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INTRODUCTION

These disjointed thoughts about one of Leonard Merrick's most articulate books must begin with a personal confession.

For many years I walked about this earth avoiding the works of Leonard Merrick, as other men might have avoided an onion. This insane aversion was created in my mind chiefly by admirers of what is called the "cheerful" note in fiction. Such people are completely agreed in pronouncing Mr. Merrick to be a pessimistic writer. I hate pessimistic writers.

Years ago, when I was of an age when the mind responds acutely to exterior impressions, some well-meaning uncle, or other fool, gave me a pessimistic book to read. This was a work of fiction which the British Public had hailed as a masterpiece of humour. It represented, with an utter fury of pessimism, the spiritual inadequacies of—but why go into details.

Now, I have to confess that for a long time I did Mr. Merrick the extraordinary injustice of believing him to be the author of that popular masterpiece.

The mistake, though intellectually unpardonable, may perhaps be condoned on other grounds. By virtue of that process of thought which we call the "association of ideas," I naturally connected Mr. Merrick with this work of super-pessimism; my friends being so confirmed in their belief that he was a super-pessimist.

But by virtue of a fortunate accident, I at last got the truth about Mr. Merrick. This event arose from the action of a right-minded butcher, who, having exhausted his stock of *The Pigeon-Fancier's Gazette*, sent me my weekly supply of dog-bones wrapped about with Leonard Merrick.

These dog-bones happened to reach my house at a moment when no other kind of literary nutriment was to be had. Having nothing better to read I read the dog-bone wrappers. Thus, by dog-bones, was I brought to Merrick: the most jolly, amusing, and optimistic of all spiritual friends.

The book to which these utterances are prefixed is to my mind one of

the few *really* amusing books which have been published in England during my lifetime. But, then, I think that all of Mr. Merrick's books are amusing: even his "earnest" books, such as *The Actor-Manager*, *When Love Flies out o' the Window*, or *The Position of Peggy Harper*.

It is, of course, true that such novels as these are unlikely to be found congenial by those persons who derive entertainment from fiction like my uncle's present. On the other hand, there are people in the world with a capacity for being amused by psychological inquiry. To such people I would say: "Don't miss Merrick." The extraordinary cheerfulness of Mr. Merrick's philosophy is a fact which will impress itself upon all folk who are able to take a really cheerful view of life.

All of Mr. Merrick's sermons—I do not hesitate to call his novels "sermons," because no decent novel can be anything else—all his sermons, I say, point to this conclusion: that people who go out deliberately to look for happiness, to kick for it, and fight for it, or who try to buy it with money, will miss happiness; this being a state of heart—a mere outgrowth, more often to be found by a careless and self-forgetful vagrant than by the deliberate and self-conscious seeker. A cheerful doctrine this. Not only cheerful, but self-evidently true. How right it is, and how cheerful it is, to think that while philosophers and clergymen strut about this world looking out, and smelling out, for its prime experiences, more careless and less celebrated men are continually finding such things, without effort, without care, in irregular and unconsecrated places.

In novel after novel, Mr. Merrick has preached the same good-humoured, cheerful doctrine: the doctrine of anti-fat. He asks us to believe—he *makes* us believe—that a man (or woman) is not merely

virtuous, but merely sane, who exchanges the fats of fulfilment for the little lean pleasures of honourable hope and high endeavour. Oh wise, oh witty Mr. Merrick!

Mr. Merrick has not, to my knowledge, written one novel in which his hero is represented as having achieved complacency. Mr. Merrick's heroes all undergo the very human experience of "hitting a snag." They are none of them represented as *enjoying* this experience; but none of them whimper and none of them "rat."

If anybody could prove to me that Mr. Merrick had ever invented a hero who submitted tamely to tame success, to fat prosperity; or who had stepped, were it ever so lightly, into the dirty morass of accepted comfort, then would I cheerfully admit to anybody that Leonard Merrick is a Pessimistic Writer. But until this proof be forthcoming, I stick to my opinion: I stick to the conviction that Mr. Merrick is the gayest, cheer fullest, and most courageous of living humorists.

This opinion is a general opinion, applicable to Mr. Merrick's general work. This morning, however, I am asked to narrow my field of view: to contemplate not so much Mr. Merrick at large as Mr. Merrick in particular: to look at Mr. Merrick in his relationship to this one particular book: *A Chair on the Boulevard*.

Now, if I say, as I have said, that Mr. Merrick is cheerful in his capacity of solemn novelist, what am I to say of Mr. Merrick in his lighter aspect, that of a writer of *feuilletons*? Addressing myself to an imaginary audience of Magazine Enthusiasts, I ask them to tell me whether, judged even by comparison with their favourite fiction, some of the stories to be found in this volume are not exquisitely amusing?

The first story in the book—that which Mr. Merrick calls "The Tragedy of a Comic Song"—is in my view the funniest story of this century: but I don't ask or expect the Magazine Enthusiast to share this view or to endorse that judgment. "The Tragedy of a Comic Song" is essentially one of those productions in which the reader is expected to collaborate. The author has deliberately contrived certain voids of narrative; and his reader is expected to populate these anecdotal wastes. This is asking more than it is fair to ask of a Magazine Enthusiast. No genuine Magazine reader cares for the elusive

or allusive style in fiction. "The Tragedy of a Comic Song" won't do for Bouverie Street, however well and completely it may do for me.

But there are other stories in this book. There is that screaming farce called "The Suicides in the Rue Sombre." Now, then, you Magazine zealots, speak up and tell me truly: is there anything too difficult for you in this? If so, the psychology of what is called "public taste" becomes a subject not suited to public discussion.

The foregoing remarks and considerations apply equally to such stories

as "The Dress Clothes of M. Pomponnet" and "Tricotrin Entertains." There are other stories which delight me, as, for example, "Little-Flower-of-the-Wood": but this jerks us back again to the essential Mr.

Merrick: he who demands collaboration.

There are, again, other stories, and yet others; but to write down all their titles here would be merely to transcribe the index page of the book. Neither the reader nor I can afford to waste our time like that.

I have said nothing about the technical qualities of Mr. Merrick's work. I don't intend to do so. It has long been a conceit of mine to believe that professional vendors of letterpress should reserve their mutual discussions of technique for technical occasions, such as those when men of like mind and occupation sit at table, with a bottle between them.

I am convinced that Mr. Merrick is a very great and gifted man, deeply skilled in his profession. I can bring forth arguments and proofs to support this conviction; but I fail utterly to see why I should do so. To people who have a sense of that which is sincere and fresh in fiction, these facts will be apparent. To them my arguments and illustrations would be profitless. As for those honest persons to whom the excellencies of Merrick are not apparent, I can only think that nothing which I or any other man could say would render them obvious. "Happiness is in ourselves," as the Vicar remarked to the donkey who was pulling the lawn-mower.

Good luck, Leonard Merrick, and good cheer! I shout my greeting to you across the ripples of that inky lake which is our common fishery.

A. NEIL LYONS.

A CHAIR ON THE BOULEVARD

THE TRAGEDY OF A COMIC SONG

I like to monopolise a table in a restaurant, unless a friend is with me, so I resented the young man's presence. Besides, he had a melancholy face. If it hadn't been for the piano-organ, I don't suppose I should have spoken to him. As the organ that was afflicting Lisle Street began to volley a comic song of a day that was dead, he started.

"That tune!" he murmured in French. If I did not deceive myself, tears sprang to his eyes.

I was curious. Certainly, on both sides of the Channel, we had long ago had more than enough of the tune—no self-respecting organ-grinder rattled it now. That the young Frenchman should wince at the tune I understood. But that he should weep!

I smiled sympathetically. "We suffered from it over here as well," I remarked.

"I did not know," he said, in English that reproved my French, "it was sung in London also—'Partant pour le Moulin?'"

"Under another name," I told him, "it was an epidemic."

Clearly, the organ had stirred distressing memories in him, for though we fell to chatting, I could see that he neither talked nor dined with any relish. As luck would have it, too, the instrument of torture resumed its répertoire well within hearing, and when "Partant pour le Moulin" was reached again, he clasped his head.

"You find it so painful?" I inquired.

"Painful?" he exclaimed. "Monsieur, it is my 'istory, that comic tune! It is to me romance, tragedy, ruin. Will you hear? Wait! I shall range my ideas. Listen!"

* * * * *

It is Paris, at Montmartre—we are before the door of a laundress. A girl approaches. Her gaze is troubled, she frowns a little. What ails her? I shall tell you: the laundress has refused to deliver her washing until her bill is paid. And the girl cannot pay it—not till Saturday— and she has need of things to put on. It is a moment of anxiety.

She opens the door. Some minutes pass. The girl reappears, holding under her arm a little parcel. Good! she has triumphed. In coming out she sees a young man, pale, abstracted, who stands before the shop. He does not attempt to enter. He stands motionless, regarding the window with an air forlorn.

"Ah," she says to herself, "here is another customer who cannot pay his bill!"

But wait a little. After 'alf an hour what happens? She sees the young man again! This time he stands before a modest restaurant. Does he go in? No, again no! He regards the window sorrowfully. He sighs. The dejection of his attitude would melt a stone.

"Poor boy," she thought; "he cannot pay for a dinner either!"

The affair is not finished. How the summer day is beautiful—she will do some footing! Figure yourself that once more she perceives the young man. Now it is before the mont-de-piété, the pawnbroker's. She watches him attentively. Here, at least, he will enter, she does not doubt. She is wrong. It is the same thing—he regards, he laments, he turns away!

"Oh, mon Dieu," she said. "Nothing remains to him to pawn even!"

It is too strong! She addressed him:

"Monsieur!"

But, when she has said "Monsieur," there is the question how she shall continue. Now the young man regards the girl instead of the pawnbroker's. Her features are pretty—or "pretty well"; her costume has been made by herself, but it is not bad; and she has chic—above all she has chic. He asks:

"What can I have the pleasure to do for you?"

Remark that she is bohemian, and he also.

The conversation was like this:

"Monsieur, three times this morning I have seen you. It was impossible that I resist speaking. You have grief?"

"Frightful!" he said.

"Perhaps," she added timidly, "you have hunger also?"

"A hunger insupportable, mademoiselle!"

"I myself am extremely hard up, monsieur, but will you permit that I offer you what I can?"

"Angel!" the young man exclaimed. "There must be wings under your coat. But I beg of you not to fly yet. I shall tell you the reason of my grief. If you will do me the honour to seat yourself at the café opposite, we shall be able to talk more pleasantly."

This appeared strange enough, this invitation from a young man who she had supposed was starving; but wait a little! Her amazement increased when, to pay for the wine he had ordered, her companion threw on to the table a bank-note with a gesture absolutely careless.

She was in danger of distrusting her eyes.

"Is it a dream?" she cried. "Is it a vision from the *Thousand and One Nights*, or is it really a bank-note?"

"Mademoiselle, it is the mess of pottage," the young man answered gloomily. "It is the cause of my sadness: for that miserable money, and more that is to come, I have sold my birthright."

She was on a ship—no, what is it, your expression?—"at sea!"

"I am a poet," he explained; "but perhaps you may not know my work; I am not celebrated. I am Tricotrin, mademoiselle—Gustave Tricotrin, at your feet! For years I have written, aided by ambition, and an uncle who manufactures silk in Lyons. Well, the time is arrived when he is monstrous, this uncle. He says to me, 'Gustave, this cannot last—you make no living, you make nothing but debts.

(My tragedies he ignores.) Either you must be a poet who makes money, or you must be a partner who makes silk,' How could I defy him? — he holds the purse. It was unavoidable that I stooped. He has given me a sum to satisfy my creditors, and Monday I depart for Lyons. In the meantime, I take tender farewells of the familiar scenes I shall perhaps never behold again."

"How I have been mistaken!" she exclaimed. And then: "But the hunger you confessed?"

"Of the soul, mademoiselle," said the poet — "the most bitter!"

"And you have no difficulties with the laundress?"

"None," he groaned. "But in the bright days of poverty that have fled for ever, I have had many difficulties with her. This morning I reconstituted the situation — I imagined myself without a sou, and without a collar."

"The little restaurant," she questioned, "where I saw you dining on the odour?"

"I figured fondly to myself that I was ravenous and that I dared not enter. It was sublime."

"The mont-de-piété?"

"There imagination restored to me the vanished moments when I have mounted with suspense, and my least deplorable suit of clothes." His emotion was profound. "It is my youth to which I am bidding adieu!" he cried. "It is more than that — it is my aspirations and my renown!"

"But you have said that you have no renown," she reminded him.

"So much the more painful," said the young man; "the hussy we could not win is always the fairest — I part from renown even more despairingly than from youth."

She felt an amusement, an interest. But soon it was the turn of him to feel an interest — the interest that had consequences so important, so heart-breaking, so *fatales*! He had demanded of her, most naturally, her history, and this she related to him in a style dramatic. Myself, I have not the style dramatic, though I avow to you I admire that.

"We are in a provincial town," she said to the young man, "we are in Rouen—the workroom of a modiste. Have no embarrassment, monsieur Tricotrin, you, at least, are invisible to the girls who sew! They sew all day and talk little—already they are *tristes*, resigned. Among them sits one who is different—one passionate, ambitious—a girl who burns to be *divette*, singer, who is devoured by longings for applause, fashion, wealth. She has made the acquaintance of a little pastrycook. He has become fascinated, they are affianced. In a month she will be married."

The young man, Tricotrin, well understood that the girl she described was herself.

"What does she consider while she sits sewing?" she continued. "That the pastrycook loves her, that he is generous, that she will do her most to be to him a good wife? Not at all. Far from that! She considers, on the contrary, that she was a fool to promise him; she considers how she shall escape—from him, from Rouen, from her ennui— she seeks to fly to Paris. Alas! she has no money, not a franc. And she sews—always she sews in the dull room—and her spirit rebels."

"Good!" said the poet. "It is a capital first instalment."

"The time goes on. There remains only a week to the marriage morning. The little home is prepared, the little pastrycook is full of joy. *Alors*, one evening they go out; for her the sole attraction in the town is the hall of varieties. Yes, it is third class, it is not great things; however, it is the only one in Rouen. He purchases two tickets. What a misfortune—it is the last temptation to her! They stroll back; she takes his arm—under the moon, under the stars; but she sees only the lamps of Paris!—she sees only that he can say nothing she cares to hear!"

"Ah, unhappy man!" murmured the poet.

"They sit at a café table, and he talks, the fiancé, of the bliss that is to come to them. She attends to not a word, not a syllable. While she smiles, she questions herself, frenzied, how she can escape. She has commanded a *sirup*. As she lifts her glass to the syphon, her gaze falls on the ring she wears—the ring of their betrothal. "To the fu-

ture, cher ange!' says the fiancé. 'To the future, vieux chéri!' she says. And she laughs in her heart—for she resolves to sell the ring!"

Tricotrin had become absolutely enthralled.

"She obtained for the ring forty-five francs the next day—and for the little pastrycook all is finished. She wrote him a letter—'Good-bye.' He has lost his reason. Mad with despair, he has flung himself before an electric car, and is killed.... It is strange," she added to the poet, who regarded her with consternation, "that I did not think sooner of the ring that was always on my finger, n'est-ce-pas? It may be that never before had I felt so furious an impulse to desert him. It may be also—that there was no ring and no pastrycook!" And she broke into peals of laughter.

"Ah, mon Dieu," exclaimed the young man, "but you are enchanting! Let us go to breakfast—you are the kindred soul I have looked for all my life. By-the-bye, I may as well know your name?"

Then, monsieur, this poor girl who had trembled before her laundress, she told him a name which was going, in a while, to crowd the Ambassadeurs and be famous through all Paris—a name which was to mean caprices, folly, extravagance the most wilful and reckless. She answered—and it said nothing yet—"My name is Paulette Fleury."

* * * * *

The piano-organ stopped short, as if it knew the Frenchman had reached a crisis in his narrative. He folded his arms and nodded impressively.

"Voilà! Monsieur, I 'ave introduced you to Paulette Fleury! It was her beginning."

He offered me a cigarette, and frowned, lost in thought, at the lady who was chopping bread behind the counter.

"Listen," he resumed.

* * * * *

They have breakfasted; they have fed the sparrows around their chairs, and they have strolled under the green trees in the sunshine. She was singing then at a little café-concert the most obscure. It is

arranged, before they part, that in the evening he shall go to applaud her.

He had a friend, young also, a composer, named Nicolas Pitou. I cannot express to you the devotion that existed between them. Pitou was employed at a publisher's, but the publisher paid him not much better than his art. The comrades have shared everything: the loans from the *mont-de-piété*, the attic, and the dreams. In Montmartre it was said "Tricotrin and Pitou" as one says "Orestes and Pylades." It is beautiful such affection, hein? Listen!

Tricotrin has recounted to his friend his meeting with Paulette, and when the hour for the concert is arrived, Pitou accompanied him. The musician, however, was, perhaps, the more sedate. He has gone with little expectation; his interest was not high.

What a surprise he has had! He has found her an actress—an artist to the ends of the fingers. Tricotrin was astonished also. The two friends, the poet and the composer, said "Mon Dieu!" They regarded the one the other. They said "Mon Dieu!" again. Soon Pitou has requested of Tricotrin an introduction. It is agreed. Tricotrin has presented his friend, and invited the *chanteuse* to drink a bock—a glass of beer.... A propos, you take a liqueur, monsieur, yes? What liqueur you take? Sst, garçon!... Well, you conjecture, no doubt, what I shall say? Before the bock was finished, they were in love with her—both!

At the door of her lodging, Paulette has given to each a pressure of the hand, and said gently, "Till to-morrow."

"I worship her!" Tricotrin told Pitou.

"I have found my ideal!" Pitou answered Tricotrin.

It is superb, such friendship, hein?

In the mind of the poet who had accomplished tragedies majestic—in the mind of the composer, the most classical in Montmartre—there had been born a new ambition: it was to write a comic song for Paulette Fleury!

It appears to you droll, perhaps? Monsieur, to her lover, the humblest *divette* is more than Patti. In all the world there can be no joy so thrilling as to hear the music of one's brain sung by the wom-

an one adores—unless it be to hear the woman one adores give forth one's verse. I believe it has been accepted as a fact, this; nevertheless it is true.

Yes, already the idea had come to them, and Paulette was well pleased when they told her of it. Oh, she knew they loved her, both, and with both she coquetted. But with their intention she did not coquet; as to that she was in earnest. Every day they discussed it with enthusiasm— they were to write a song that should make for her a furore.

What happened? I shall tell you. Monday, when Tricotrin was to depart for Lyons, he informed his uncle that he will not go. No less than that! His uncle was furious—I do not blame him—but naturally Tricotrin has argued, "If I am to create for Paulette her great chance, I must remain in Paris to study Paulette! I cannot create in an atmosphere of commerce. I require the Montmartrois, the boulevards, the inspiration of her presence." Isn't it?

And Pitou—whose very soul had been enraptured in his leisure by a fugue he was composing—Pitou would have no more of it. He allowed the fugue to grow dusty, while day and night he thought always of refrains that ran "*Zim-la-zim-la zim-boum-boum!*" Constantly they conferred, the comrades. They told the one the other how they loved her; and then they beat their heads, and besought of Providence a fine idea for the comic song.

It was their thought supreme. The silk manufacturer has washed his hands of Tricotrin, but he has not cared—there remained to him still one of the bank-notes. As for Pitou, who neglected everything except to find his melody for Paulette, the publisher has given him the sack. Their acquaintances ridiculed the sacrifices made for her. But, monsieur, when a man loves truly, to make a sacrifice for the woman is to make a present to himself.

Nevertheless I avow to you that they fretted because of her coquetry. One hour it seemed that Pitou had gained her heart; the next her encouragement has been all to Tricotrin. Sometimes they have said to her: