Literary Life in the 'Twenties: A FOOTNOTE

I had been visiting Sax Rohmer, the thriller writer. At my bookstall in Tower Bridge Road, Bermondsey, when I was in my 'teens, he was my surest best-seller. One day I had written thanking him for being alive and making so much money for me. I asked if I could call on him for ten minutes and get him to sign one of his books for me. (I still have it, forty years later.)

Mr Rohmer looked very English and very ordinary, except that he wore a Chinese smock that swept the floor—just the sort of thing Dr Fu Manchu would wear. He showed me into a room filled with Chinese curiosities, and took the book I had brought over to a huge Oriental carved desk. Then he asked me if I'd like a photo of him. I said I'd be delighted. He signed this in red ink with a broad-nib pen. 'Don't blot it,' he said. 'It will dry in time.' I was out of his home in less than ten minutes.

I was walking along the Bayswater Road, holding Sax Rohmer's photograph, still wet with its bloody-looking signature, when I came upon Arnold Bennett. Now at that time one of my chief sources of income was telling jokes to Arnold Bennett. I'd tell him a joke, and if it made him laugh he'd write an inscription in one of his books (which I provided), and I would sell the book. The longer the laugh, the longer the inscription. On his laughter depended so very much—often a week's wages.

I remember the first time I made him laugh. I told him about the woman who went to the Assistance Board for relief. She told him that she had eight children under ten, and her husband had deserted her ten years ago. 'So you have eight children under ten,' said the official, 'and yet your husband has deserted you for ten years?' 'Yes,' said the woman. 'But I can't help it if he comes home once a year to apologise. He's a perfect gentleman.'

Well, I ran into Arnold Bennett in the Bayswater Road. 'Good afternoon, sir,' I said. 'I hope your head is not aching.' He suffered from shocking headaches. 'No, I'm very well, thank you, Bason,' he said. 'Now, you like meeting writers, don't you? Perhaps you'd like to come with me and meet Edith Sitwell.' We went along to a block of flats in Moscow Road, about two hundred yards from where Sax Rohmer lived. I'll bet that he and Edith Sitwell had never met—or even heard of each other.

I had heard of Edith Sitwell's Saturday afternoon tea parties, but never in my wildest dreams had I expected to attend one of them. It was very generous of Arnold Bennett to take me along. Miss Sitwell's flat was on the fifth floor, and there was no lift. Mr Bennett, who was not a healthy man, paused for breath on each floor. He was breathless when we arrived at Miss Sitwell's door. She must have had some magic spell over him to make him climb five flights of stairs.

He introduced me to Miss Sitwell as 'Bason, the book-barrow boy.' He then had some words with her, presumably explaining what I did. 'How remarkable!' said Miss Sitwell. Myself, I didn't see anything remarkable about having a book barrow in Bermondsey. But I thought it was remarkable that I should attend Miss Sitwell's salon, and I told her so. She seemed pleased.

Miss Sitwell was tall, thin and ugly, I thought. But she was very gracious, and undoubtedly she was a lady. I was handed a cup of tea. Mr Bennett was obviously the lion of the party, and everyone gathered round him, much to his enjoyment.

When everyone was talking to Arnold Bennett a pleasant-looking young man came up to me and said he was interested to hear I had a barrow of books. He asked me if I had any books by Charlotte M. Yonge. 'Yes,' I said, 'I have a fine copy of The Heir of Redclyffe, and the price is two shillings and sixpence.' 'Is that enough?' he asked. 'It's quite enough for that book,' I said. He then asked what the postage would be. I said a shilling would be plenty. He then wrote his name and address on the edge of a newspaper and gave it to me. 'Send me the book,' he said.

Miss Sitwell came over as I dropped his three and sixpence into...
my pocket. 'Ah, book-barrow boy,' she said. 'I hope you're enjoying yourself.' 'Yes, I am,' I said. Three and sixpence meant a lot to me in those days.

Meanwhile Arnold Bennett was talking to a tall, thin man. After about twenty minutes he turned to me and said we must go. We went, accompanied by the tall, thin man, down those hard cold stairs, into the sunlight. Then I thought of a joke. 'Look, Mr Bennett,' I said. 'Suppose you're addressing an audience in a town you have been to before. You start off by saying: 'I was lucky the last time I came here. I picked up a threepenny bit. I do hope she's here tonight.'"

But Arnold Bennett didn't raise a smile at that one—I don't know why. He shook hands with me and got into a very impressive car. I made my way to Shepherd's Bush market. The tall thin man called a taxi. I believe he did enjoy my joke.

When I got home I looked at the name and address given to me by the man who had ordered The Heir of Redclyffe. It was Graham Greene. I'd never heard of him; he hadn't even published his first novel then. But five years later I sold him a copy of The Little Duke, also by Charlotte M. Yonge, for three and sixpence. And he used lines from The Little Duke as sub-titles in that wonderful novel of his, The Heart of the Matter.

Several years later, too, I recognised in a newspaper the face of the tall, thin man whom Arnold Bennett had been talking to at Miss Sitwell's party. It was T. S. Eliot.

At that time I had never heard of T. S. Eliot. I only knew of Miss Sitwell because a magazine in which she had written some verse had been 'remaindered' and I had bought a hundred copies at a halfpenny each. It took me months to sell them. If I had asked the first hundred people passing my stall who Edith Sitwell was I'm sure not one would have known. But they all knew of Sax Rohmer.

I've just been downstairs from my new flat at No. 4 Broadway, and stood in the rain in Portland Street, Walworth (which is where I live now), and asked the first three people I saw if they had heard of Sax Rohmer. None of them had. Then I asked them if they'd heard of Edith Sitwell. They all had! And of T. S. Eliot! And of Graham Greene!