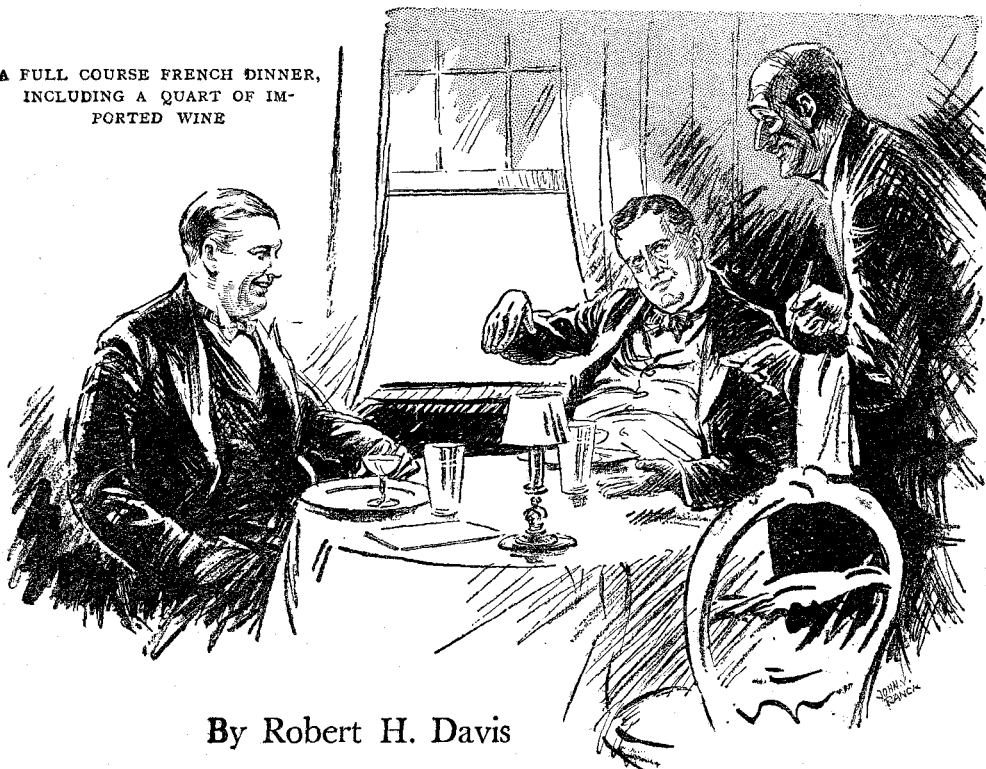


# Bob Davis Recalls

A FULL COURSE FRENCH DINNER,  
INCLUDING A QUART OF IM-  
PORTED WINE



By Robert H. Davis

*The Author of "Over My Left Shoulder," "'Ruby Robert,' alias Bob Fitzsimmons," "Bob Davis Recalls," etc., Tells How He Met the Learned Caliph of Bagdad-on-the-Subway, otherwise Known as O. Henry, Immortal Master of the Short Story*

**I**NTEREST in the late O. Henry is about equally divided between the individual and his product. It is quite impossible to interpret the one without understanding the other.

When, in the latter nineties, his stories began to appear, a few people sensed their quality, though appreciation in letters is long delayed. Here and there a discerning eye sees and a friendly voice spreads the news, but the first years are harrowing years, and the acolyte must swing his lamp a

thousand times before the flame illuminates even his own person, to say nothing of the aisle to the chancel.

My first experience with O. Henry was when I read his story "The Ice Machine," after which I devoured everything I could find under the signature of O. Henry or Sydney Porter.

In 1903, F. L. H. Noble went from the New York *American* to the Sunday editorship of the New York *World*. I went with him. In scouting about for features, Noble had an excellent idea. This was my assignment:

"Go out and locate O. Henry. He's

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got a breezy, snappy style. I want him to write introductions to our Sunday stories. Offer forty dollars a week. If that doesn't do the trick, jump to fifty. The limit is sixty."

After some research I learned that the author was living over a French restaurant somewhere on West Twenty-Fourth Street.

Accordingly I began a complete survey of every structure that seemed open to the transient world. Through the courtesy of some landlords and the discourtesy of a few waiters I managed to comb four buildings—without results. The fifth happened to be the Hotel Marty, between Sixth Avenue and Broadway. The proprietor was French. I asked him if he had an O. Henry or Sydney Porter occupying a room in his hospitable inn. Neither name seemed to mean anything to him. He did, however, suggest that I go through the house and investigate.

I began on the top story. None of the tenants was in. On the next story, that is to say, the fourth from the ground, from hall bedroom Number Seven, in response to my bombardment, I received a cheerful invitation to enter. It was a very small room, opening on the usual air shaft. In spite of the dim light I was able to make out a rather corpulent figure in shirt sleeves with suspenders down, seated beside a washstand upon which reposed a huge bowl containing perhaps five pounds of cracked ice in which nestled a half dozen fine Bartlett pears. The fat man arose with considerable dignity, bowed, and spoke: "Come in, mister."

I entered and closed the door.

"I am looking for Sydney Porter, otherwise, O. Henry."

"I am both," said he. "Here's a chair. Have some fruit. It is nice and cool. I suffer like hell in New York from the heat." He wiped the perspiration from his brow. "What can I do for you?"

I seized a Bartlett and slew it with the skin on.

"I have a proposition to make."

He fixed his gray-blue eyes on me and cupped his left ear with his hand. There was something about this demeanor that suggested the utter absurdity of barter.

"In fact, I have three propositions," I continued. "But I shall make the last one first: The New York *World* authorizes me to offer you sixty dollars a week to write introductions, varying from three hundred to seven hundred words in length, for special features appearing in the Sunday issue."

"If this last proposition is the best," said he, gazing out of the airshaft much in the same manner as the Prisoner of Chillon catching a glimpse of Lake Geneva, "you needn't make the other two. I accept your proposition. Moreover, mister, you can have the balance of the pears."

The whole transaction was completed in less than two minutes. To commemorate the operation we withdrew to the basement of the Marty, where we had a full course French dinner, including a quart of imported wine.

In the course of the relationship that followed I carried on a voluminous correspondence with O. Henry and saw him frequently. I offer one of his adroit *billets-doux* dealing with the gentle art of securing funds to tide him over temporary embarrassments. He was a nimble-witted borrower. It was his habit to address me as "Bill" and "Mister": mere terms of endearment quite in keeping with the author's recklessness in selecting pseudonyms for himself.

DEAR OLD BILL:

At last I have hove anchor at — Waverley Place, and have an address to give you. I am in Gilman Hall's apartment, and can now continue to turn out the old blown-in-the-bottle brand of fiction.

I am a man of damn few words. I want \$125 (don't read that a dollar and a quarter). That, in addition to the \$150 that I screwed out of Merwin during your absence, will make a total of \$275, which will

be more than covered by the moral and entertaining tale that I hereby agree to have finished and delivered to you all by 10.30 A.M., Monday, August 27, or perhaps earlier.

Pursue the best liberal policy and get the best stuff.

Personally and officially I greet you and make obeisance.

Consistently,  
BILL THE BEDOUIN.

Bill the Bedouin was a procrastinator in more ways than one. The "moral tale" to which he refers in the above letter did not appear on time.

I called on him at his Waverley Place address and in a casual way inquired as to the progress of the manuscript.

"Going fine! Got a great start. I could sit down any time and finish it."

"Can I read the first page?"

"Certainly, old kid, here's the manuscript."

He tossed me a sheaf of yellow paper, the first page of which contained the numeral I and the title. Before I had time to expostulate he gently took the sheaf from my hand and continued:

"And what's more, I can go right on with this story without the least effort. You have already seen page one. Now here's the second page."

With marvelous deliberation he lifted page one and wrote "page 2" on the next sheet. "And so on. Page 3, 4, 5. I think I will stop here, if you don't mind, and rest."

He was a whimsical individual, absolutely without guile.

I have the feeling that had he possessed the slightest power of resistance he would be alive to-day and that the illness to which he surrendered would have been defeated.

Peace be to his ashes.

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### THE CALL

Oh, I must stray, down some winding way,  
To the mouth of an old lagoon;  
For I've heard the call of a witch's thrall,  
And there's nothing now can stay.

I must join the clans where mystical Pans  
Pipe the languorous hours away.

Amid purple sage I will find assuage  
From the clamorous marts of men,  
And a mad, glad rune shall be my tune  
When I set out again.

Oh, never more will the empty lore  
Of heritage close in;  
I have made my choice a complete reverse  
That leaves no room for sin;

The feathery tops of seeded hops  
Shall yield me a mirthful brew;  
I will laugh, the while I quaff  
To the health of my godless crew.

If so it seems, such lovely dreams  
End sheer with the stark white day,  
I must save my night from the terrible light,  
I will up, I will up—and away!

*Katherine Sinclair*