

FAME

LONG ago a friend told me how to achieve fame. 'Sit still and do nothing!' he directed. Just read a few of the right books, see a few of the best pictures, and go to a very few of the outstanding plays. And say very *very* little about them. You will, of course, cultivate a slight acquaintance with an occasional celebrity.'

'What then?' I asked. 'That's not fame.'

'No, no. It's the road to fame. People notice you. They wonder what you do. They can find out nothing about you. So they make you famous.'

'Oh, do talk sense!' I begged him, for I was an ardent young man ablaze with literary zeal, and perfectly well aware that I only needed Recognition to achieve a durable fame—I had everything else.

My friend sighed, and continued, with infinite patience:

'Society is less tolerant of a nonentity than Nature of a vacuum. Society, therefore, finding someone constantly in its midst of whom nothing can be told, but whose tastes and judgment are exquisite, realises that you are an Artist, and must be a Creator. Presently, one busy Collector after another will seek your acquaintance, and murmur hopefully, '*Such* a marvellous picture in the Splashers Gallery! So you do agree that line is merely' or, perhaps, '*When* are we to have another sonnet?' or, even, 'It's too bad of you, you know! *No* one could *adequately* interpret that part!'

I was hurt. I wanted nothing spurious. I looked for honour as due recognition for my work, a birth-right. And I was zealous—so I went on writing.

I wrote a lot of things—essays, stories, books and poems—and I cherished them no less when they re-

turned from their circular tours than I did when they set out, immaculate. Perhaps I took refuge in cynicism now and then, but I never lost faith. My friends constantly stimulated me; they all knew I wrote (they had heard most of the things read) and they never had faith, and their cynicism increased; I was determined to shame them.

At last I wrote an article, and beamed upon it, and said nothing to my friends, and sent it to *Punch* with a stamped, addressed envelope.

In a day or two I received the envelope again. I opened it stoically. My article should be reverently placed on my bookshelves in its appropriate folio. I withdrew it from its envelope. *It had changed its form.* It was no longer in my own peculiar handwriting. It was a Printer's Proof!

I dared not presume to correct it. I returned it at once as it was. I only took the precaution to inquire discreetly if the Editor of *Punch* were accustomed to play practical jokes on aspiring contributors. But no: next week *Punch* arrived, and there was my article! I can show it to you now.

I happened to remark to my friends that that particular number was of particular interest to me, and, under pressure, modestly explained why. They didn't believe me. I happened to leave the printed slip lying on my desk. They believed that.

I confess I regretted the anonymity. But there it was. I was on the ladder at last.

I brought out all my portfolios. I condensed novels to two thousand words, and epics to sonnets. I had the whole lot re-typed, and sent batch after batch to the Editor of *Punch*. He courteously returned batch after batch to me with printed slips that differed only slightly from the one I kept. (I have often wondered if he regretted his generous impulse on first hearing from me.)

Blackfriars

But I maintained a discreet silence in this matter, in conversation, and spoke about other people's output rather than my own.

My friends treated me with more respect. They realised unplumbed depths in me; for instance, they had not looked on me before as a funny man. Then, one day, as I was waiting for a local 'bus, I overheard two ladies talking together. One said to the other, 'There's Mr. —. He writes for *Punch*, you know,' and they looked at me with reverence.

I blushed. I was elated. I was contrite. Oh, blessed anonymity! Oh, comforting hypocrisy! Others, too, heard of my success; it was noised abroad; and I am no longer a nonentity in local Society. Strangers whom I meet now are warned first: 'Mr. — writes for *Punch*, you know,' and they murmur to me enchantingly, 'So glad . . . I always want to thank you when I read your articles. Such a tonic!' or else, 'Can't think how you do it, y'know, week after week.'

And all my cynicism has gone; now, as I turn the pages of *Punch* on Wednesdays, I read without envy, without criticism, for I read the work other men have done to bring me Fame.

RONALD RICHINGS.