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Richard Marsh, *The Complete Adventures of Sam Briggs*

Edited by Minna Vuohelainen

Introduction

By Minna Vuohelainen

At the beginning of Richard Marsh's 1897 bestseller *The Beetle: A Mystery*, the homeless tramp Robert Holt, an unemployed clerk, gets lost in Walham Green in suburban West London, where he soon falls into the clutches of the novel's eponymous monster:

In the darkness and the rain, the locality which I was entering appeared unfinished. I seemed to be leaving civilisation behind me. The path was unpaved; the road rough and uneven, as if it had never been properly made. Houses were few and far between. Those which I did encounter, seemed, in the imperfect light, amid the general desolation, to be cottages which were crumbling to decay. [...] It was as if I was in a land of desolation.¹

Later on, an upper-class narrator describes the scene as a wasteland:

The road [...] seemed to lead to nothing and nowhere. We [...] were confronted by something like chaos. In front and on either side of us were large spaces of waste land. [...] Here and there enormous weather-stained boards announced that "This Desirable Land was to be Let for Building Purposes." The road itself was unfinished. There was no pavement, and we had the bare uneven ground for sidewalk. It seemed, so far as I could judge, to lose itself in space, and to be swallowed up by the wilderness of "Desirable Land" which lay beyond.²

In a nice satirical touch, Marsh introduces us to the owner of the site, an eccentric old lady who claims that this is "one of the finest building sites near London, and it increases in value every year."³

¹ Richard Marsh, *The Beetle: A Mystery*, ed. Minna Vuohelainen (Kansas City: Valancourt, 2008), 10.

² Marsh, *The Beetle*, 186.

³ Marsh, *The Beetle*, 243.

In her analysis of suburbia in Victorian literature, Lara Baker Whelan argues that the gothic mode and the suburban setting share a mutual concern over otherness and the uncertainty of the future,⁴ that “[r]uinous suburbanization presented as something that opened a gateway to ‘other worlds’ seems to have captured the imagination of Victorian writers.”⁵ This instability of suburban space is evident in Marsh’s fiction when, just seven years after *The Beetle*, he introduces us to the lower-middle-class clerk Sam Briggs, a first-person narrator of a series of comic and, later, war stories and a proud inhabitant of Walham Green, the “desirable land” satirised in *The Beetle*.

Marsh is now mostly remembered for *The Beetle*, which rivaled and, indeed, outsold Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. What is often forgotten is that he was in fact a prolific and versatile writer of a range of genre fiction, producing gothic, crime, adventure, spy, romance, juvenile and comic fiction in a career that lasted from 1880 to his death in 1915. This Valancourt edition provides the reader with access to a forgotten series of short stories featuring Sam Briggs, probably Marsh’s most successful comic creation. Sam is the first-person narrator of a series of twenty-three comic and war stories, here presented together for the first time. Twenty-one of the stories appeared in *Strand Magazine* between October and December 1915, and Sam also featured in two collections, *Sam Briggs: His Book* (London: John Long, 1912) and *Sam Briggs, V.C.* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, in 1915). For readers accustomed to thinking of Marsh as an author of gothic fiction, Sam’s collected misadventures may come as something of a surprise.

Richard Marsh and the literary marketplace

Much of Marsh’s fiction was initially published in magazines, either in short or serial formats, and only subsequently issued in volume form as novels or short story collections. Marsh’s professional success was connected to fundamental changes in the consumption of print at the fin de siècle, a potential “golden age” for the popular novelist.⁶ The period witnessed the introduction of cheaper and quicker printing methods, advances in distribution and communication, increasingly aggressive marketing, the emergence of affordable 6s. first editions and of magazines specializing in fiction, and, importantly, near universal literacy

⁴ Lara Baker Whelan, *Class, Culture and Suburban Anxieties in the Victorian Era* (New York & London: Routledge, 2010), 99.

⁵ Whelan, *Class, Culture*, 105.

⁶ Simon Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing, 1800-1919* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1994), 14.

resulting from the introduction of state education. The newly literate lower middle classes gathered in the cities, where the employment market was creating unprecedented opportunities for white-collar workers with basic skills in literacy and numeracy. In the process, they created a growing market for reading material, especially cheap fiction and light journalism.⁷ From the 1880s, the publishing industry began to respond to the challenge of catering for these new consumers by providing them with cheaper and lighter reading matter than had been previously available.

The introduction of the six-shilling one-volume first edition was one key innovation of the period;⁸ perhaps more important, however, was the rise of the popular press. Penny weeklies such as *Tit-Bits*, *Answers* and *Pearson's Weekly* and illustrated sixpenny monthlies such as the *Strand*, *Windsor* and *Idler* magazines provided the newly literate public with substantial chunks of fiction relatively cheaply. According to Walter Besant,

There are at this moment in the country hundreds of papers and journals and magazines, weekly and monthly, published at prices varying from half-a-crown to a penny, the latter, of course, vastly outnumbering the former. The circulation of some is enormous, far beyond the wildest dreams of twenty years ago: they are the favourite reading of millions who until the last few years never read anything: they are the outcome of the School Board, which pours out every year by thousands, by the hundred thousand, boys and girls into whom they have instilled, as one result of these standards, a love of reading. The favourite amusement of these young people is reading. It is, of course, nonsense to suppose that they read for study: they read for amusement: and it is, or should be, a more desirable and more innocent form of amusement than the billiard room and the music hall and the tavern bar, or the pavement in the company of a girl. The penny journals cater for young people: they provide, week by week, things that will amuse them: stories, long and short: papers descriptive—all kinds of papers: papers of adventures, of travel, of history: all kinds of papers, except papers critical and literary: they demand a continual supply of these

⁷ Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*. Second edition (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 306-07; Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1992), 14.

⁸ Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 184; McAleer, *Popular Reading*, 27.

things: they want, also, anecdotes, paragraphs, and personal gossip: they want questions and answers: they want verses: they want riddles: they want, in a word, everything that their *clientèle*, which is by no means confined to former children of the Board School, will find amusing.⁹

Marsh's career coincided with this proliferation of popular fiction magazines providing the public with inexpensive reading matter. Born Richard Bernard Heldmann in London on 12 October, 1857, Marsh came from a background in trade, although he took to journalism at an early age. His father, lace merchant Joseph Heldmann, was of German Jewish origin, and his mother Emma, née Marsh, was a lace-manufacturer's daughter from Nottinghamshire. Bernard (his preferred name), or "Bertie," was born just before his father became embroiled in bankruptcy proceedings which revealed that he had been defrauding his employers, who also happened to be his in-laws, by selling goods well below cost value. The trial put an end to Joseph Heldmann's career as lace merchant and he soon took to private tutoring, teaching German, English Literature and the Classics at various London schools before running his own school in Hammersmith, West London. The Heldmanns had at least three further children: Henry (Harry, 1858-1932); Sophia Alice (Alice, 1860-1938); and John Whitworth, who died in his infancy (1870-71).

Young Bernard appears to have been something of a scapegrace and had, by 1880, taken to journalism, then a semi-intellectual career on the borders of respectable society. His earliest identified contributions appeared in 1880 in the devotional publications *Quiver* and *Young England* and the boys' paper *Union Jack*. The weekly *Union Jack*, associated with two favorite boys' writers of the time, W.H.G. Kingston (1814-80) and G.A. Henty (1832-1902), provided Heldmann with his initiation into the literary life. Under Henty's editorship, he quickly became a trusted contributor of short and serial school and adventure stories before being promoted to co-editor in October 1882. However, in spring 1883 Heldmann's contribution to the paper began to flag, the serial he was publishing was interrupted in April, and his editorship was abruptly terminated by Henty in June. While the exact circumstances of Heldmann's breach with Henty in spring 1883 remain unclear, we now know that Heldmann was by the summer of the same year living a life of fraud.

In March 1883, Heldmann had opened an account at the Acton branch of the London and South Western Bank. Arthur Charles Bocking, the clerk with whom he dealt, had "had an

⁹ Walter Besant, *The Pen and the Book* (London: Thomas Burleigh, 1899), 54-55.

introduction from his brother [Harry Heldmann] who had an account and was very respectable.” Heldmann was subsequently given a check book but as early as 21 May, 1883, Bocking had cause to write to Heldmann “calling his attention to the irregular way in which the account had been kept.”¹⁰ When Heldmann failed to respond, Bocking closed the account; but Heldmann continued to issue checks which subsequently bounced, and soon went on to live on his wits in France, the Channel Islands and different parts of Britain. Soon he was “wanted at various parts of the kingdom for various frauds” committed in the guise of “a well-to-do gentleman” sporting various aliases.¹¹ Heldmann was eventually captured in February 1884 and was tried in April at the West Kent Quarter Sessions, where he was sentenced to eighteen months’ hard labor for obtaining money, board and lodgings by false pretences.¹² He served his sentence in full at Maidstone Jail and was released on 8 October, 1885. The Maidstone Prison Nominal Roll tells us that he was considered well-educated, declared his occupation as journalist, had brown hair, and was 5 foot 5 inches tall.¹³

After this disgrace, Heldmann vanished from the literary scene for some time. We do not know what he did immediately upon his release from prison but, by autumn 1886, he had settled with a woman called Ada Kate Abbey. The couple’s first child, Alice Kate, was born in July 1887 but died in her infancy in March 1888. Five further children, Harry, Mabel, Madge, Conrad, and Bertram, followed in rapid succession between July 1888 and January 1895. It would have been difficult to support such a large family, and Heldmann may have resorted to producing fiction to supplement his income from journalism. He is likely to have been aware of his mother’s will, dated 15 June 1888, which to all intents and purposes disinherited him by leaving him £25, plus a list of religious exhortations, out of an estate valued in 1911 at nearly £3000. In any case, by summer 1888, Heldmann was again producing fiction, now under the pseudonym “Richard Marsh,” a combination of his own first name and his mother’s maiden name, as well as the name of his maternal grandfather and, incidentally, of the trainer of the Prince of Wales’s racehorses. Between 1888 and 1897 he published, often anonymously, in a number of fiction papers, including at least *Belgravia*,

¹⁰ “‘Captain Roberts’ Sent for Trial,” *Kent and Sussex Courier*, 20 February 1884, 3.

¹¹ “Capture of a Forger at Tenby,” *Western Mail*, 12 February 1884, 4.

¹² *West Kent Quarter Sessions*, Wednesday 9 April 1884, 72. See also *County of Kent: Criminal Register: England and Wales 1884*, 284: “Return of all persons Committed, or Bailed to appear for Trial, or Indicted at the General Quarter Sessions held at Maidstone on the ninth day of April 1884, showing the nature of their offences, and the result of the proceedings.”

¹³ *Maidstone Prison Nominal Roll*, November 1883–November 1884, no. 2100: “Hildmann, Bernard.”

Household Words, *Cornhill*, *Gentleman's*, *Blackwood's*, *Longman's*, *Home Chimes*, *All the Year Round*, *Strand*, *Idler* and *Answers*. These early contributions were almost exclusively in the short story format and thus exploited the enormous demand for short fiction that characterized the publishing industry, particularly the magazine market, towards the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ It was only after the success of *The Beetle* in 1897 that Marsh was able to sign all his magazine work and began to navigate towards the illustrated 6d. monthlies which flourished in turn-of-the-century Britain, including *Harmsworth Magazine*; the heavily illustrated *Pearson's Magazine*; *Windsor Magazine*; and *Cassell's Magazine*, all powerful commercial enterprises with print runs of from 100,000 to a million monthly copies. Most importantly of all, however, Marsh established a regular working relationship with George Newnes's *Strand Magazine*, founded in 1891.¹⁵ Newnes, who famously claimed to be "the average man" and thus to know his literary needs,¹⁶ was able to gauge the public taste accurately in his 6d. monthly that boasted a picture on every opening. Apart from its plentiful illustration, *Strand* was designed to sell by its lively contents, typically a mixture of short fiction and topical articles. Commercially a resounding success,¹⁷ *Strand* also offered contributors prompt editorial decisions and fair pay. Marsh had first contributed to *Strand* in December 1892, and from 1900 *Strand* emerged as his primary and, after 1910, sole, magazine contact, issuing sixty items by him between 1892 and 1916. It is no wonder that the monthly felt itself obliged to announce that Marsh's "death [would] be regretted by none more than by readers of this magazine."¹⁸

The short story

The short story was an extremely effective literary vehicle for the popular author at the fin de siècle, when a number of critics attempted to define it as "a definite species, having

¹⁴ Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth-Century Grub Street* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 208.

¹⁵ On Newnes, see Ann Parry, "George Newnes Limited," in *British Literary Publishing Houses, 1881-1965: Dictionary of Literary Biography* 112, ed. Jonathan Rose and Patricia J. Anderson (London and Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), 226-32.

¹⁶ Reginald Pound, *The Strand Magazine, 1891-1950* (London: Heinemann, 1966), 25.

¹⁷ Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 156.

¹⁸ Richard Marsh, "How I 'Broke into Print,'" *Strand Magazine* 50 (November 1915), 573.

possibilities of its own and also rigorous limitations.”¹⁹ The short story theorists were led by the American Brander Matthews, who described the “Short-story” as possessing an “essential unity of impression” which “deals with a single event, a single emotion, or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation.”²⁰ The short story, Matthews maintained, “must do one thing only, and it must do this completely and perfectly; it must not loiter or digress; it must have unity of action, unity of temper, unity of tone, unity of color, unity of effect; and it must vigilantly exclude everything that might interfere with its singleness of intention.”²¹ Another critic, T. Sharper Knowlson, agreed that “A short story is a narrative in miniature, exhibiting the working and climax of a deep emotion, considered subjectively, and therefore giving a pre-eminent interest to one particular person.”²²

While these literary critics attempted to define the short story as an elite form and thus to invest it with cultural capital, it was also a convenient commercial vehicle for popular authors. Marsh acknowledged this in his *Home Chimes* article on the short story, where he argued that

The short story is the product of to-day. This is the age of condensation. You condense an ox into a spoonful of essence. You condense a three-volume novel into eighteen pages. In other words, you boil it down. People say that writers of short stories are born, not made. It is a mistake. They are made.²³

Short fiction could be produced relatively quickly to ease financial pressure, and the magazine market was a means for an author to make himself known to different audiences. Short magazine fiction could also be used to experiment with new genres and audiences. Marsh, for example, exploited the flexibility of the magazine market by writing in a broader generic range than in his novels. Where his long fiction can be divided according to genre into three general categories—crime and adventure, supernatural, popular romance—short fiction allowed him to try his hand at, for example, comic sketches and suffragette stories.

¹⁹ Brander Matthews, ed., *The Short-Story: Specimens Illustrating its Development* (London: Sidney Appleton; New York, Cincinnati, Chicago: American Book Company, 1907), 3.

²⁰ Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short-Story* (New York, London & Bombay: Longmans, Green, 1901), 15-16.

²¹ Matthews, ed., *The Short-Story*, 26-27.

²² T. Sharper Knowlson, *Money-Making by Short-Story Writing* (London: Neuman and Castarede, [1904]), 19.

²³ Richard Marsh, “The Short Story,” *Home Chimes* 12.67 (August 1891), 23.

The literary marketplace of the turn of the century had been fragmented by the growth of literacy. In this increasingly diversified environment, it became imperative for writers to be able to target particular audiences: stories and novels had to be tailored to suit potential audiences with very different reading needs,²⁴ such as, for example, educated male readers; lower-middle-class office workers; middle-class women; teenage boys; and semi-literate working classes. As Ian Small recognizes,

[C]ommercial success depended not upon the understanding of the *individual* consumer and the insatiability of his or her wants, but rather upon identifying a *community* of taste. And, importantly, a community of taste presupposes certain *social relations* which underlie and define it—a class or gender identity, for example.²⁵

Marsh targeted a number of such communities through genre fiction, never relying solely on the support of a solitary, potentially fickle, niche audience. While his main contacts were mainstream monthlies, they all catered for slightly different readers and, considered together, they represent as wide an audience as a popular author could well aspire to. “Few authors,” a *Strand* interviewer acknowledged in 1915, “had a wider public than Mr Richard Marsh.”²⁶

Marsh’s connection with *Strand Magazine* in many ways defined his efforts in short fiction, particularly crime and humor. Initially designed as a short-story magazine “organically complete each month,”²⁷ *Strand* was instrumental in ushering in the golden age of the short story in Britain. Most importantly, the magazine is associated with Arthur Conan Doyle’s series of Sherlock Holmes stories, which ran in it from the summer of 1891. Halfway between the serial *novel* and the *unconnected* short story, the serial short story simultaneously created continuity and produced a self-contained reading experience that could be completed in one sitting, even on public transport; it also made it possible for busy readers to miss an installment without losing the plot. This format, pioneered by Doyle in *Strand*, became a staple of the magazine market at the turn of the century, and Marsh exploited it fully in his series of stories featuring the lower-middle-class clerk Sam Briggs (1904-15) and the lip-reading female detective Judith Lee (1911-16).

²⁴ Brantlinger, *Reading Lesson*, 187; Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914* (London: Fontana, 1991), 340; McAleer, *Popular Reading*, 24.

²⁵ Ian Small, “The Economies of Taste: Literary Markets and Literary Value in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 39.1 (1996), 14.

²⁶ Marsh, “How I ‘Broke into Print,’” 573.

²⁷ Pound, *Strand Magazine*, 30.

“The Adventures of Sam Briggs”

Sam Briggs is the first-person narrator of a series of twenty-three comic and war stories, here presented together for the first time. Twenty-one of the stories appeared in *Strand Magazine* between October 1904 (“The Girl on the Sands”) and December 1915 (“A Fighting Man”). The first eight of the stories ran intermittently between October 1904 and February 1908 and were illustrated in a comic style by Walter S. Stacey (1846-1929). These stories, together with two non-*Strand* stories featuring Sam and two other comic sketches without him, in fact reprinted from Marsh’s 1899 collection *Frivolities*, were collected together as *Sam Briggs: His Book*, published by John Long in 1912 as a 6s. unillustrated hardback. The second set of stories, illustrated in a more realistic style by Charles Pears (1873-1958), official War Artist to the Admiralty as well as the designer of stylish posters for London Underground, ran in *Strand* from August 1914, when a one-off (and uncollected) comic story, “Looping the Loop,” marked Sam’s return. This was then followed by a series of twelve war stories, subtitled “Sam Briggs Becomes a Soldier,” which ran in *Strand* monthly from January to December 1915. The final ten of these were subsequently issued by T. Fisher Unwin as *Sam Briggs, V.C.* in 1915, after Marsh’s death, and again without illustrations. The stories do not appear to have attracted much critical attention, but this was often the case with short story collections.

Marsh first introduced Sam as an occasional character who only made sporadic appearances in *Strand*, although the stories were accompanied by a subtitle establishing them as one of the “The Adventures of Sam Briggs.” However, it is only with Sam’s wartime adventures that we finally see him featuring in *Strand* as the protagonist of a regular, monthly series of stories on the model established by Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson in 1891. At this stage, the illustrations depicting Sam’s wartime heroics also change from Stacey’s comic sketches, which depict Sam as a figure of fun, to Pears’s dramatic, almost photographic illustrations which transform Sam into a human being and, eventually, a hero. It is intriguing that Marsh decided to use the pre-existing character in this way: while Sam had still been a comic figure in August 1914 when Marsh made him loop the loop in a story exploring the possibilities of aviation, the war stories present him as someone worthy of emulation.

The lower-middle-class clerk

The first set of Sam Briggs stories addresses a topical concern with clerical labor. As a reflection of socio-economic changes, clerks were one of the fastest growing occupational groups by the end of the nineteenth century.²⁸ In 1871, there were, according to Jonathan Wild, 262,084 white-collar employees in Britain; by 1891, the figure had risen to 534,622; and by 1911, to 918,186.²⁹ The proportion of male white-collar employees over 15 years of age as percentage of all occupied males over 15 rose from 3.5% in 1871, to 5.5% in 1891, and to 7.1% in 1911,³⁰ and within these figures low-paid commercial and office clerks such as Sam were increasingly important. Clerical work was strikingly urban in nature and flourished in governmental and trading centers such as London, where over 10% of the work force was engaged in white-collar employment by 1891.³¹ This statistical rise in white-collar employment was linked to changes in the economy that increasingly demanded literacy and numeracy, and to the provision of these skills in the aftermath of the 1870 Education Act.³² The nineteenth-century clerk had had middle-class origins, but by the early twentieth century working-class boys from skilled manual backgrounds, with good Board School performance, were increasingly entering clerical posts³³ in search of “social mobility, expanding job opportunities, and rising salaries.”³⁴ Clerking was not only an urban but also a relatively youthful trade by the Edwardian years: 46% of commercial clerks were under 25 years of age in 1911.³⁵ The average clerical salaries in the Edwardian years distinguished sharply between a clerical aristocracy of bank clerks, with an average middle-class income of £170 a year, and lower commercial and railway clerks whose income would seldom exceed £160 and would

²⁸ G.L. Anderson, “The Social Economy of Late-Victorian Clerks,” in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 113.

²⁹ Jonathan Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.

³⁰ Geoffrey Crossick, “The Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain: A Discussion,” in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 19.

³¹ Crossick, “The Emergence,” 19.

³² Richard N. Price, “Society, Status and Jingoism: The Social Roots of Lower Middle Class Patriotism, 1870-1900,” in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 103.

³³ David Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker: A Study in Class Consciousness*. 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 106; Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 407.

³⁴ Rose, *The Intellectual Life*, 434.

³⁵ Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, 43.

be likely to average just £80 a year, a figure roughly comparable to the earnings of better paid manual laborers.³⁶

Poor pay, oversupply in the clerical labor market, and reduction in opportunities for promotion all served to undermine the clerk's social and class status.³⁷ This problematic status is evident in the literary representation of the male clerk as either a comic or a degenerate figure (or both) connected to suburbia. The clerk's comic status is grounded in his status anxiety, the perceived "snobbishness," "self-deception" and "false consciousness" of the clerk who indulges in middle-class pretensions while living on a working-class income.³⁸ The clerk's notorious obsession with appearances, the importance of making social status visible,³⁹ provided comic clerk literature with a distinctive and accessible literary formula in which the author would focus on the clerk's material preoccupations,⁴⁰ in a recognition that the clerk's aspiration to middle-class status involved a considerable amount of expenditure to keep up a suitable lifestyle.⁴¹ The most famous example of this type of clerk is, of course, the comic but endearing Mr Pooter in George and Weedon Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892).

Another standard depiction of the clerk in the late-Victorian and (particularly) the Edwardian years saw him portrayed as a physically stunted degenerate.⁴² This representation reflected the realities of poor, cramped working conditions, the prevalence of consumption amongst clerks, and the discovery of the poor physical condition of army recruits from clerical backgrounds during the Boer War.⁴³ As a consequence, the Edwardian years witnessed a debate over the physical impact of city life and office work, with the clerical worker as a representative of the degenerative influence of a white-collar existence.⁴⁴ The best-known literary example would be Leonard Bast in E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1909)—a clerical figure with pretensions to "culture" and self-improvement without the necessary financial means.

³⁶ Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, 42, 269.

³⁷ Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, 117; Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 84.

³⁸ Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, 14.

³⁹ Crossick, "The Emergence," 31.

⁴⁰ Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 57.

⁴¹ Gregory Anderson, *Victorian Clerks* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976), 68.

⁴² John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992), 62.

⁴³ Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, 17-18; Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 82.

⁴⁴ Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 83.

Marsh's Sam Briggs can be seen as a representative of both literary traditions, though he comes to stand for something more positive as the series of stories progresses. Unmarried, youthful and naïve but ambitious, Sam is closer to Pooter's son Lupin than to either Pooter or Bast. Sam is employed by the dried fruit merchants Potter, Potter & Sons. By the second series, Sam is employed by a different firm, Blagden and Cook. He insists that he is not an "office boy" but a "junior clerk" and protests (too much, one feels) that "sweeping the floors" is *not* "his usual duty."⁴⁵ Sam is not shy about his future aspirations: "I'm in the dry fruit trade—wholesale. [...] Been there four years. Started with five shillings a week. Now I'm getting thirty. Mean to have three pounds before long. [...] I don't mean to marry till I have got it. [...] I don't hold with love in a cottage."⁴⁶ Real material hardship does not feature in the stories, while material ambition – and the eventual rewarding of such ambition – is a key element in them.

Sam is represented as an under-sized, plump young man of 19 at the beginning of the series, or, as he puts it himself, he will be "[t]wenty-one the year after next."⁴⁷ Sam's miniscule frame is a constant joke in the stories: he is repeatedly referred to as "a microbe"⁴⁸ and confesses that "the question of my size is a delicate one with me. While not holding with your giants, I am aware that I might, without much harm being done, be the merest fraction taller than I am."⁴⁹ Others repeatedly take advantage of Sam's lack of stature, as in this example from "A Social Evening:"

"He's not much to look at, is he?" said red-head, looking me up and down as if I was there for exhibition.

"You've got to look at him twice," said Posford, "before you can see him once."

"There certainly is not much of him to make a fuss about."

"Fuss! Him! Why, he's more like a monkey than a man, and not a fully-grown monkey either."

"Extraordinary what some women can take to!" [...]

"Extraordinary!"⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Marsh, "Her Fourth," *Strand Magazine* 30 (December 1905), 767, 770.

⁴⁶ Marsh, "The Girl on the Sands," *Strand Magazine* 28 (October 1904), 424.

⁴⁷ Marsh, "The Girl on the Sands," 424.

⁴⁸ Marsh, "Her Fourth," 765.

⁴⁹ Marsh, "That Hansom," *Strand Magazine* 31 (May 1906), 569.

⁵⁰ Marsh, "A Social Evening," *Strand Magazine* 33 (April 1907), 393.

However, Sam is not only under-size; he is also naïve, inexperienced and unassertive and, unlike many literary clerks, single until his engagement to Dora Wilkinson in the second series. In “Her Fourth,” Sam nearly ends up married to his employers’ forceful, elderly aunt who is looking for a fourth husband after exhausting the previous three:

She looked at me till I felt uncomfortable; then she put up a pair of glasses and looked at me through them. She kept on looking as she said:—

“Not bad, Ashington. What do you think?” [...]

“No intellect,” she answered.

“You don't want intellect in a man.”

“I suppose not.”

“I've got all the intellect that's wanted in my house. What is wanted in a man is something different. Is it your mother or your father who is fat?” she asked me, in that way she had of speaking as if she was firing a gun at you.

It struck me as being a funny question, but I made no bones about telling her.

“I shouldn't say that either of them was out of the way,” I said.

“Aren't they? Then let me tell you that you'd better be careful about what you eat and drink, or you'll get a double chin. Come here.” I went as near to her as I dared. “Closer!” she said. “Closer!” She made me go as close to her as I could. Then she put up her hand and felt my chin, prodding me in the cheek as a butcher might a pig. I went hot all over; I never had been handled like that before. “Nice and soft,” she said.

“Like him,” remarked the tall woman, in a voice which I should term snappy.

“What's the harm if he is? The softer a man is, the easier he is to manage.”⁵¹

This “softness” is not only physical but, arguably, cultural and intellectual in keeping with Edwardian hostility towards lower-middle-class suburban culture and clerical standards of education.

Suburbia and Edwardian urban culture

⁵¹ Marsh, “Her Fourth,” 761-62.

In the minds of contemporaries, the figure of the clerk was inextricably linked to suburbia, since clerks typically lived in suburbs,⁵² often inner suburbs such as Camberwell.⁵³ Sam is a proud inhabitant of Acacia Villa in Walham Green, a lower-middle-class residential suburb on the Western brink of Central London, where he lives with his father, mother and sisters Amelia (in the first series) and Louisa (in the second). As Charles Booth's survey of *The Life and Labour of the People in London* testifies, Sam is a reasonably typical resident of this area which contained

Some good streets [...] let to retired tradesmen and professional men. Many smaller houses with clerks, artisans, cabmen, and labourers whose wives sometimes work; often two families to a house. Few very bad, dirty streets inhabited by the lowest class.⁵⁴

Just as clerks were amongst the fastest growing occupational groups in this period, so London suburbs were amongst the fastest growing areas in England in the late nineteenth century, expanding by 50% per decade between 1861 and 1891.⁵⁵ The marked suburban growth and the provision of affordable public transport meant that people in lower income brackets could now afford to become suburbanites.⁵⁶ Simultaneously, a shift occurred in the perception of suburbia from an association with the established middle classes towards the aspirational lower middle classes.⁵⁷ Whelan characterizes the resulting post-1880 image of the suburb as "trivial, dull, bourgeois, pretentious without reason, an object of mockery by those who considered themselves above the petty concerns of the world of mid-level clerks

⁵² Carey, *The Intellectuals*, 46.

⁵³ H.J. Dyos and D.A. Reeder, "Slums and Suburbs," in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, 2 vols, ed. H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London and New York: Routledge, 1999 [1973]), I, 371.

⁵⁴ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London: First Series: Poverty, II: Streets and Population Classified* (London: Macmillan, 1902), Appendix, Table I: Classification and Description of the Population of London, 1887-1889, by School Board Blocks and Divisions, 7.

⁵⁵ Whelan, *Class, Culture*, 3.

⁵⁶ Kate Flint, "Fictional Suburbia," in *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History*, ed. Peter Humm, Paul Stigant and Peter Widdowson (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 113; Whelan, *Class, Culture*, 148; S. Martin Gaskell, "Housing and the Lower Middle Class, 1870-1914," in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870-1914*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 160.

⁵⁷ Whelan, *Class, Culture*, 143.

and accountants.”⁵⁸ Such attitudes were most notoriously voiced by T.H.W. Crosland in his 1905 attack on the *Suburbans* as representative of “pretty well everything on the earth that is ill-conditioned, undesirable, and unholy.”⁵⁹

However, while contemporaries often viewed suburbia negatively, H.J. Dyos’s definition of a suburb as “a decentralized part of the city with which it is inseparably linked by certain economic and social ties” is useful.⁶⁰ While suburban life undoubtedly creates a separation by means of the commute on public transport between work and home, the city and the suburb are also inextricably connected. Indeed, we seldom hear much about either work or suburbia in the literature of clerkdom: the focus is much more clearly on the rewards of such work in keeping with the cult of the self-made man and the values of self-help, competitive individualism, and defense of private property.⁶¹ The new cultural status of the lower middle classes was reflected in this age of “material things and fleshly pleasures”⁶² in the emergence of a new lower-middle-class culture, with its clerk’s slang, reading matter, shopping experience, and use of holidays and leisure time.⁶³ Marsh’s stories reference all these cultural developments in Sam’s narrative voice, appetite for striking apparel, trips to the seaside, and consumption of *Tit-Bits*.

The clerk’s connection to the city is crucial here in facilitating his indulgence in lower-middle-class culture. Sam may live in Walham Green but social and cultural opportunities constantly come his way in or on the way to the City, particularly on public transport, as Sam is “going up in the train to business”⁶⁴ “fourteen in” a train compartment,⁶⁵ walking “over Blackfriars Bridge [...] on to the Embankment,”⁶⁶ or traveling “on the top of the ’bus”.⁶⁷ Work is barely mentioned, and, instead, London becomes a centre of leisure opportunity. Thus, Sam is constantly meeting young women on the bus, in Hyde Park, and at teashops. The seaside resorts are within easy striking distance for Sam to spend his

⁵⁸ Whelan, *Class, Culture*, 140.

⁵⁹ T.W.H. Crosland, *The Suburbans* (London: John Long, 1905), 8.

⁶⁰ H.J. Dyos, *Victorian Suburb: A Study of the Growth of Camberwell* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1961), 22.

⁶¹ Flint, “Fictional Suburbia,” 115; Anderson, *Victorian Clerks*, 41; Crossick, “The Emergence,” 46.

⁶² Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press & London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 4.

⁶³ Whelan, *Class, Culture*, 157; Carey, *The Intellectuals*, 58-59; Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, 34.

⁶⁴ Marsh, “A Modest Half-Crown,” *Strand Magazine* 30 (November 1905), 497.

⁶⁵ Marsh, “A Modest Half-Crown,” 499.

⁶⁶ Marsh, “A Modest Half-Crown,” 498.

⁶⁷ Marsh, “The Star of Romance,” *Strand Magazine* 34 (July 1907), 89.

“holiday—ten days altogether. [...] I had been doing myself a fair treat [...]. I give you my word that I’d missed nothing. That sort of thing makes the pieces fly.”⁶⁸ Suitable reading matter can easily be purchased (*Tit-Bits* is mentioned), social gatherings organized, football matches and air shows attended, and striking clothing purchased. Sam’s ostentatious taste in clothes, in particular, is a constant source of humor in the stories. In “The Gift Horse,” Sam prepares for an excursion to Margate “in style”:

I spent a good bit of coin in rigging myself out. I always do hold that a gentleman ought to attire himself in accordance with the occasion. It is not my wish to enter into private details, but I may mention that I bought a pair of new brown shoes at five-and-eleven, a straw hat at one-and-nine, a tie which was just the thing, one of those new-fashioned collars which are all the rage—they had not got my size, so they let me have it cheap because it was a trifle smaller than I usually take, and before I had done with it I wished I had never had it at all—and a pair of yellow dogskin gloves which you could see from one end of Cheapside to the other—not to go any farther. The governor gave me a Saturday off.⁶⁹

Others, however, find his tastes somewhat garish, commenting on the “conglomeration” that he is wearing that “there are seven distinct colours in plain sight.”⁷⁰

While, then, the clerk may have been a comic or an economically marginal figure, socially he could be seen as integral to a certain type of Edwardian urban culture.⁷¹ Marsh’s stories only work because Sam is a recognizable “type.” Sam’s first-person narrative emphasizes the values of his class: he is highly conscious of his status, socially and financially ambitious, and obsessed with money, material possessions, and economic and employment opportunities, though always “a bit short”;⁷² however, this unashamed consumerism also makes Sam noticeable on the urban scene—visible “from one end of Cheapside to the other.”⁷³ While the clerk has traditionally been seen as a pitiable figure, Wild points out that literary representations of the clerk are also essentially ambivalent. As Wild notes in his analysis of *A Diary of a Nobody*, Pooter’s diary serves eventually as a

⁶⁸ Marsh, “The Girl on the Sands,” 423.

⁶⁹ Marsh, “The Gift Horse,” *Strand Magazine* 29 (March 1905), 282.

⁷⁰ Marsh, “Her Fourth,” 764.

⁷¹ Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*, 35.

⁷² Marsh, “A Modest Half-Crown,” 497.

⁷³ Marsh, “The Gift Horse,” *Strand Magazine* 29 (March 1905), 282.

validation of lower-middle-class values and culture, and his essential integrity is also celebrated and rewarded at the end of a story that has essentially poked fun at him and his kind.⁷⁴ The same analysis could be offered of Marsh's stories, which ran in *Strand*, a magazine aimed at lower-middle-class readers, many of them based in London, whose leisure needs were well served by the monthly's innovative use of the serial short story. These were readers who would ideally wish to read a single self-contained story during their commute to work in the City and would find positive images of successful clerks encouraging.⁷⁵ Marsh's stories were humorous, it is true, but while we smile at Sam's mishaps we also always know that he is essentially a decent and, eventually, likeable figure in his reaffirmation of lower-middle-class values and his validation of those values as quintessentially English. This dual purpose of the stories—as entertainment *and* validation of lower-middle-class values—is endorsed by their first-person narrative technique. While we are clearly supposed to laugh at Sam in a good-humored way, it is hard not to empathize with him as he repeatedly becomes the butt of his superiors' jokes. Sam's youthfulness and naivety serve to soften Marsh's satire, and his first-person narrative endears him to the reader: Sam will yet grow up.

Sam Briggs Becomes a Soldier: Sam and the First World War

Sam's English decency is confirmed in the second series of the stories which ran in *Strand* from January to December 1915 and saw Sam enlist in the army, in keeping with great numbers of real-life clerks.⁷⁶ The comic Sam initially appears an incongruous figure in a military setting, and struggles to be accepted due to his size when, in nationalistic fervor, he enlists alongside other young men. As a rare review in the *Observer* puts it,

Sam Briggs is a hero *malgré lui* on some occasions, if we trust his modesty and take his record from his own lips; but it is fairly obvious that he is of the real stuff V.C.s are made of; and the almost fabulous stories that we read daily in the papers, and know for glorious fact, show what that stuff is. Sam is a charming little man—the unheroic-looking, humorous, sturdy type that fills our ranks, and rises, as Sam rose, to well-deserved promotion. His adventures, taking German trenches, blowing up powder magazines, locating and destroying hostile batteries—well, they are enough to

⁷⁴ Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 57-62.

⁷⁵ Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 89.

⁷⁶ Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 123.

make a Boy Scout's mouth water when he reads of them. Even a reviewer feels like forming fours.⁷⁷

The reviewer notes that Sam has become a fitting hero for the age, and also points out, unwittingly, that Marsh is here returning in some respects to his early career as a provider of adventure stories for male readers.

While the Sam of these stories is still under-sized, plump, naïve and young (he does not appear to have aged, certainly not by ten years), he is also a much more mature and responsible character. Sam's narrative voice, which in the early stories is characterized by its clerk's slang and naivety, now assumes an authoritative tone that emphasizes responsibility, duty and love of Britain when faced with the German enemy. The early stories in the second series appear to subscribe to the widely-held view that the "Great War" would reaffirm age-old traditions of heroic masculinity and give young men who had been withering away in offices something worthwhile to do. As Sam affirms, he can hear the bugle calling for him and all men worth their salt should enlist to defend Britain. However, Sam also repeatedly emphasizes that Britons are a peace-loving nation and have only gone to war to defend themselves and their continental friends, who have been unfairly attacked by the brutal, machine-like and often drunken Germans. *Strand*, a popular magazine, is here doing its bit for the war effort by publishing stories that essentially serve a propaganda function in showing what a single soldier, even someone as unlikely to succeed in the trenches as Sam, can achieve. Put to a real test, Sam is neither a comic nor a tragic figure but a real role model for English boys and young men.⁷⁸ This suggests, of course, that these qualities existed in Sam all along: the peace-loving clerk comes to stand for everyman. Sam's suburban origins, clerical status and diminutive stature are all forgotten as the junior clerk from Walham Green comes to epitomize Englishness itself.

Sam's army experience is in many respects a great success: he is rapidly promoted, finds himself the center of feminine admiration, and single-handedly tackles enormous German soldiers due to his native English grit. In keeping with the stories' propaganda function, Marsh's lack of first-hand war experience, and the relatively early stage of the war when Marsh was working on the series, Sam's wartime adventures are *not* realistic. However, while Sam somehow accidentally survives and eventually gains a Victoria Cross, his experiences and reflections also grow increasingly bitter as the series progresses and he

⁷⁷ "New Novels," *Observer*, 12 December 1915, 7.

⁷⁸ Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk*, 137-45.

returns from the war a richer and more mature but also a more cynical man, perhaps as a reflection of Marsh's—and the nation's—growing disillusionment with the war. The author's sons were serving in the army, and his eldest son Harry was killed in action on 25 September 1915, a mere six weeks after Marsh's death on 9 August. Sam's progress from the comic figure of 1904 to the cynical war hero of 1915 is, thus, indicative of changes in Britain's place in the world and of mainstream attitudes towards the war, and we see in it an early indication of the wide-spread disillusionment and cynicism which would be brought about by the war.