DURING twenty-five years, in my quest for autographs, I have met nearly eleven thousand famous people in all walks of life. For the most part the impressions of some of them which I give in this ‘Who’s Who’ were written down immediately after I had met them. I believe a nobody like myself, born, bred and living in the slums,¹ to be a better judge of greatness and graciousness than most. These people did not need to pose to me, they had nothing to lose (or gain) by being civil to me. (AFTERTHOUGHT: but lawyer must vet all entries . . . even though every word I’ve written is true. Don’t want to spend a year of me jolly old life in clink!)

DR ALEXANDER ALEKHINE

I SAW HIM in 1937 when he was probably the greatest chess player in the whole wide world. I had been advised to ask for his autograph in French. (I can ask for autographs in ten languages, using the words ‘Please will you sign my book?’ I have to say ‘Thank you’ in English.) He asked in French if I was a player of chess. I was flummoxed, as I didn’t understand what he was asking me, but a lady kindly interpreted his question. I said, ‘Tell him no, but that I am hot stuff at tiddley winks!’ She looked at me and I kept a straight face. Then she spoke to him and I caught the words ‘tiddley winks.’ He looked curious and interested. He signed my book, but as he still carried on a conversation in which the words ‘tiddley winks’ kept cropping up, I moved away, for I didn’t want to be involved in a blooming international argument on the respective merits of chess and tiddley winks.

MY WHO’S WHO

SIR JAMES BARRIE

He was a very canny Scot and there were no flies on him. He knew all the answers. I haunted the Adelphi many evenings before I happened to meet him. Out came my autograph album and off came my cap. Would he do me the honour? ‘No, not in there!’ ‘But it’s a perfectly clean page in a perfectly good autograph album!’ ‘I don’t sign albums.’ ‘Would you sign in a book—a book by yourself?’ ‘I might.’ And off he went. I bought a copy of The Little Minister and went to the Adelphi many nights after that (for about three weeks), with the book under my arm. At last I was lucky enough to see him just outside the Little Theatre. I opened the book and took off my cap and appealed for his autograph. ‘I don’t sign books for strangers. I don’t give autographs. Go away.’ ‘But when I offered my album you refused and said you might sign one of your own books. So I bought a book by you, as you see, and now you again refuse.’ He didn’t answer and off he went towards the Savoy. I stood and watched him go. When he had gone about twelve yards he stopped and turned round. Then he beckoned to me. I ran towards him. He took the volume from me and in pencil at the very extreme top of the half-title he wrote ‘J. M. Barrie,’ then handed the book back without a word. ‘Thank you ever so much, sir, I won’t forget it…’ And although this happened about twenty-two years ago, you see I haven’t forgotten!

JOE BECKETT

In his days of fame this boxer wasn’t exactly a Sir Galahad. Pushed me and my book aside. I dropped my fountain-pen (that cost me fifteen hard-earned shillings) and his brother accidentally stepped on it. Was autograph hunting with a pencil for over five months, till I could afford a new pen. Ashamed to say that I was glad when Carpentier beat him in one round and said to myself, ‘Well, you wouldn’t sign my book would you?’ I was very young at the time—about twelve. All my own fault. I was a little pest at twelve and never took ‘No’ for an answer.

ARNOLD BENNETT

Under the surface I reckon him a kind-hearted man. Got a shy way, but when he thaws out is O.K., and will chat on this and that. (Later. Now had some twenty little chats with him after first nights and we’ve compared opinions. Has got funny ways but is a jolly good sort. Going to spend an evening all in my company to visit the Beggars’ Theatre.) I’m tempted to write and insert here a detailed account of our visit to this Lambeth theatre. Yes, it’s worth it. Here goes.

Now, rather like my friend Somerset Maugham, Arnold Bennett was somewhat touchy. He chose his friends with great care, was very kind when you got to know him, and was interested in the unusual. Because I was a gallery first-nighter for an unbroken twelve years, he got used to seeing me (and my autograph book) at first nights, and we would often have a chat while he waited for his car and I looked out for celebrities to ‘capture.’

Well, one night after a show at the Savoy Theatre, his car took a long time to arrive, and as he was getting hot up I volunteered to go and look for it. I found it tucked away down by the Embankment Gardens, caught in a traffic jam. I told the driver to stay there and I’d bring Arnold Bennett to the car. I did this, and as we walked along I told him all about the Beggars’ Theatre I’d visited the previous night.

On most occasions when we’d conversed I’d had a pretty sure feeling that he wasn’t listening very closely, but this time he seemed really interested. He asked me if he could see the show. I told him that it was a very rough and ready place and that posh people were not admitted; but that if he liked to put on a shabby suit and look a bit seedy I reckoned we could pass muster as a couple of blokes rather on the rocks. I arranged to meet him at seven-thirty the very next night at the foot of Lambeth Bridge and take him to the place, but I said I must promise never to write about his visit or even put the incident into his Diaries. He promised.

Now, not even his best friend could ever have called Arnold Bennett distinguished-looking. He had a drooping, weeping apology of a moustache, a nose that seemed set on a crooked path, long teeth (and such a funny voice). Add to this a dilapidated black trilby with the brim at all angles, an old dark-brown raincoat, and trousers that didn’t reach his boots, and you have Arnold Bennett as I saw him on our evening out.

‘The Lambeth Walk’ made Lambeth world famous, but it remains a borough of mean streets. Many parts of Lambeth were badly blitzed, and among the streets that have quite vanished is the little dingy turning that, Arnold Bennett and I went down that night. I wouldn’t be writing this now if the place was still standing, because I promised never to write about it while it was a theatre for beggars, as they didn’t want curious strangers popping in and out. I knocked at the door of a drab-looking tumbledown two-story house.

‘Who’s you?’ said the doorkeeper.

‘Me?—I’m Freddie. A pal of Frankie, the pavement artist. I was here two nights ago and you said I could come again any time.’
'Oh, all right, but don’t make a ’abit of it, mate... and who’s this?' He pointed to Arnold Bennett.

'Oh, he’s all right. He’s a real pal of mine. Take it from me, he’s all right. He’s seen better days. He once wrote a book what got printed!'

The passage was narrow and not very high. We entered a room that was really two rooms in one because a partition had been knocked down. There were about seventeen people in the room, and it was rather crowded. You could barely see across the room for fog and smoke. The seating arrangements consisted of three very ancient sofas, several orange boxes, a tea chest, an old trunk bed and some chairs in various stages of ruin. All these were placed around the walls, leaving the centre free for the acts'. A fat, beery old man who sat in front of the fire (and took most of its warmth) turned his head as we entered and beckoned us to go over to him. He was the theatre magnate, stage manager and casting director in one. He held out his hand and I placed four pennies in it. ('Tuppence a time—stay till you’re warm or fed up!)

'Ta, mate,' he said, pocketing the money, and pointing to two seats in the corner.

'Silence, everybody!' said he in a powerful voice.

'Harris is going ter play you, so pay attention. What you playing tonight?—oh, yes—I remember—it’s ‘Parted.’ So silence all of you.'

Harris got his fiddle out of its case, walked into the centre of the room, and without any preliminary tuning up began to render (tear apart) ‘Parted.’ Everyone except Arnold Bennett applauded loudly.

'Did you expect Kreisler for tuppence, sir?' I asked him. He said he hadn’t expected anything—much.

A fellow sitting next to me asked ‘Who’s im what you calls “sir”?’ I was going to tell him to mind his own business, but instead, not wanting trouble, I said my friend had seen better days and that out of politeness and in memory of those days and to give credit where credit was due I still called him ‘sir.’ This satisfied my neighbour. (Giving credit where credit is due is always a safe line to play with working-class folk.)

'Now, Sarah, what about it?' said the old man. The room seemed to tremble. Many of the audience took up the cry, and after a few moments the door opened and a young woman came in. She paused at the door and acknowledged the applause.

'Do your stuff, girlie,' said the grimy old man next to me.
I tapped Mr Bennett on his arm. ‘About time we went, A. B. ’ I said.

‘A.B.,’ said a man to whom he had been talking in little bursts of speech, ‘blimey, he ain’t no Yid surely!’

‘Of course not,’ I replied, ‘it’s only initials.’

‘What’s his name then?’ he asked. I felt sure Mr Bennett was going to tell him, and to shut him up I said, ‘Any bottles! You know folk don’t like giving names away!’ He laughed, and looking at Arnold Bennett said, ‘A.B. All Backside!’

Walking along the Embankment, I told Arnold Bennett a couple of Stock Exchange stories (he was something of a connoisseur) and by a miracle he’d heard neither before. The squeaky laughs he gave showed that he was in a good mood, and I ventured to ask him some literary questions, to which he gave carefully considered replies. We both agreed that Radclyffe Hall was the handsomest woman in London. (Did you ever see her? A lovely aquiline nose, keen steady eyes, a neat mouth, sleek close-cropped slightly grey hair with a little wave, wonderful smile, slight figure and the prettiest hands ever.) Mr. Bennett highly praised The Well of Loneliness, but said one must not forget that she wrote other great books, including Adam’s Breed. He also praised Hugh Walpole and said The Dark Forest was a brilliant novel. I asked him to name the most promising playwright and he selected Patrick Hamilton. I scribbled notes about his remarks on the inside of a packet of cigarettes as I rode home on a 56 tram.

Arnold Bennett thanked me for the evening and called a cab. As he got into it he handed me a pound note. I refused it and said that what I would really like as a little present would be one of his own novels with his signature in it. Four days later he sent me Accident, suitably inscribed. But, alas, Hitler robbed me of it by blitzing my home.

I went to the memorial service of this great man at St Martin-in-the-Fields and sat next to John Drinkwater. We had both lost a friend.

MADELEINE CARROLL

MY IDEA OF THE sweetest angel this side of Heaven. Beautiful, gracious and kind. I was the first fan to get her autograph in the days when she was quite unknown. Loved her in secret since we were both in our teens. Watched her become a star. Still proud to have been one of her first admirers. She has no side and is friendly—in fact, she’s my ideal. And if I had but one pound in the world and she needed it, then gladly would it be given to her.

GEORGE FORMBY

HE CAN BE PUT DOWN as a good sort, but if you put him out of temper I reckon you’d have a very rough side of a real Lancashire hot-pot. As I was getting his signature someone in the crowd asked him for a song, and with a dead-pan glance he looked up from my book and said, ‘Do you work for nothing?’ in a manner that was very chilly and froze the speaker to vanishing point.

WINSTON CHURCHILL

MANY YEARS AGO I stood under the porch by the entrance to the House of Lords to get out of the rain. Next to me was an obvious copper in plain clothes, and next to him stood Winston Churchill. And although I had both book and pen I was afraid to ask in case the dick run me in or something. But I did find courage to say, ‘Wish you could pass a Better British Weather Law, Mr Churchill.’ He grinned and looked in a very amiable mood. For two pins I’d have chanced my arm (or my neck) and asked. I still so very much want his autograph.
HITLER

Two years before the war I wrote to Hitler asking if he would care to swap fag cards with me. I got no reply. A year before the war I wrote again. Hitler possessed the finest collection of cigarette cards in Europe, while I had probably the best selection in England. This time I did get a reply. It boiled down to the fact that the Führer was too busy to give attention to my request (I bet he was!). So I went to Berlin a month before the war started, without knowing German or anyone in Germany at all; I thought that on the spot I might be able to see him and arrange to exchange cards. What a blooming hope! I never saw him, but I did bring home 3,000 sets of German cards, arriving back with them the day before war broke out. (Reached London 1.30 Saturday afternoon and war began Sunday morning!) And the first ruddy incendiary bomb to fall in our street fell on my home and burnt the blarsted lot!

JACK HOBBS

I'm not a cricket fan but, of course, no collection of autographs is complete without representative sportsmen. I chose Hobbs because he was Surrey, and Surrey was my local team as it were. Bold as brass I hop off to the Oval armed with large album and long pencil. A commissionaire turns me away. Back I come. Again—a bit less gently—I'm thrust aside at the Players' Entrance. There's me and the blarsted cocky commissionaire and a couple of taxi-drivers. One of the taxi-drivers tells the commissionaire just what he thinks of him: says he ought to let me stay as I'm doing no harm. Words lead to words and it's almost a fight. Out of a taxi steps a kindly-looking man. He asks, 'What's up?' He's quickly told the situation by me and the other taxi-driver, who says, 'It's this way, Mr Hobbs.' 'Mr Jack Hobbs?' I say. The man nods. 'Then do please sign, sir. That's all I want, it's all I'm waiting for. When I've got it I promise never to ask another cricketer again.' I got it and I have kept my promise these twenty-four years. Hence in near eleven thousand autographs I have but one cricketer.

LORD HEWART

A dead failure. Can't think what made me ask. It was outside the

DEAN INGE

In a bundle of books I found a copy of Assessments and Anticipations by him which I had been unable to sell. Seeing that he was due to broadcast from Savoy Hill, I wrapped up the book and took it to the entrance and waited for him. Tall, thin, gloomy, he arrived. I raised my cap and put forward the book and pen. He looked at the book and then at me—up and down several times. (I was shabbily dressed and wore cap and choker.) He said, 'You reading my book! I am astounded!' I didn't answer him till he'd autographed it. Then, as he handed it back to me, I said, 'No, sir—I haven't read it. I prefer Somerset Maugham. You see, sir, I sell books to make a living. It wouldn't sell unsigned, so perhaps it will sell signed.' He sighed such a sigh—and passed on, tall, thin and extra gloomy.

W. W. JACOBS

Everyone knew his name, but very few people had ever met him. I looked up his address (it was Gloucester Gate) and haunted his front door armed with a tiny photograph for reference. I was lucky. After two hours he came out. I took off my cap and made my request. I was a real admirer and could easily have recalled to him whole paragraphs of his works. He signed my autograph book and suddenly said, 'Would you like a book by me signed by me?' I said I'd treasure it always. He went back into his house and within five minutes was back with a Tauchnitz edition of The Skipper's Wooing all nicely autographed. It escaped the blitz and is still a treasured possession of mine. That's the kind of man W. W. Jacob was.

ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET LORD JELLICOE

Saw him in the Strand. Hadn't got my book, but did so much want his autograph. What could I do? I said, 'Beg you to excuse me, my Lord. I would so much like your signature but have no book with me. If I wrote to you at the Admiralty would you honour me?' He said 'You seem anxious to capture me. Why?' 'You are a great man.'
'Well spoken, my boy. Look—I have a newspaper. I'll autograph that for you.' And he did. We saluted each other. He passed on and I went off with his newspaper. Carefully I put it on top of the piano underneath a few sheets of music to keep it flat, and went off happy to bed. Next morning I got downstairs early—but not early enough. My dad had lit the fire with my priceless Jellicoe newspaper!

RUDYARD KIPLING

SNOBISH AND stand-offish. One of my few failures. Saw him in South Kensington near a museum. Raised my hat. Begged the great honour. He pushed me aside with a 'No.' I repeated my request. 'I never sign and have no wish to be bothered. Will you go away.' He glared and sort of bristled. Even the policeman who had kindly pointed him out to me was amazed at this reception.

SIR HARRY LAUDER

ONE OF THE FEW men I'd really raise my hat to. A noble man. Asked if I'd like a photograph of himself and his 'lassie.' I had a sort of idea that 'lassie' was a dog! But he sent a charming picture of himself and wife seated in front of their house. That was in 1926.

RAMSAY MACDONALD

THE ONLY P.M. I ever captured. He was at the Palladium at a Sunday Charity concert, with his daughter. He was in an amiable mood, asking where I lived, what I did for a living and whether I was a Labour man. As I was only about fifteen I wasn't much interested in Labour. Seemed to me very human and quite pleased to sign my book. Shook hands with crowds of people.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

THE KINDEST CELEBRITY it has ever been my good fortune to meet. Put me on my feet financially when I hadn't thirty shillings in the world. Nor by giving money, but by showing me how to write, autographing books for me to sell at a profit and ordering books from me which probably he didn't really need. But perhaps you've read my article about him in the fifth SATURDAY BOOK.

FRED BASON

CHARLES MORGAN

SAID TO BE RATHER aloof and not hail-fellow-well-met, but I can honestly say that on the only occasion I ever spoke to him he was very human and far from aloof. I saw him in St. Martin's Lane with his wife a week after The Fountain was published. I looked scruffy and wore old clothes and cap and had a sack of books on my back. I said 'Excuse me, sir. I ain't anyone. I just sell books for my living and I just want to say I think The Fountain is a magnificent novel—and jolly good luck to you.' His wife (I'm sure it was his wife, because Mr Morgan isn't the type to go around with chorus girls or other men's wives) said, 'My dear, how very sweet! That's the nicest piece of praise I've ever heard.' And Charlie said that he would never forget that testimonial, and thanked me very heartily. Wasn't till they'd passed on that I remembered I had my album in my pocket—and I missed the occasion in my enthusiasm over a great novel.

NONI

I PUT HIM IN because he is the finest clown I've seen. It took fifteen occasions to capture his autograph. No, he didn't refuse fourteen times, but he is so comically made-up on the stage that I could never visualize what he was like in real life, and I had to wait until he was appearing at two different music halls in one night and catch him in his make-up as he clambered into a taxi between acts. (Later) Doesn't look a bit funny without his make-up, and you'd pass him a hundred times without knowing he was Noni, successor to Grock and in my opinion his equal.

BARONESS ORCZY

I WAS VERY YOUNG when I first read The Scarlet Pimpernel, and it took me fifteen years to meet the author of it. She didn't look a scrap like my idea of a Baroness. But she was a dear, sweet soul and made me feel quite at home, and I had a lovely afternoon in her company.

PADEREWSKI

VERY, VERY FAMOUS and guarded like a king—but even guards are
sometimes slack and I managed to slip through and ask for his autograph. He waved long slender hands in the air and said, 'My hands! My hands! I am very tired!' I must have looked as disappointed as I felt, for I had waited over two hours for that moment. A man in dress clothes rushed up and I was pulled away. Padrewski said to him, 'Take the child's name and address.' I thought it meant police and trouble. 'What right,' I cried, 'have you got to ask for my address? I was absolutely polite.' 'It's quite all right. Your request will be granted in due course if I have your address.' Six months later the autograph was sent me—but it was not genuine. Someone had obviously signed for him on a photograph.

JAMES MASON

THEY SAID THIS film actor was a tiger and would snarl. They said he was temperamental and touchy. They said he was a law unto himself. They talked through their blooming hats, as they so often do, because they had never met Mr Mason. Mr Bason met Mr Mason and found him human, kindly and a very good sort. He doesn't suffer fools gladly. He detests cadgers and he hates fuss and bother, pomp and ceremony. Don't hero-worship James Mason. Treat him as he is—a man's man and a clever man at that.

J. B. PRIESTLEY

IT WAS AT THE Duchess Theatre that I first saw him, and I happened to be carrying in my attaché case a sparkling first edition of The Good Companions, which I had two hours previously gambled a pound on to buy as an investment. Would he autograph my copy of his book? He would. As he handed it back he said, 'It's really quite readable. You ought to read it some day!' And he hurried away before I had time to say that I don't pay a pound for a book I've not read: I had read The Good Companions three times. Unfortunately when we were blitzed this signed first edition was destroyed, but later I was able to get him to autograph Faraway—this time a soiled and much read copy. And before he could make any comment I said, 'It's been read. I've read it—several times!' He smiled as he said, 'Bit different from the other one.' More than two years—nearer three—had elapsed since the first occasion, which goes to show that J.B.P. has a wonderful memory and that there are no flies on him.

FRED BASON

SIR A. QUILLER-COUCH

JUST ONE OF THOSE lucky breaks we autograph hunters sometimes get. I'm on a railway station. Seated on the same bench is an elderly gentleman looking very dignified. Next to me is a younger man (might have been a nervous school teacher). He keeps saying rather loudly, 'Yes, Sir Arthur,' 'No, Sir Arthur,' 'Oh, no, Sir Arthur.' So I know that the old bloke is Sir Arthur! The nervous chap gets up with a 'Very well, Sir Arthur,' and off he goes. Out comes my autograph album. He's Sir Arthur someone. I'll take a chance—although I know it's not Conan Doyle. I raise my hat and most politely beg the honour of Sir Arthur's autograph. He seems amazed and pleased to be recognized, and he obliges with a signature which I eventually decipher as A. T. Quiller-Couch.

BERNARD SHAW

SO MUCH HAS BEEN SAID about this Superman that I won't add anything. I got his autograph when I was about fifteen. To me then he was just a funny old cove. He was a funny old cove who, it was said, wouldn't sign his autograph unless you happened to be as famous as he was. I thought I'd be cheeky—I could only get a clip on the ear. It was in Kingsway after a debate at the Kingsway Hall. A crowd followed him the whole way down Kingsway but he moved so fast that it had thinned to two by the time we reached the Strand. A middle-aged woman was begging him to help her son, who was in prison. He kept saying, 'I can do nothing. Nothing.' And there was me almost running to keep up with him. I kept asking for his signature and he kept saying, 'No, no, no!' Presently the woman gave up and lagged behind—I believe she was crying. That left me and Shaw. I was on the point of giving up. I kept asking for his signature and he kept saying, 'No, no, no!' Presently the woman gave up and lagged behind—I believe she was crying. That left me and Shaw. I was on the point of giving up. Then I had a brainwave. I said, 'Don't be so mean, Mr Shaw. You might be quite famous one day and then I won't bother you. I only want your autograph now for a souvenir when you become well-known!' He stopped and stared at me. Then he laughed, a merry laugh, took my book and pen, and signed with a flourish. And off he went again at a tremendous pace, leaving me panting but very pleased.

Thinking it over, I should positively hate to be as rich or as famous as Shaw. It must be a ruddy bother.
PAUL ROBESON

I was a bit of a boy when he first appeared in London in Emperor Jones, but I had enough knowledge of art to recognize a great artist. I went to the stage-door and waited for him to come out after a show one foggy winter night. It was very dismal and dark and I had to wait quite three-quarters of an hour. As he came out I opened my book at random and asked him to sign. Then I saw that the page already had several names on it, so I turned over to a fresh, clean page. He said, ‘Do you object to my signing on a page that has white men’s signatures upon it?’ ‘Most certainly not, Mr Robeson,’ I replied. ‘I think you are such a great actor that you deserve a page to yourself. In fact, I wouldn’t have the cheek to ask you to put your signature on the page with such people.’ And he was so delighted that, unasked, he went back into the theatre and brought me out a nice photograph which I’ve kept over twenty years. And although five years passed before I next saw him, he remembered me and shook hands.

A. GORDON SELFRIDGE

I wouldn’t call him a celebrity, but as founder of Selfridge & Co. he is undoubtedly a famous name. He happened to be, like myself, a very keen first-nighter, and we got used to seeing each other at shows, till there came a time when he would nod and smile and recognize me and at times even have a few quick words as he waited for his daughter. So one night I asked if I could have his signature. He thought I was kidding and refused. ‘But, Mr Selfridge, I really want it and I’ll be proud to have it.’ He signed then and said he couldn’t remember anyone previously asking for it save on a cheque!

DAME SYBIL THORDIKE

A very distinguished actress and a very noble lady. Always seems so very pleased to give her signature and so interested in what you have to say about her work, her plays or things in general! A dear kindly soul with a generous heart. Seems to lay stress on sentences like, ‘How are you?’ ‘Did you really?’ Never seems to dress fashionably yet is always just right.

SIR Rabindranath Tagore

Alas, one of my failures. I didn’t get near enough even to ask. I feel pretty sure he’d have granted my polite request. But if he’d been King of All India he couldn’t have been more closely guarded. It was in 1930 in London that I saw him, or, rather, the extreme top of his head. Looked a very distinguished old gentleman. I bet I’m one of the very few Cockneys to have read and enjoyed Gitanjali. He and I could have found much to talk about.

FRED BASON

Now only a name, yet in her day the world’s greatest soprano. Saw her in 1925. Untidy, fat and plain. Lots of temper. No charm or graciousness. ‘And why me!’ she said. ‘Because you are truly great, madame!’ She purred like a pussy cat and out of a bag brought forth her photograph and signed it. I felt a proper hypocrite because I had never heard her sing. I had merely asked because she was a name to fill a page. (Later) I have heard a record she made when she was in her prime. She may not have been beautiful to look at, but, by golly, she had a truly wonderful voice. No one would have thought it to look at her. Still, she was as God made her, only He might have been a bit kinder with her. (Afterthought): I do not know if she is still alive. If she is, I beg her to forgive this frank pen-picture. Perhaps with age she has matured into something like graciousness. I hope so, because I recall that the girl who asked for her signature almost immediately before I did got such a refusal that she warned me not to ask or I would probably get my face slapped!

IRENE VANBRUGH

I know a chap who saw All The King’s Horses, a play of 1926 in which Irene Vanbrugh was the leading lady, forty-eight times. I thought he was crackers! No play could be that good outside Shakespeare. But he said it was once to see the play and forty-seven times to see Miss Vanbrugh. He said that each and every time she was just a little different, and it was the difference that compelled him to go so frequently. As he’s a rich bloke (a timber merchant) I accepted his invitation to go twice (at his expense) to witness the differences, and blow me, he was right. Never twice alike and yet always just right. A born actress, a great actress. A nice lady as well. Did she make Pinero famous or did his plays make her famous? I once asked a theatre critic that question, and all he answered was, ‘Miss Vanbrugh would have been famous in any age in any sphere.’
EDGAR WALLACE

MOST HUMAN BLOKE I met till I met Willy Maugham. There was a first night of one of Wallace's plays at the Apollo at a time when all he touched seemed to turn to gold. But I considered it a very poor play (could easily have written something twice as good myself). I was friendly enough with Wallace to be able to go up to him and tell him I thought it a dull and uninteresting play which wouldn't run a week on merit. 'In fact,' I said, 'I bet you it doesn't run ten days on merit or anything else. Bet you 2s. 6d. against a signed book by you. Is that on?' He nodded and we shook hands on it. Play ran five days. He must have lost a packet on it. Fifteen days later, when I saw him at another first night, he came over to me and asked me to go to his car with him. I did so, and he got out of the car a signed copy of The Flying Squad, his latest book. It said, 'You win!' on the title page. Amidst all his work, all his troubles and worries, he remembered a bet made with a galleryite nobody!

SIR HUGH WALPOLE

A VERY TOUCHY man of many moods. I never much liked his books save The Dark Forest and The Secret City. I was warned that if you made a fuss of him you got quite a nice autograph, but for heaven's sake don't forget you've immensely enjoyed his latest novel and lay the butter on thick. But I am no hypocrite, and when he asked me if I'd read Harmer John I said, 'Well, I'm busy enjoying The Old Wives' Tale for the third time.' It seems I said the right thing, for he spent five minutes praising it to the skies. But then I said the wrong thing. 'I think, sir, you've written only two books that matter, The Dark Forest and The Secret City. The rest, with the exception of Mr Perrin and Mr Traill, are so blooming wordy-wordy that you get lost in a jungle, and when you cut through there isn't any story!' Then, blow me, he got proper annoyed and asked who I thought I was to pass judgment on his work. And, would you believe it, he pulled back the autograph book that I held in my hand waiting for the ink to dry, and scribbled out his autograph with a pencil! 'In that case you don't need my autograph!' I took off my cap and said, 'I am sorry, sir, I thought you were a great man—great enough to accept even my very humble but sincere opinion.' And then he suddenly changed. He smiled and apologized and signed all over again on a fresh page.