Bangs John Kendrick

Peeps at People

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Peeps at People / Being Certain Papers from the Writings of Anne Warrington Witherup:

Содержание

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NANSEN

It was in the early part of February last that, acting under instructions from headquarters, I set forth from my office in London upon my pilgrimage to the shrines of the world's illustrious. Readers everywhere are interested in the home life of men who have made themselves factors in art, science, letters, and history, and to these people I was commissioned to go. But one restriction was placed upon me in the pursuit of the golden Notoriety, and that was that I should spare no expense whatever to attain my ends. At first this was embarrassing. Wealth suddenly acquired always is. But in time I overcame such difficulties as beset me, and soon learned to spend thousands of dollars with comparative ease.

And first of all I decided to visit Nansen. To see him at

home, if by any possibility Nansen could be at home anywhere, would enable me to open my series interestingly. I remembered distinctly that upon his return from the North Pole he had found my own people too cold for comfort. I called to mind that, having travelled for months seeking the Pole, he had accused my fellow-countrymen of coming to see him out of "mere curiosity," and I recalled at the same time that with remarkable originality he had declared that we heated our railway trains to an extent which suggested his future rather than his past. Wherefore I decided to visit Nansen to hear what else he might have to say, while some of the incidents of his visit were fresh in our minds.

The next thing to discover, the decision having been reached, was as to Nansen's whereabouts. Nobody in London seemed to know exactly where he might be found. I asked the manager of the house in which I dwelt, and he hadn't an idea – he never had, for that matter. Then I asked a policeman, and he said he thought he was dancing at the Empire, but he wasn't sure. Next I sought his publishers and asked for his banker's address. The reply included every bank in London, with several trust companies in France and Spain. To my regret, I learned that we Americans hold none of his surplus.

"But where do you send his letters?" I demanded of his publisher, in despair.

"Dr. Nansen has authorized us to destroy them unopened," was the reply. "They contain nothing but requests for his autograph."

"But your letters to him containing his royalties – where do they go?" I demanded.

"We address them to him in our own care," was the answer.

"And then?" I queried.

"According to his instructions, they are destroyed unopened," said the publisher, twisting his thumbs meditatively.

It seemed hopeless.

Suddenly an idea flashed across my mind. I will go, I thought, to the coldest railway station in London and ask for a ticket for Nansen. A man so fastidious as he is in the matter of temperature, I reasoned, cannot have left London at any one of their moderately warm stations. Where the temperature is most frigid, there Nansen must have gone when leaving, he is such a stickler for temperature. Wherefore I went to the Waterloo Station – it is the coldest railway station I know – and I asked the agent for a ticket for Nansen.

He seemed nonplussed for a moment, and, to cover his embarrassment, asked:

"Second or third class?"

"First," said I, putting down a five-pound note.

"Certainly," said he, handing me a ticket to Southampton. "Do you think you people in the States will really have war with Spain?"

I will not dilate upon this incident. Suffice it to say that the ticket man sent me to Southampton, where, he said, I'd be most likely to find a boat that would carry me to Nansen. And he

was right. I reached Sjwjcktcwjch within twenty-four hours, and holding, as I did, letters of introduction from President McKinley and her Majesty Queen Victoria, from Richard Croker and Major Pond, Mr. Nansen consented to receive me.

He lived in an Esquimau hut on an ice-floe which was passing the winter in the far-famed Maelstrom. How I reached it Heaven only knows. I frankly confess that I do not. I only know that under the guidance of Svenskjold Bjonstjon I boarded a plain pjine rjaft, such as the Norwegians use, and was pjaddjled out into the seething whirlpool, in the midst of which was Nansen's more or less portable cottage.

When I recovered I found myself seated inside the cottage, which, like everything else in the Maelstrom, was waltzing about as if at a military ball or Westchester County dance.

"Well," said my host, looking at me coldly. "You are here. *Why* are you here?"

"Mr. Nansen?" said I.

"The very same," said he, taking an icicle out of his vest pocket and biting off the end of it.

"The Polar Explorer?" I added.

"There is but one Nansen," said he, brushing the rime from his eyebrows. "Why ask foolish questions? If I am Nansen, then it goes without saying that I am the Polar Explorer."

"Excuse me," I replied. "I merely wished to know." And then I took a one-dollar bill from my purse. "Here, Mr. Nansen, is my dollar. That is, I understand, the regular fee for seeing you.

I should like now to converse with you. What is your price per word?"

"Have you spoken to my agents?" he asked.

"No," said I.

"Then it will only cost you $160 a word. Had you arranged through them, I should have had to charge you $200. You see," he added, apologetically, "I have to pay them a commission of twenty per cent."

"I understand that," said I. "I have given public readings myself, and after paying the agent's commission and travelling expenses I have invariably been compelled to go back and live with my mother for six months."

"Miss Witherup," said Nansen, rising, "you did not intend to do it, and I therefore forgive you, but for the moment you have made me feel warmly towards you. Please do not do it again. Frigidity is necessary to my business. What can I do for you?"

"Talk to me," said I.

He immediately froze up again. "What about?" said he. "The Pole?"

"No," said I. "About America."

"I cannot!" he cried, despairingly.

"I do not wish to dwell upon my sufferings. If I told about my American experience, people would not believe; they would rank me with Munchausen, my sufferings were so intense. Let me tell of how I lived on Esquimau dog-chops and ice-cream for nineteen weeks."

"Pardon me, Mr. Nansen," said I, "but I can't do that. We Americans know all about the North Pole. Few of us, on the other hand, know anything about America, and we wish to be enlightened. What did you think of Chicago?"

"Chicago? H'm! Let me see," said Nansen, tapping his forehead gently with an ice-pick. "Chicago! Oh yes, I remember; it was a charmingly cold city, full of trolley-cars, and having a newly acquired subway and a public library. I found it a beautiful city, madam, and the view from the Bunker Hill Statue of Liberty was superb, looking down over Blackwell's Island through the Golden Gate out into the vast, trackless waste of Lake Superior. Yes, I thought well of it. If I remember rightly, we took in $1869 at the door."

I was surprised at his command of details, and resolved further to test his memory.

"And Philadelphia, Mr. Nansen?"

"A superb city, considering its recency, as you say in English. I met many delightful people there. Senator Tom Reed received me at his palace on Euclid Avenue, if I remember the street aright; the Mayor of the city, Mr. McKinley, gave me a dinner, at which I sat down with Mr. Cleveland and Mr. Van Wyck, and Mr. Bryan and Mr. Pulitzer, and other members of his cabinet; and in my leisure hours I found the theatres of Philadelphia most pleasing, with Mr. Jefferson singing his nigger songs, Mr. Mansfield in his inimitable skirt-dancing, and, best of all, Mr. Daly's Shakespearian revivals of 'Hamlet' and 'Othello,' with

Miss Rehan in the title-rôles. Oh yes, Miss Witherdown – "

"Witherup!" I snapped, coldly.

"Excuse me, Witherup," said the great explorer. "Oh yes, Miss Witherup, I found America a most delightful country, especially your capital city of Philadelphia."

"Herr Nansen," said I, "are you as accurate in your observations of the North Pole as in your notes of the States, as expressed to me?"

"Neither more nor less so," said he, somewhat uneasily, I thought.

"But you have drawn a most delightful picture of the States," said I. "I think all Americans will be pleased by your reference to the Bunker Hill Monument at Chicago, and Mayor McKinley's cabinet at Philadelphia. On the other hand, you spoke of intense suffering while with us."

"Yes," said he, "I did – because I suffered. Have you ever travelled in your own country, madam?"

"I am an American," said I. "Therefore when I travel I travel abroad."

"Then you do not know of the privations of American travel," he cried. "Consider me, Nansen, compelled, after the delightful discomfort of the *Fram*, to have to endure the horrid excellence of your Pullman service. Consider me, Nansen, after having subsisted on dogs and kerosene oil for months, having to eat a breakfast costing a dollar at one of your American hotels, consisting of porridge, broiled chicken, deviled kidney, four

kinds of potatoes, eggs in every style, real coffee, and buckwheat cakes! Consider me – "

"Nansen?" I inquired.

"Yes, Nansen," said he. "Consider me, Nansen, used to the cold of the Arctic regions, the Arctic perils, having to wake up every morning in an American hotel or an American parlor-car, warm, without peril, comfortable, *without anything whatsoever to growl about.*"

"It must have been devilish," said I.

"It was," said he.

"Well, Mr. Nansen," I put in, rising, "you can stand it. You are cold enough

to stay in Hades for forty-seven years without losing your outside garments. How much do I owe you?"

"Fifteen thousand dollars, please," said he.

I gave him the money and swam away.

"Good-bye," he cried, as I reached the outer edge of the Maelstrom. "I hope, next time I go to America, that I shall meet you."

"Many thanks," said I. "When do you expect to come?"

"Never," he replied, "Deo volente!"

Charming chap, that Nansen. So warm, you know.

MR. HALL CAINE

I do not know why it should have happened so, but it did happen that after my interview with Nansen I felt gloomy in my soul, and hence naturally sought congenial company. My first inclination was to run down to Greece and take luncheon with King George, but when I came to look over my languages, the only bit of Greek I could speak fluently turned out to be hoi polloi, and from private advices I gather that that is the only bit of Greek that his honor the King has no use for. Therefore I bought a ticket straight through to Gloomster Abbey, Isle of Man – the residence of Hall Caine.

Appropriately enough, it was midnight when I arrived. It was a moonlight night, but there were a dozen clouds on the horizon and directly in the wake of the moon's rays, so that all was dark. From the abbey itself no single ray of light gleamed, and all was still, save the croaking of the tree-toads in the moat, and the crickets on the roof of the parapet.

Any one else would have been chilled to the marrow; but I, having visited Nansen, had to use a fan to overcome the extreme cordiality of the scene. With the thermometer at 32° I nearly swooned with the heat.

"Is this Gloomster Abbey?" I asked of my hackman.

"Yes," said he; "and, for Humanity's sake, pay your fare and let me go. I am the father of seven orphans, and the husband of

their widowed mother. If I stay here ten minutes I'll die, and my wife will marry again, Heaven help her!"

I paid him £6 10*s*. 6*d*. and let him go. He was nothing to me, but his family had my sympathy.

Then I knocked on the portcullis with all my might, and was gratified to find that, like a well-regulated portcullis, it fell, and with a loud noise withal.

An intense silence intervened, and then out of the blackness of the blue above me there came a voice with a reddish tinge to it.

"Who's there?" said the voice. "If you are a burglar, come in and rob. If you are a friend, wait a minute. If you are an interviewer from an American Sunday newspaper, accept my apologies for keeping you waiting, turn the knob, and walk in. I'll be down as soon as I can get there."

It was Hall Caine himself who spoke.

I turned the knob and walked in. All was still, dark, and cold, but I did not mind, for it fitted into my mood exactly.

In the darkness of the corridor within I barked what if I were a man I should call my shins. As it happened, being a woman, I merely bruised my ankles, when he appeared – Hall Caine himself. There

was no gas-light, no electric light. Nothing but the blackness of the night, and *He Appeared*! I suppose it was all due to the fact that he is a brilliant man, who would shine anywhere. However it may have been, I suddenly became conscious of a being that walked towards me as plainly discernible as an ocean steamship

at sea at night, with every electric light burning in the saloon, and the red and green lanterns on the starboard and port sides of its bow.

"Mr. Caine?" said I, addressing his starboard side.

"That's I," said he, grammatically and with dignity. A man less great would have said "That's me," which is why in the darkness I knew it was Mr. Caine and not his hired man I was speaking to – or with, as your style may require.

"Mr. Caine," said I, not without nervousness, "I have come – "

"So I perceive," said he; and then an inspiration came to me.

" – to lay my gloom at your feet," I said, with apparent meekness. "It is all I have, but such as it is you are welcome to it. Some people would have brought you rich gifts in gold and silver; some would have come with compliments and requests for your autograph; I bring you only a morbid heart bursting with gloom. Will you take it?"

"I appreciate the courtesy, madame," replied the great man, wiping a tear from the end of his nose, which twinkled like a silver star in the blackness of the corridor, "but I cannot accept your offering. I have more gloom on hand than I know what to do with. I am, however, deeply touched, and beg to offer you the hospitality of the moat, unless you have further business with me at my regular rates."

A dreadful, blood-curdling wail, like that of a soul in torment, interrupted my answer. It seemed to come from the very centre of the earth directly beneath my feet. I was frozen with horror,

and my host, with a muttered imprecation, turned and ran off.

"I haven't time to see you now," he cried, as he disappeared down the steps of a yawning hole at the far end of the corridor. "I can't afford to miss the experiment for anything so small and cheap as a morbid heart bursting with gloom."

I followed closely after, although he had not granted permission. I didn't feel that I could afford to miss the experiment either, and ere he had time to slam to the door of the dungeon which we ultimately reached, I was inside his workshop.

If it was chill without, it was deadly within, save that the darkness was not so intense, red lights burning dimly in each of the four corners of the dungeon. The walls were covered with a green trickling ooze from the moat, and under foot the ground was dank and almost mushy.

In the very centre of the place was a huge rack, a relic of some by-gone age of torture, and stretched at full length upon it was a man of, I should say, about forty years of age. Two flunkies in livery – red plush trousers and powdered wigs – now and then turned the screw, and with each turn horrid shrieks would come from the victim, mingled with alternate prayers and curses.

"What on earth is the meaning of this?" I cried, in horror.

"It means, madame," replied the famous author, calmly, "that I never fake. All my situations, all my passages descriptive of human emotions and sufferings, are drawn from life, and not from the imagination."

"You work from living models?" I gasped. "Why would not a

lay figure do as well for torture?"

"Because lay-figures do not shriek and pray and curse. I am surprised that you should be so dull. James, turn the thumb-screw three times; and, Grimmins, take your cricket-bat and give the patient a bastinado on his right foot."

"It is a pitiless shame!" I cried.

"It is in the interest of art, madame," said the novelist, shrugging his shoulders. "Just as our surgeons have to vivisect for the advancement of science, so must I conduct experiments here in the interest of letters. My new novel has a stirring episode in it based upon the capture and torture of a newspaper correspondent in Thibet. I might, I suppose, have imagined the whole thing, but this so far surpasses the imagination that I am convinced it is the better way of getting my color."

"There isn't any doubt about that," said I; "but consider this man here, whose limbs you are stretching beyond all endurance – "

"He should regard it as a splendid sacrifice," vouchsafed the novelist, lighting a cigarette and winking pleasantly at his victim.

"Is his a voluntary sacrifice?" I demanded.

"Rather good joke that, eh, Rogers?" laughed Mr. Caine, addressing the sufferer. "This simple-minded little American girl asks if you are there because you like it. Ha! ha! What a droll idea! Thinks you do this for pleasure, Rogers. Has an idea you tied yourself on there and racked yourself at first, so she has. Thinks you shriek so as to smother your laughter, which would

be very inappropriate to the occasion."

The sufferer groaned deeply, and the novelist, turning to me, observed:

"No, madame. My poor unhappy friend Rogers is here against his will, I regret to say. It would be far pleasanter for me when I hear him bastinadoed to know that he derived a certain amount of personal satisfaction from it in spite of the pain, but it must be otherwise. Furthermore, in the story the newspaper man who is tortured is not supposed to like it, so that accuracy requires that I should have a man, like Rogers, who dislikes it intensely."

"And do you mean to say, sir, that you deliberately went out into the street and seized hold of this poor fellow, carried him in here, and subjected him to all this? Why, it's a crime!"

"Not at all," replied Mr. Caine, nonchalantly. "I am no common kidnapper. I do not belong to a literary press-gang. I have simply exercised my rights as the owner of this castle. This man came here on his own responsibility, just as you have come. I never asked him any more than I asked you, and he has had to take the consequences, just as you will have to abide by whatever may result from your temerity. Rogers is a newspaper man, and he tried to get a free interview out of me by deceit, knowing that I no longer do a gratis business. It so happened that I was at that moment in need of just such a person for my experiment. I gave him the interview, and now he is paying for it."

The novelist paused, and after eying me somewhat closely for a moment, turned to his notes, lying on his desk alongside the

rack, while a tremor of fear passed over me.

"Curious coincidence," he remarked, looking up from an abstract of his story. "In my very next chapter I take up the sufferings in captivity of a young and beautiful American girl who is languishing and starving in a loathsome cell, full of reptiles and poisonous beasts, like Gila monsters and centipedes. She is to be just your height and coloring and age."

I grew rigid with horror.

"You wouldn't – " I began.

"Oh yes, I would," replied the author, pleasantly. "Would you like to see the cell?"

"I would like to see the outside of your castle!" I cried, turning to the stairs.

The novelist laughed hollowly at the expression of hopelessness that came over my face as I observed that a huge iron grating had slid down from above and cut off my retreat.

"I am sorry, Miss Witherup, but I haven't got the outside of my castle in here. If I had I'd show it to you at once," he said.

"I beg of you, sir," I cried, going down on my knees before him. "Do let me go. I – "

"Don't be emotional, my dear," he replied, in a nice, fatherly way. "You will have an alternative. When I have receipted this," he added, writing out a bill and tossing it to me – "when I have receipted this, you can go."

I glanced at the paper. It called for £1500 for an interview of an hour and a half, at £1000 an hour.

"If you will give me your check for that amount, you may go. Otherwise I am afraid I shall have to use you for a model."

"I have only £1200 in the bank," I replied, bursting into tears.

"It will suffice," said he. "Your terror will be worth £300 to me in a short story I am writing for the Manx *Sunday Whirald*."

Whereupon I wrote him a check for £1200 and made my escape.

"I'll expose you to the world!" I roared back at him in my wrath as I walked down the path to the road.

"Do," he cried. "I never object to a free advertisement. By-bye."

With that I left him, and hastened back to London to stop payment on the check; but in some fashion he got the better of me, for it happened to be on a bank holiday that I arrived, and ere I could give notice to the cashier to refuse to honor my draft it had been cashed.

EMPEROR WILLIAM

After recovering from the attack of nervous prostration which was the natural result of my short visit to Gloomster Abbey, acting on my physician's advice I left England for a time. Finding myself, some weeks later, in Berlin, I resolved to call upon his Imperial Highness William the Second, better known as the Yellow Kid of Potsdam.

I experienced some difficulty at first in reaching the Emperor. Royalty is so hedged about by etiquette that it seemed almost impossible that I should get an audience with him at all. He was most charming about the matter, but, as he said in his note to me, he could not forget the difference in our respective stations in life. For an Emperor to consent to receive a plain American newspaper woman was out of the question. He could be interviewed *incog.*, however, as Mr. William Hohenzollern, if that would suit my wishes.

I replied instantly that it was not Mr. William Hohenzollern that I wished to interview, but the German Emperor, and unless I could see him as Emperor I did not wish to see him at all. I added that I might come *incog.* myself if all that was necessary to make the whole thing regular was that I should appear to be on a social level with him, and instead of calling as Miss Witherup I could call as the Marchioness of Spuyten Duyville, or, if he preferred, Princess of Haarlem Heights, to both of which titles,

I assured him, I had as valid a claim as any other lady journalist in the world – in fact, more so, since they were both of my own invention.

Whether it was the independence of my action or the novelty of the situation that brought it about I do not know, but the return mail brought a command from the Emperor to the Princess of Haarlem Heights to attend a royal *fête* given in her honor at the Potsdam Palace the next morning at twenty minutes after eleven.

I was there on the stroke of the hour, and found his Imperial Highness sitting on a small gilt throne surrounded by mirrors, having his tintype taken. This is one of the Emperor's daily duties, and one which he has never neglected from the day of his birth. He has a complete set of these tintypes ranged about the walls of his private sanctum in the form of a frieze, and he frequently spends hours at a time seated on a step-ladder examining himself as he looked on certain days in the past.

He smiled affably as the Grand High Chamberlain announced "The Princess of Haarlem Heights," and on my entrance threw me one of his imperial gloves to shake.

"Hoch!" he cried as he did so.

"Ditto hic," I answered, with my most charming smile. "I hope I do not disturb you, my dear Emperor?"

"Not in the least," he replied. "Nothing disturbs us. We are the very centre of equanimity. We are a sort of human Gibraltar which nothing can move. It is a nice day out," he added.

"Most charming," said I. "Indeed, a nicer day out than this no

one could wish for."

"We are glad you find it so, madame."

"Excuse me, sire," I said, firmly – "Princess."

"Indeed yes. We had forgotten," he replied, with a courteous wave of his hand. "It could not be otherwise. We are glad, Princess, that you find the day nice out. We ordered it so, and it is pleasant to feel that what we do for the world is appreciated. We shall not ask you why you have sought this interview," he continued. "We can quite understand, without wasting our time on frivolous questions, why any one, even a beautiful American like yourself, should wish to see us in person. Are you in Berlin for long?"

"Only until next Thursday, sire," I replied.

"What a pity!" he commented, rising from the throne and stroking his mustache before one of the mirrors. "What a tremendous pity! We should have been pleased to have had you with us longer."

"Emperor," said I, "this is no time for vain compliments, however pleasing to me they may be. Let us get down to business. Let us talk about the great problems of the day."

"As you will, Princess," he replied. "To begin with, we were born – "

"Pardon me, sire," I interrupted. "But I know all about your history."

"They study us in your schools, do they? Ah, well, they do rightly," said the Emperor, with a wink of satisfaction at himself

in the glass. "They indeed do rightly to study us. When one considers

what we are the result of! Far back, Princess, in the days of Thor, the original plans for William Second were made. This person, whom we have the distinguished and sacred honor to be, was contemplated in the days when chaos ruled. Gods have dreamed of him; goddesses have sighed for him; epochs have shed bitter tears because he was not yet; and finally he is here, in us – incarnate sublimity that we are!"

The Emperor thumped his chest proudly as he spoke, until the gold on his uniform fairly rang.

"Are we – ah – are we appreciated in America?" he asked.

"To the full, Emperor – to the full!" I replied, instantly. "I do not know any country on the face of this grand green earth where you are quoted more often at your full value than with us."

"And – ah," he added, with a slight coyness of manner – "we are – ah – supposed to be at what you Americans call par and a premium, eh?"

"Emperor," said I, "you are known to us as yourself."

"Madame – or rather Princess," he cried, ecstatically, "you could not have praised us more highly."

He touched an electric button as he spoke, and instantly a Buttons appeared.

"The iron cross!" he cried.

"Not for me – oh, sire – not for me?" said I, almost swooning with joy.

"No, Princess, not for you," said the Emperor. "For ourself. We shall give you one of the buttons off our imperial coat. It is our habit every morning at this hour to decorate our imperial self, and we have rung for the usual thing just as you Americans would ring for a Manhattan cocktail."

"What!" I cried, wondering at the man's marvellous acquaintance with the slightest details of American life. "You know the – Manhattan cocktail?"

"Princess," said the Emperor, proudly, "we know everything."

And this was the man they call Willie-boy in London!

"Emperor," said I, "about the partition of China?"

"Well," said he, "what of the partition of China?"

"Is it to be partitioned?"

The Emperor's eye twinkled.

"We have not yet read the morning papers, Princess," he said. "But we judge, from what we saw in the society news of last night's *Fliegende Choynal*, that there will be a military ball at Peking shortly, and that the affair will end brilliantly with a – ah – a German."

"Good!" said I. "And you will really fight England?"

"Why not?" said he, with a smile at the looking-glass.

"Your grandmother?" I queried, with a slight shake of my head, in deprecation of a family row.

"She calls us Billie!" he cried, passionately. "Grandmothers can do a great many things, Princess, but no grandmother that Heaven ever sent into this world shall call us Billie with

impunity."

I was silent for a moment.

"Still, Emperor," I said, at last, "England has been very good to you. She has furnished you with all the coal your ships needed to steam into Chinese waters. Surely that was the act of a grandmother. You wouldn't fight her after that?"

"We will, if she'll lend us ammunition for our guns," said the Emperor, gloomily. "If she won't do that, then of course there will be no war. But, Princess, let us talk of other things. Have you heard our latest musical composition?"

I frankly confessed that I had not, and the imperial band was called up and ordered to play the Emperor's new march. It was very moving and made me somewhat homesick; for, after all, with all due respect to William's originality, it was nothing more than a slightly Prussianized rendering of "All Coons Look Alike to Me." However, I praised the work, and added that I had heard nothing like it in Wagner, which seemed to please the Emperor very much. I have since heard that as a composer he resents Wagner, and attributes the success of the latter merely to that accident of birth which brought the composer into the world a half-century before William had his chance.

"And now, Princess," he observed, as the music ceased, "your audience is over. We are to have our portrait painted at mid-day, and the hour has come. Assure your people of our undying regard. You may kiss our little finger."

"And will not your Majesty honor me with his autograph?" I

asked, holding out my book, after I had kissed his little finger.

"With pleasure," said he, taking the book and complying with my request as follows:

"Faithfully your War Lord and Master,

"Me."

Wasn't it characteristic!

MR. ALFRED AUSTIN

It was on a beautiful March afternoon that I sought out the Poet-Laureate of England in his official sanctum in London. A splendid mantle of fog hung over the street, shutting out the otherwise all too commercial aspect of that honored by-way. It was mid-day to the stroke of the hour, and a soft mellow glare suffused the perspective in either direction, proceeding from the gas-lamps upon the street corners, which, like the fires of eternal youth, are kept constantly burning in the capital city of the Guelphs.

I approached the lair of England's first poet with a beating heart, the trip-hammer-like thudding of which against my ribs could be heard like the pounding of the twin screws of an Atlantic liner far down beneath the folds of my mackintosh. To stand in the presence of Tennyson's successor was an ambition to wish to gratify, but it was awesome, and not a little difficult for the nervous system. However, once committed to the enterprise, I was not to be baffled, and with shaking knees and tremulous hand I banged the brazen knocker against the door until the hall within echoed and re-echoed with its clangor.

Immediately a window on the top story was opened, and the laureate himself thrust his head out. I could dimly perceive the contour of his noble forehead through the mist.

"Who's there, who's there, I fain would know,
Are you some dull and dunning dog?
Are you a friend, or eke a foe?
I cannot see you through the fog,"

said he.

"I am an American lady journalist," I cried up to him, making a megaphone of my two hands so that he might not miss a word, "and I have come to offer you seven dollars a word for a glimpse of you at home."

"How much is that in £ *s*. *d*.?" he asked, eagerly.

"One pound eight," said I.

"I'll be down," he replied, instantly, and drawing his noble brow in out of the wet, he slammed the window to, and, if the squeaking sounds I heard within meant anything, slid down the banisters in order not to keep me waiting longer than was necessary. He opened the door, and in a moment we stood face to face.

"Mr. Alfred Austin?" said I.
"The same, O Lady Journalist,
I'm glad to take you by the fist —
Particularly since I've heard
You offer one pun eight per word."

said he, cordially grasping me by the hand.

"Come right up and make yourself perfectly at home, and I'll give you an imitation of my daily routine, and will answer

whatever questions you may see fit to ask. Of course you must be aware that I am averse to this sort of thing generally. The true poet cannot permit the searchlight of publicity to be turned upon his home without losing something of that delicate – "

"Hold on, Mr. Austin," said I. "I don't wish to be rude, but I am not authorized to pay you seven dollars apiece for such words as these you are uttering. If you have any explanations to offer the public for condescending to let me peep at you while at work, you must do it at your own expense."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.