did not deplore this latter fact, for she was of opinion that French people were not the kind of people that one would naturally want to have conversation with; broadly speaking, they were not quite 'nice', in spite of their ingratiating manners.

The dear dean had given her endless advice, warning her earnestly not to enter into conversation with strangers, to obtain all information from the police, railway officials—in fact, anyone in an official uniform. He deeply regretted to say that he was afraid that France was not a country for a woman to travel about in *alone*. There were loose, bad people about, always on the lookout…He really thought perhaps he ought not to let her go. It was only by the utmost persuasion, in which she rather exaggerated her knowledge of the French language and character, her courage, and indifference to discomfort, that she managed to carry the day.

She unpacked her valise, placed her things about the room, tried to thrust back the little stabs of homesickness as she visualized her darling room at the deanery. How strange and hard and unfriendly seemed these foreign hotel bedrooms—heavy and depressing, no chintz and lavender and photographs of…all the dear family, the dean, the nephews and nieces, the interior of the cathedral during harvest festival, no samplers and needlework or

coloured reproductions of the paintings by Marcus Stone. Oh dear, how foolish she was! What did she expect?

She disrobed and donned a dressing gown; then, armed with a sponge-bag and towel, she crept timidly down the passage to the bathroom, after closing her bedroom door and turning out the light. The gay bathroom cheered her. She wallowed luxuriously in the hot water, regarding her slim legs with quiet satisfaction. And for the first time since leaving home there came to her a pleasant moment—a sense of enjoyment in her adventure. After all, it was rather an adventure, and her life had been peculiarly devoid of it. What queer lives some people must live, travelling about, having experiences! How old was she? Not really old—not by any means. Forty-two? Forty-three? She had shut herself up so. She hardly ever regarded the potentialities of age. As the world went, she was a well-preserved woman for her age. A life of self-abnegation, simple living, healthy walking and fresh air had kept her younger than these hurrying, pampered city people.

Love? yes, once when she was a young girl…he was a schoolmaster, a most estimable kind gentleman. They were never engaged—not actually, but it was a kind of understood thing. For three years it went on, this pleasant understanding and friendship. He was so gentle, so distinguished and considerate. She would have been happy to have continued in this strain forever. But there was something lacking. Stephen had curious restless lapses. From the physical aspect of marriage she shrunk—yes, even with Stephen, who was gentleness and kindness itself. And then one day…one day he went away—vanished, and never returned. They told her he had married one of the country girls—a girl who used to work in Mrs Forbes' dairy—not a very nice girl, she feared, one of these fast, pretty, foolish women. Heigho! well, she had lived that down, destructive as the blow appeared at the time. One lives everything down in time. There is always

—II—

A Source of Irritation

To look at old Sam Gates you would never suspect him of having nerves. His sixty-nine years of close application to the needs of the soil had given him a certain earthy stolidity. To observe him hoeing, or thinning out a broad field of swede turnips, hardly attracted one's attention, he seemed so much part and parcel of the whole scheme. He blended into the soil like a glorified swede. Nevertheless, the half-dozen people who claimed his acquaintance knew him to be a man who suffered from little moods of irritability.

And on this glorious morning a little incident annoyed him unreasonably. It concerned his niece Aggie. She was a plump girl with clear blue eyes and a face as round and inexpressive as the dumplings for which the county was famous. She came slowly across the long sweep of the downland and, putting down the bundle wrapped up in a red handkerchief which contained his breakfast and dinner, she said:

'Well, Uncle, is there any noos?'

Now this may not appear to the casual reader to be a remark likely to cause irritation, but it affected old Sam Gates as a very silly and unnecessary question. It was moreover the constant repetition of it which was beginning to anger him. He met his niece twice a day. In the morning she brought his bundle of food at seven, and when he passed his sister's cottage on the way home to tea at five she was invariably hanging about the gate. And on each occasion she always said, in exactly the same voice:

'Well, Uncle, is there any noos?'

'Noos!' What 'noos' should there be? For sixty-nine years he had never lived farther than five miles from Halvesham. For nearly sixty of those years he had bent his back above the soil. There were indeed historic occasions: once, for instance, when he had married Annie Hachet. And there was the birth of his daughter. There was also a famous occasion when he had visited London. Once he had been to a flower show at Market Roughborough. He either went or didn't go to church on Sundays. He had had many interesting chats with Mr James at 'The Cowman', and three years ago had sold a pig to Mrs Waig. But he couldn't always have interesting 'noos' of this sort up his sleeve. Didn't the silly gaffir know that for the last three weeks he had been thinning out turnips for Mr Dodge on this very same field? What 'noos' could there be?

He blinked at his niece, and didn't answer. She undid the parcel, and said:

'Mrs Goping's fowl got out again last night.'

He replied, 'Ah!' in a non-committal manner, and began to munch his bread and bacon. His niece picked up the handkerchief, and humming to herself, walked back across the field.

It was a glorious morning, and a white sea mist added to the promise of a hot day. He sat there munching, thinking of nothing in particular, but gradually subsiding into a mood of placid content. He noticed the back of Aggie disappear in the distance. It was a mile to the cottage, and a mile and a half to Halvesham. Silly things, girls! They were all alike. One had to make allowances. He dismissed her from his thoughts, and took a long swig of tea out of a bottle. Insects buzzed lazily. He tapped his pocket to assure himself that his pouch of shag was there, and then he continued munching. When he had finished, he lighted his pipe and stretched himself comfortably. He looked along the line of turnips he had thinned, and then across the adjoining field of swedes. Silver streaks appeared on the sea below the mist. In some dim way he

felt happy in his solitude amidst this sweeping immensity of earth and sea and sky.

And then something else came to irritate him. It was one of 'these dratted airyplanes'. 'Airyplanes' were his pet aversion. He could find nothing to be said in their favour. Nasty, noisy, vile-smelling things that seared the heavens, and made the earth dangerous. And every day there seemed to be more and more of them. Of course 'this old war' was responsible for a lot of them, he knew. The war was a 'plaguey noosance'. They were short-handed on the farm. Beer and tobacco were dear, and Mrs Stevens' nephew had been and got wounded in the foot.

He turned his attention once more to the turnips. But an 'airyplane' has an annoying genius for gripping one's attention. When it appears on the scene, however much we dislike it, it has a way of taking stage-centre; we cannot help constantly looking at it. And so it was with old Sam Gates. He spat on his hands, and blinked up at the sky. And suddenly the aeroplane behaved in a very extraordinary manner. It was well over the sea when it seemed to lurch in a drunken manner, and skimmed the water. Then it shot up at a dangerous angle and zigzagged. It started to go farther out, and then turned and made for the land. The engines were making a curious grating noise. It rose once more, and then suddenly dived downward, and came plump down right in the middle of Mr Dodge's field of swedes!

Finally, as if not content with this desecration, it ran along the ground, ripping and tearing up twenty-five yards of good swedes, and then came to a stop. Old Sam Gates was in a terrible state. The aeroplane was more than a hundred yards away, but he waved his arms, and called out:

'Hi! you there, you musn't land in they swedes! They're Mister Dodge's.'

The instant the aeroplane stopped, a man leaped out and gazed quickly round. He glanced at Sam Gates, and

—*III*—

Juxtapositions

'Where we are all mixed up,' said my friend, Samuel Squidge, vigorously scraping down the *Portrait of the Artist, by Himself* with a palette knife, 'is in our juxtapositions. It's all nonsense, I tell you. People talk about a bad colour. There's no such thing as a bad colour. Every colour is beautiful in its right juxtaposition. When you hear a woman say "I hate puce" or "I love green", she might as well say "I hate sky" or "I love grass". If she had seen puce used in a colour-print as Hiroshige the Second used it—green—fancy *loving* green! The idiot! Do you remember what Corot said? He said Nature was too green and too badly lighted. Now the old man was quite right—'

When Squidge starts talking in this strain he is rather apt to go off the deep end. I yawned and murmured sweetly:

'We were talking about Colin St Clair Chasseloup.'

'Exactly! And I'm trying to point out to you how, with Colin St Clair Chasseloup, it's all a question of juxtapositions. You say that Colin is a frozen drunkard, a surly bore, a high-pressure nonentity. Listen to me. We're all nice people, every one of us. Give a man the right air he should breathe, the right food he should eat, the right work he should do, the right people he should associate with, and he's a perfect dear, every one of him. There isn't a real irreconcilable on the earth. But the juxtaposition—'

'What has Chasseloup to complain of? He has money, a charming wife, children, a place in the country, a flat in town. He does exactly what he likes.'

Squidge surveyed me with amazement.

'You ass! You prize ass! I thought you wrote about people. I thought you were supposed to understand people! And there you go and make a smug, asinine remark like that.'

I blushed, fully conscious that Squidge was being justifiably merciless. It was an asinine statement but then I was merely putting out a feeler, and I could not explain this to the portrait painter. After all, I did not really know St Clair Chasseloup. He was only a club acquaintance, and a very unclubbable acquaintance he was. He appeared to dislike club life. To a stranger he seemed to reek of patrician intolerance. He was an aristocrat of aristocrats. His well-set-up, beautifully groomed figure, clean-cut features, well-poised head, were all in the classic tradition of a ruling caste. It was only about the rather heavy eyelids and the restless mouth that one detected the cynic, the disappointed man, the disillusioned boor. Why?…It was no affair of mine, the secret troubles of this man's heart. But it was his business to behave himself to me decently. To hell with Colin St Clair Chasseloup! I disliked the man. But then we all dislike people who we feel nurture an innate sense of superiority to us. Added to this trying exterior of complete self-absorption and superiority, one had also to allow for the vanity of the cripple.

St Clair Chasseloup had lost his right leg just below the knee. It happened before the war. Indeed, at the time when he was a naval cadet at Osborne, skylarking with other young cadets, he had slipped from a pinnace on a rough day and his right foot had been crushed against the stone wall of a jetty. The leg had to be amputated. That was the end of his naval career. And his father had been a commodore before him, and his father's father was in the Battle of Trafalgar, and so on right away back to the spacious days of Elizabeth—all naval men. Devilish bad luck, you may say! Of course, one had to allow for the bitterness that this misfortune must have produced.

At the same time it doesn't excuse a man not answering when he's spoken to by a fellow-member at the club, or for looking at one—like Chasseloup did!

Squidge's championship of the thwarted seaman amused me. You could not conceive a more remarkable contrast. I was not even aware that they knew each other. In spite of his missing limb, St Clair Chasseloup was the kind of man who always looked as though he had just had a cold bath, done Swedish drill, and then passed through the hairdresser's on his way to your presence. He was aggressively fit. Squidge looked as though a walk to the end of the street would have brought on valvular disease of the heart. From the centre of a dank beard, limp ends of cigarettes eternally clung. Physically, he was just comic. It was his vivid eyes and his queer excitable voice that told you that he was a person of no mean vitality. He was just as sociable and optimistic as Chasseloup was taciturn and moribund. And yet they met on some odd plane, it appeared. Well, well, I could understand Squidge finding merit in Chasseloup, indeed in anyone, but what would Chasseloup's opinion of Squidge be? It made me shudder to contemplate. On the occasion I am recounting it was almost impossible to extract any further intimate details out of Squidge, for he had flown off on one of his pet theoretical tangents.

'It's a queer rum thing,' he was saying, 'why people ever get married at all. You simply can't get level with it—the most unlikely, most outrageous combinations! The more outrageous the more likely they are to be a success. You see some scraggy goat of a woman and you think to yourself, "Poor wretch! whatever sort of chance has she got of getting married?" and the next thing you hear is that she's married to some god who adores her, and they have a large family of boys at Harrow and girls at Girton. Queer! Another woman breathes sunlight and the men pursue her, and nothing happens. She's unhappy. I know a woman who is married to a man she is apparently in love

—IV—

The Room

The Room was in Praxton Street, which is not very far from the Euston Road. It was fifteen feet by ten feet six inches. It had a door and a window. The window was covered by stiff lace curtains with several tears in them, framed by red plush curtains, which, if pulled together, failed to meet by nearly a yard. The furniture consisted of a circular mahogany table, a Victorian sideboard with mirrors inset in the panels above, a narrow-seated horsehair chair which had a tendency to shoot the occupant into the fireplace, two other mahogany chairs with green velvet seats, a white enamelled flower-stand supporting a puce-coloured earthenware pot in which a dismal aspidistra struggled for existence. In the angle between the door and the window was an iron frame supporting what proved to be a bed by night and a dumping ground for odds and ends by day. The wall was papered with a strange pattern of violet and pink flowers leaping in irregular waves ceiling-wards. On the walls were many framed oleographs, one of the Crucifixion, one of a small boy holding a piece of sultana cake on a plate and a large collie dog regarding the cake with melancholy greed. There was a photograph of somebody's husband with a square beard and a white stock, two watercolours of some foreign country characterized by blue mountains reflected in a lake, and a large print of the coronation of King George. On the floor was a yellow and red carpet of indeterminate pattern worn right through in all the most frequented spots of the room. Around the gas chandelier a dozen or so flies played their eternal game of touch.

Now this is a brief description of inanimate objects

—except for the flies. But we all know that even inanimate objects—particularly a collection of inanimate objects—have a soul. That is to say that they subtly affect everyone on the spiritual plane. Perhaps it would be safer to say that they have a message.

To James Wilbraham Waite, seated on the horsehair chair on a bright July afternoon, they brought an abrupt message. He looked around the room and he said to himself out aloud:

'This is simply hell!'

He had occupied this room in the lodging-house for seven years, and it had taken all this time to breed in him the special kind of intense loathing and hate which he felt at that moment. It was not the quick hate of sudden anger. It was the slow combustible passion of years of disappointment and dissatisfaction. The room seemed to embody in itself all that he detested and yearned to avoid.

His father had been a small Essex farmer, and James Wilbraham had spent his boyhood on the farm. Owing, however, to Mr Waite senior's lack of concentration on the commercial side of the farm, and his too great concentration on the good stuff served over the bar of the Dog and Destiny, he went bankrupt, and died soon after. His wife had died many years before, and James Wilbraham, being an only son, found himself at the age of eighteen alone in the world without even a mangel-wurzel to his name. He was a dreamy boy, loving an open-air life. He had done fairly well at the Grammar School. He had no head for mathematics, but excelled at theoretical subjects, which brought him no credits or marks. When his father died there was apparently nothing for him to do but become a farm hand. One of the masters at the school, who had taken an interest in him, did his best to dissuade him from this course. His name was Mr Flint, and he pointed out the hopeless future of manual labour without capital. He emphasized the fact that James had

had quite a good education and that he was intelligent, and that he had only to use his brains to make his way in the world. For two years James fought against the good advice of his friend. He worked for a local farmer, and he might be working for the same farmer now but for the fact that he fell in love with a girl he had seen walking about the streets of Pondersham. He never spoke to her, but she stirred some profound note in his nature. It was less the girl herself, perhaps, than the idea of love in the abstract. She was what was known as a lady, inaccessible, remote, fragile as a china vase. He began to regard his rough hands and coarse clothes with misgiving. And then one day he went to the pictures with an acquaintance and found himself suddenly projected into a world of magnificent Life, spelt with a very large L, where gorgeous women flashed in and out of priceless automobiles, and powdered flunkeys ushered them into marvellous palaces. The contrast was too violent. If ever he wanted to possess one of these splendid creatures—well, he could never do so as a farm hand.

His ideas of farming had never been academic, to put it mildly. He had inherited a great deal of his father's vagueness. During his father's lifetime he had regarded the soil as a mysterious substitute for a mother. It succoured him with the good things he liked, and made few calls on his industry. He liked to ride over it, and see the little green shoots budding. Then he would dream by a pond, or idle the hours away with a dog and a ferret.

Consequently when he informed his employer one day, with a sigh, that he had decided to give up farming, that gentleman accepted his resignation with unblushing satisfaction. Through the influence of Mr Flint he got a situation as a clerk in a corn chandler's at Pondersham. He earned seventeen and sixpence a week, and managed to keep himself—in a state of chronic hunger.

He endured this life for over a year, when again through the influence of Mr Flint he considerably

—*XXVIII*—

The Brown Wallet

Giles Meiklejohn was a beaten man. Huddled in the corner of a third-class railway carriage on the journey from Epsom to London, he sullenly reviewed the unfortunate series of episodes which had brought him into the position he found himself. Dogged by bad luck!…Thirty-seven years of age; married; a daughter ten years old; nothing attained; his debts exceeding his assets; and now—out of work!

He had tried, too. A little pampered in his upbringing, when the crisis came he had faced it manfully. When, during his very first year at Oxford, the news came of his father's bankruptcy and sudden death from heart failure, he immediately went up to town and sought a situation in any capacity. His mother had died many years previously, and his only sister was married to a missionary in Burma. His accomplishments at that time? Well, he could play cricket and squash rackets; he knew a smattering of Latin and a smudge of French; he remembered a few dates in history, and he could add up and subtract (a little unreliably). He was good-looking, genial, and of excellent physique. He had no illusions about the difficulties which faced him.

His father had always been a kind of practical visionary. Connected with big insurance interests, he was a man of large horizons, profound knowledge, and great ideals. Around his sudden failure and death there had always clung an atmosphere of mystery. That he had never expected to fail, and was unprepared for death a week before it happened is certain. He had had plans for Giles which up to that time he had had no opportunity of

putting into operation. The end must have been cyclonic.

Through the intervention of friends, Giles obtained a situation as clerk in an insurance office, his wages amounting to fifteen shillings a week, a sum he had managed to live on. In the evening he attended classes, and studied shorthand and typewriting. At first the freshness of this experience, aided by youth and good health, stimulated him. But as time went on he began to realize that he had chosen work for which he was utterly unsuited. He worked hard but made no progress. He had not a mathematical mind; he was slow in the up-take. The chances of promotion were remote. The men around him seemed so quick and clever. At the end of two years he decided to resign and try something else. If only he had been taught a profession! After leaving the insurance office he went through various experiences: working at a seedsman's nursery, going round with a circus, attempting to get on the stage and failing, working his passage out to South Africa, more clerking, nearly dying from enteric through drinking polluted water, working on an ostrich farm, returning to England as a male nurse to a young man who was mentally deficient.

It was not till he met Minting that he achieved any success at all. They started a press-cutting agency in two rooms in Bloomsbury. Minting was clever, and Giles borrowed fifty pounds (from whom we will explain later). Strangely enough the press-cutting agency was a success. After the first six months they began to do well.

It was at that time that he met Eleanor. She was secretary to Sir Herbert Woolley, the well-known actor-manager, and she happened to call one day concerning the matter of press cuttings for her employer. From the very first moment there was never any question on either side but that both he and she had met their fate. Neither had there been an instant's regret on either side ever since. They were completely devoted. With the business promising well, he married her within three months. It

is probable that if the business had not existed he would have done the same. They went to live in a tiny flat in Maida Vale, and a child was born the following year.

A period of unclouded happiness followed. There was no fortune to be made out of press cuttings, but a sufficient competence to keep Eleanor and the child in reasonable comfort. Everything progressed satisfactorily for three years. And then one July morning the blow fell. At that time he and Minting were keeping a junior clerk. Giles and Eleanor had been away to the sea for a fortnight's holiday. Minting was to go on the day of their return. When Giles arrived at the office he found the clerk alone. To his surprise he heard that Minting had not been there himself for a fortnight. He did not have long to wait to find the solution of the mystery. The first hint came in the discovery of a bank counterfoil. Minting had withdrawn every penny of their small capital and vanished!

Giles did not tell his wife. He made a desperate effort to pull the concern together, but in vain. There were a great number of outstanding debts, and he had just nine shillings when he returned from his holiday. He rushed round and managed to borrow a pound or two here and there, sufficient to buy food and pay off the clerk, but he quickly foresaw that the crash was inevitable. He had not the business acumen of Minting, and no one seemed prepared to invest money in a bankrupt press cutting agency. In the midst of his troubles the original source of the fifty pounds, upon which he started the business, wrote peremptorily demanding the money back. He went there and begged and pleaded, but it was obvious that the 'original source' looked upon him as a waster and ne'er-do-well.

He went bankrupt, and Eleanor had to be told. She took it in just the way he knew she would take it. She said:

'Never mind, darling. We'll soon get on our feet again.'

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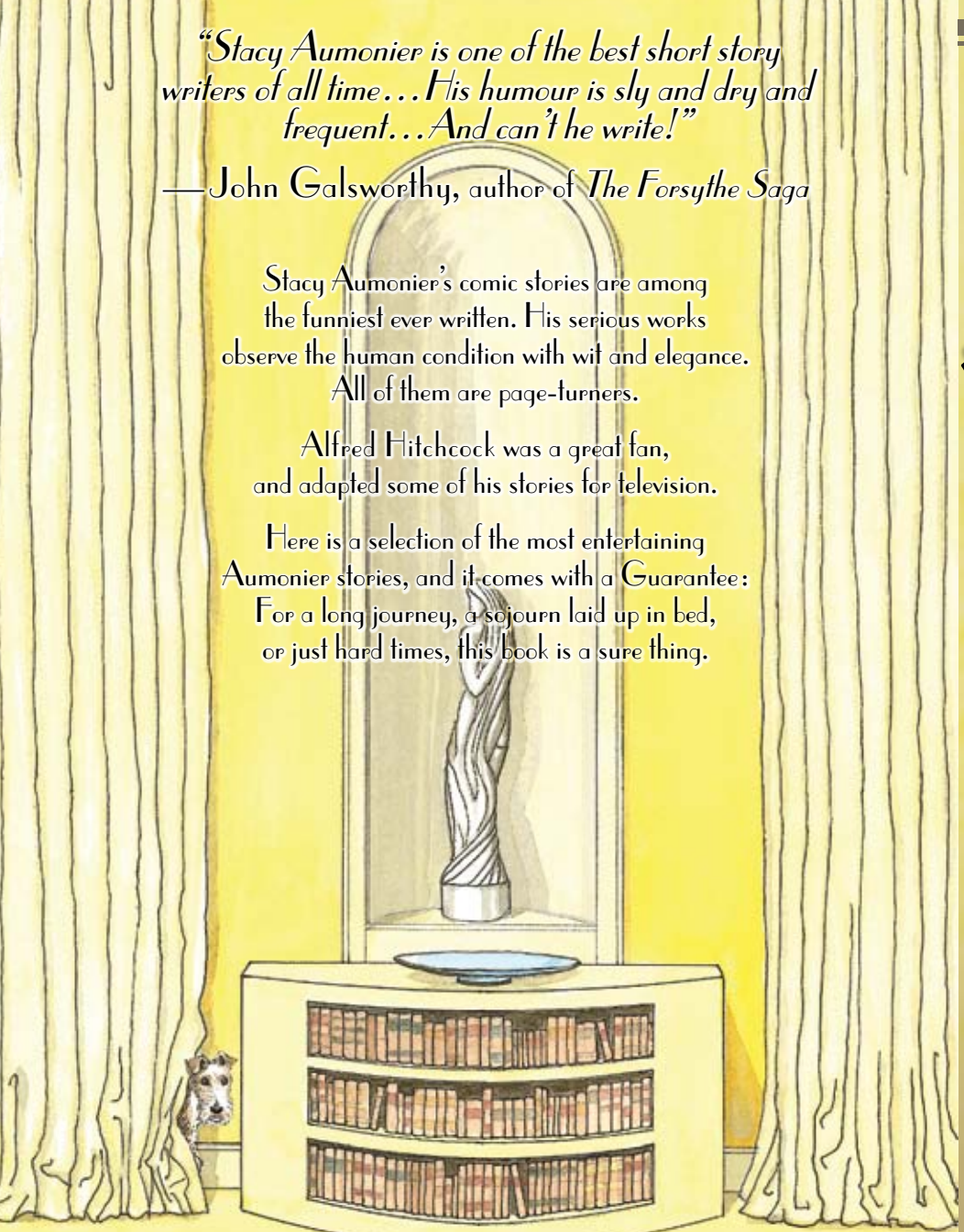

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