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TIME FOR A QUICK ONE?

By A. R. D. FAIRBURN

HOW do you feel about short stories? They've always given me a lot of trouble. I find them awfully difficult to cope with. I'd be happier in my mind if I knew I wasn't the only one.

Poetry is difficult, too, of course, but in a different way. Most of it is more or less unreadable without the help of a geiger-counter, or at the very least, a gum-spear. We people who write poetry only do it to annoy. But the short story writers aren't like that at all. I feel they do their best for us all the time, but circumstances are against them. It's the short story form itself that is the cause of the awkwardness.

You begin reading one. After nine pages you know that Bessie, the ambitious daughter of a small inn-keeper, has managed to become engaged to Gervase Allardyce, a wealthy landowner's son who (unknown to the unsuspecting Bessie) has had an affair with her twin sister, and has just been told by an aunt of hers (Bessie's) that (unknown to Bessie) a fortune has just been left to her—that is to say, to Bessie—by an uncle in Australia, who actually is a first cousin of Gervase Allardyce's father, and left England under a cloud after cheating at croquet. The effort you have made to take all this in leaves you exhausted, but you struggle through to the end, fourteen pages further on. At that point you come to the second short story of the sixty-three in the omnibus volume, and find once more that you have to break in a lot of new territory and fence and drain it before you can really get started.

I'm mentally lazy and just as conservative as hell. I like to get dug into a novel with a nice simple plot that goes on and on in a leisurely way for about five hundred pages. I don't want to have to adjust myself to a whole new world—new people, new places, different situations—every quarter of an hour. I have a friend who has just set himself to read the whole of Trollope. I can understand his feelings. I think I'll look out some of the serials in those old volumes of *Chums* in the box in the wash-house.

If any more short stories are to be written, let them be really *short* ones. Not "short short" stories, as they are called, which often run to as much as 1200 or 1500 words. Even they can impose a strain on the mind.

I'll knock off one or two, just to show you what I mean. Here's quite a nice little yarn called

110 IN THE SHADES

Gilbert Wutherspoon was bored. His wife drove him to drink, and his lust for speed drove him to driving. He took to drunken driving. Logical, huh? Wutherspoon went out one morning to try out his new sports car, which the dealer said would do a hundred and ten. Wutherspoon carried heavy life insurance. Mrs. Wutherspoon lived merrily ever after.

Short enough? To the point? Packed with human interest? Just think how many

pages I could have run it out to if I'd liked, and still have got away with calling it a "short" story.

Here's another time-saver. I thought of calling it

BRUSH UP YOUR CHASE

I lifted my foot and planted my heel on his nose, hard. I screwed it round a few times, just for good measure. I never cared for him, much. Then I kicked his face in. I gave it all I had.

Not care for it? Not think it was a likeness? He could keep his lousy twenty guineas.

I tore the canvas out and chucked it on the fire. The frame would do for the next time—if there was a next time.

See what I mean? Nothing wrong with that, was there? Neither of those two is a Nobel Prize Winner, of course. But they do leave you time to weed the cabbages and give the lawn a bit of a once-over. Above all, they don't give you a hod-full of mental bricks to carry up a slippery slope.

Just before we call it a day—I wouldn't want to hold you up—here's something very daring, to show you what can be done if you try hard. It's got a very simple title, just

THE ODYSSEY

or

HOMER IS MY PIGEON

After the war? Well, I had a bit of a look around. Oh, here and there. Met a lot of people—nice people some of them. Others not so nice. That's just the way it comes any time, after all. Women? Nothing for publication. You wouldn't believe me if I told you, anyway.

Well, I reckon it's good to be home again, mighty good. Next trip? Maybe Melbourne in November, if they nominate me. But I won't be away so long next time. Between you and me, the wife's not the only one I told to get weaving. Not good to be away such a long stretch at a time. Can't keep an eye on things.

How's that? The nub? The kernel? What more do you want—an epic?

