The Fun of Genius

By Ford Madox Hueffer

The merciless rain drilled small holes into the sodden sand-hills, and through the grey air there showed only a narrow expanse of a sea that appeared old beyond conception. It was as if the racing foam upon its surface were the ghosts of flames that had been dead for untold centuries. In this greyness, half a mile from the barely visible bungalows planted amongst the dunes, like a solitary flake of black, Wert Best, a miner's son who had risen to be honorary scholar of social economics in a Welsh College, appeared and disappeared amongst the smother with a slow resolution. The wind flapped his cape out from his shoulders and battered the soft brim of his hat over his brows, and as he went slowly along the verge of the sea he resembled a wind-driven crow, all black, seeking for dead things amid the flotsam of the sea.

He came to a dune one of whose sides had been shored up with bulks of timber like railway sleepers, and his clothing becoming tranquil in the shelter of this great mass of sand, he fumbled deliberately in the hidden pockets of his black cape. He produced a thing of grey, shining metal—a long revolver. He levelled it at one of the rusty nuts that held the bulkhead of sleepers together. He fired with great deliberation and with an unshaking hand.

The wind carried the sound of the shot far out to sea. A cleanly pierced hole showed itself about a foot to the right of the nut at which he had fired. With the same deliberation he fired again, and the new hole showed itself in the rough wood some inches nearer the rusted lump of iron. Once more he fired, and this time there was a hole just below the shoulder of the nut. He pushed the revolver back into the pocket beneath his cape, and approaching the grey wood of the sleepers, he fingered each of the holes with a close and as if scientific attention.

Each was quite clean, each was nearly the size of a threepenny piece, and each had gone in very much deeper than his eye could plumb. He climbed arduously to the top of the high mound, for he desired to see whether the sound of firing had attracted any attention.

The wind caught his cape and whirled it furiously round his head. No one was coming from the half-hidden bungalows on his right; no one was coming from the coast-guard station that showed itself, little and white, a mile down the wind over the great hummocks of drift sand.

In the marshes inland no soul stirred, and the little flags of the golf links blew out here and there, stiff, like boards of red or white. In all the desolation nothing moved except the rushes, the low clouds that hurried over his head, and the grey sea.

The Scholar waded, descending again through the sands, and reached once more the shelter of the grey sleepers. He sat down clumsily and drew a book in a green-grey cover from the other pocket beneath his cape. He pushed up his hat brim from over his brows, and lovingly felt the sides, the back, and the speckled top of the volume. He opened the pages. With an expression of immense, of parental love, he read the title: "*The New Eugenics*," *A Plea for Social Reconstruction. By Wert Best, sometime Scholar of Llerdryssaint University.*

And, hunching his shoulders together, he began slowly to read his own book. He had toiled for six years at writing it, and it seemed that he could never read enough of it. The night fell, very slowly and desolately through the hurrying clouds. When it was much too dark to read any more, he closed his book and slowly scrambled to his feet. He did his best to square his shoulders and to gaze forbiddingly at the grey Universe that, as he considered, had misused him. He was thirty-one; he was nearly six feet high, very clumsily and misshapenly built; his brows were of very great breadth and set into a fixed scowl; his eyes were black and revengeful, and round his broad, sallow cheeks there was a fringe of black, curling beard. He scowled at the rain, at the racing clouds, at the livid and racing sea, and beneath the folds of his cape he fingered the copy of his book. It was to be published on the morrow, and on the morrow he would be dead. For

he, Wert Best, the Scholar, was about to murder a man and a woman and afterwards to shoot himself through the brain.

He peered over the dune behind which he had so long taken shelter. In the distance friendly and tranquil lights from the little bungalows made a gentle blur through the hurrying spindrift. The wind that came down from that way was so strong that at times he had to fall on his hands and knees as he progressed amongst the coarse rushes.

He came nearer and nearer to the lights. At last his feet were upon short clipped turf—the short turf of little lawns near the sea. It had grown quite dark and he crept clumsily on tiptoe over the grass. In the shelter of the house the torment of the weather stilled itself. He stepped on to a little verandah, and passing the lighted window swiftly, he pressed his form against the weather boarding of the little house. He moved his head very cautiously sideways, and drawing the revolver with a mechanical stealthiness from his pocket he succeeded at last in peering into the room.

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In the pleasant warmth of a deeply shaded lamp the two young people sat at dinner. The red shade cast a flush all over the room—over the bride's young shoulders, over the young man's bronzed face—and it accentuated the red cheeks of the housemaid who waited within so that they glowed like bright apples. They had been married that morning in the West of England and had made a dash across the breadth of the country for this place upon the East Coast, where there was excellent golfing and a very good summer hotel, whilst dotted all round it were little bungalows, each made to hold a married couple. They had their dinner served there, and when the servant went away they were alone for the night. Wert Best had been awaiting them since the night before.

The great gusts hurled themselves against the little house, and when they were silent the sound of the sea upon the beaches came through the frail wooden walls like a long complaint. But they were exceedingly merry, so that the isolation, the sea, and the heavy weather seemed all a matter for ceaseless small laugh and increases of intimacy. The housemaid went into the little hall to get new dishes

from a porter, who wheeled them there in a large hot box; and suddenly the young girl, facing the darkling window panes, became a little rigid. Her eyes scrutinised one spot:

"A book!" she exclaimed. "I'm perfectly certain someone's holding a book near the windowpane."

Her husband, with his back to the window, laughed outrageously.

"It's there all the same," she affirmed.

He swung round from his chair and went towards the window, upon which the large shadow of his figure fell from the lamp.

"If I open the window," he said, "the roof will be blown right off."

". . . But no, it won't," he continued. "The wind is on the other side."

He slipped the French catch and pulled the window inwards, still laughing.

"What a night!" he said. "The sea's like phosphorus, for all it's so dark."

He was so convinced of the folly of his bride's idea that he did not trouble to look to right or left, but continued gazing at the rising foam. The door of the little room behind him opened and he heard the maid's voice talking to the porter.

He drew back and closed the window with the automatic instinct of a gentleman. The maid would have to go on working here: it would be inconsiderate to put into her head any idea of mysteries outside the windows of such a lonely place.

"It's a very wild night," he said, good-humouredly. "We had better have the curtains drawn."

"No," she answered, "it's only weakness. I don't like to give in to that sort of thing."

The maidservant moved round about the table; their knives and forks clicked on the plates, the rosy light shone upon all the little bright room. From time to time the young girl gazed fixedly at the window, her muscles appearing to stiffen slightly when she did so, but she said nothing more. The maidservant gathered up the dishes and plates upon her hands and arms. She handed them to the porter through the half-open door. Then she folded up the table-

cloth and, hanging it over her arm, went out. They heard voices in the small hall, then the tremendous roar of wind as the cottage door opened; then again the slam of the door and a deep silence into which there crept gradually the sound of the sea upon the long beaches.

The bride sat with her bare young arms crossed upon the table. She looked downwards at her motionless fingers. Her husband walked round behind her and, bending down, pressed his lips for a long time upon her bare shoulder. She lifted up one of her hands with a friendly and confiding gesture and met his hand over her shoulder. She said nothing. He remained standing over her, looking down at an ornament like a golden butterfly that was half hidden in her light hair, and with a gay inanity he offered her a penny for her thoughts.

She said, slowly and abstractedly:

"I can't help thinking of that other man. He's been in my thoughts all dinner-time."

Her husband's brow creased slightly. "Oh, come!" he exclaimed, and he bent his head down till his cheek was against hers.

"It's wonderful to think, isn't it," she said, "of our coming down to meet each other through all the ages? It's like two very long lines coming closer and closer together and meeting in a point. And then how does it go on? That's what I can never understand."

"That man must have been an infernal brute!" her husband said. "What sort of an animal is it that tricks a young girl like you into a secret engagement and holds her to it? What was he? A coalminer's son? That was it. That sort of chap ought to be shot neatly through the head. They disturb the world."

"I don't think," she said slowly, "that you can judge him by just common standards. His mind never worked like any other man's that I have ever known. He was a genius. I was frightened of him. It was that sort of attraction."

"The brute ought to have released you from your engagement, if he was any sort of a gentleman, when he got chucked out of his job," her husband said. "I like to do even that low sort of fellow justice. When he had a chance of becoming a Professor, there was some excuse

for his courting you. But when they turned him out of his scholarship for being heretical— Why, he lectured even against marriage, didn't he?"

"I don't think, you know," the young girl answered, "that he cared at all about gentleman-like ideas. He was funny, closed-up, reserved. I don't think he noticed anything much in the world but me and the book he was writing. And you must remember he certainly damaged his prospects in life in order to remain near me. They offered him an excellent Professorship in America, and I believe he never so much as answered the letter. I daresay he thinks that gave him some sort of claim."

Her husband straightened himself in an access of irritation.

"Claim!" he burst out. "What can give a ragged beggar a claim?"

Suddenly he straightened his shoulders.

"It looks extraordinarily like a book. Of course, it's only a reflection in the glass," he said musingly. "Yet it's as if somebody were trying to read by the light from inside here."

"Yes, I know," she answered slowly. "It's like a portent. It's like a reminder. I used to think—I used to think the book that Wert Best was writing was our only chance of getting married."

"What the devil do you mean?" her husband asked sharply. "What sort of nonsense is this?"

His eyes remained fixed upon the windowpane.

"I used to think," she began again, "I knew it—he said it many times that if he could get his book finished down to the last word and published before you and I were married, he would murder me. Don't you understand? He thought that if he did it before his book was published, they would suppress the book. I believe he loved it as much as he did me."

The young man suddenly exclaimed:

"My God!" and his eyes remained fixed and glassily set at the window-pane. "A man's looking in," he said. "It isn't a book, it's a face. My God, what is this?"

And appalled out of all instinct for action, he stood rigid, looking at the window, his white shirt-front gleaming towards the darkness of the night. In the stillness a mouse

which had crept out of the corner ran swiftly to a large crumb lying beneath the table.

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As he had crept on to the verandah, using instinctively a caution that the noise of the wind and of the tormented sea rendered altogether unnecessary, Wert Best had been filled by one single passion. It was as if that alone forced him along, as if he went to do a deed of vengeance—nay, to do a deed of justice—at the bidding of a law that was stronger than any will of his own. His own mind seemed to him to be an immense black cavern through which he crept with a sinister determination. He was determined to kill this woman; he thirsted to kill this woman; it was as if the knowledge that she were dead, and that alone, could give him solace from the terrible unrest at whose hands he suffered. And whilst he felt this hunger and thirst, he desired almost as hungrily to justify himself to his own conscience. The son of a Welsh Nonconformist miner, the language of justification was an immense part of the language in which his mind moved. "Vengeance is mine. I will repay"—these words spoke in the very marrow of his bones. This girl who had occupied all his thoughts for a whole six years had sinned against him. She had sinned against the strength, against the black and fiery dominance of his will. By the sheer strength of this will he had climbed up from being a little lad who pulled trucks about at the face of the pit workings, in the very bowels of the earth. He had climbed up from that to occupying the position which he considered made him one of the most eminent men in the world. He knew he was one of the most eminent men in the world, for had he not, as he considered it, solved the riddle of all knowledge? He alone of all men in the world had seen, had thought out, painfully and with an immense labour of consideration, the whole design of Providence on earth. He considered himself a prophet, unacknowledged, but ultimately to be known and worshipped to the very ends of the earth. And against the barbarous strength of his will this girl had set herself up. She was necessary to every thought of his life, and she had torn herself away to be wasted upon an empty, idle fop. This was sin; this

was the immense sin which hardly blood, but that alone, could wash out.

He had intended to walk straight up to the window, to burst it open and then, standing vengefully with his back against the light for just long enough to be recognised —then he would fire, one shot at her, one shot at that fool, and the third through his own head. But in crossing past the window he had seen that the maidservant was in the room, and a moment later, by the sounds at the back of the house, he knew that it contained yet a fourth, an unknown person. With the instinctive caution of a wild beast, he desired to have no witness of his act. It was like a barbaric, an enormous shyness, for he had no desire to escape. His book, the great work of his life, was finished, was to be published on the morrow, and the report of his death could only enhance the enormous avidity with which it would be read, the enormous fame that would come to him. He desired, moreover, immensely, to kill these two while they were in each other's arms.

This was the image of shame and horror that had haunted all his night thoughts for so long now. But when, advancing his eyes with a stealthy, cat-like movement past the side of the window, he gazed into the room, he saw them sitting placidly at table whilst the maidservant with her white cap and apron stood attentively behind the girl's back. He had no desire to injure the maidservant; she was of his own class; she was not one of these Dead Sea swine. He drew back and leant against the weather-boarding of the wall, a black blot on the black night. He waited, and waited, hungry for his revenge, repeating incessantly:

"She will be dead in open sin."

Beneath his cloak he felt the edges of his book—his great testament to the world of which, during his waiting behind the sand dune, he had read nearly a quarter. The rain had wetted it as if there had been shed upon it the tears of an universe, and an intense mournfulness descended upon him at the thought of this desecration. He continued to finger its smooth cover aimlessly and caressingly.

There came upon him an overwhelming desire to read —to read his own words with which for so long the whole blood of his heart seemed to have been slowly formed. And it was with this imperative and unreasoning desire—

a mania in its strength—that he held the book up towards the glow of the light. He kept his head pressed against the weather-boarding of the wall. By holding out the book in front of the window the light of the lamp fell upon it dimly. His head could not be seen. Yet he could read if he strained his eyes. And, as he caught hold of the argument at the place in which by chance the book had opened, the words came more and more easily into his consciousness. He had been writing of the cultivation of the human race—of perfecting human beings by breeding them as if they were show animals. This he called the New Eugenics. He had hit upon a passage which dealt with Genius.

"In all human societies," he had written, "there have appeared at various ages certain individual phenomena who have been called at will prophets, seers, divine poets—in short, geniuses. To the proper cultivation of the healthier human animal—to produce which alone should be our end in life—these abnormal persons are always detrimental. In their personal actions they have always been erratic, and their admirers have cried out that they must be pardoned for their unsocial acts on account of their services to mankind. But their services to mankind have in themselves been crimes against humanity. By exciting enthusiasms, by upsetting the equipoise of normal thought, by setting up for normal, sane, and healthy society, standards of greatness which alone are unsocial and dangerous to the fabric of the Commonwealth as a whole—in this alone and always they mislead humanity. And of these Overmen or Geniuses we may consider Rousseau, who exposed his children, as a very typical instance, and so contemptuously dismiss these phenomena from our thoughts. . . ."

His own words fell like an opiate upon his tortured mind. He read on and on. Suddenly the page was obscured before his eyes. The latch of the window creaked close to his ear, which was pressed against the woodwork. He shrank back, effacing himself against the weather-boarding so that he was nothing but a black shadow in all the shadows. The upper half of a man's form leant from the window, the eyes straining into the night, straight out towards the sea. Wert Best held the heavy revolver, which

had never left his grasp since he had been on the verandah within three handbreadths of the shining white shirt-front that alone protected this man's heart from the dangerous night. A voice came from the man's lips:

"What a night it is! The sea is like phosphorus, for all it's so dark."

Wert Best's heart began to beat with great thunderous gouts, yet he thought very clearly:

"If I shoot this man now, the woman will escape."

Then, after the sound of an opening door, he heard the voices of the maidservant and the porter. It was not yet time to fire, unless the man looked in his direction. He remained still, retaining his breath, the revolver poised. After a time the man drew his head straight back into the room. The window closed.

For a long time Wert Best remained, panting and utterly in disarray as if he had run for a very great distance. Then slowly his thoughts returned to the old groove. This woman must die, for she had sinned against him (who was a great man, a prophet, a seer, the possible redeemer of mankind, a genius). The word came to him like an echo of something he had heard a long time ago. He was a genius, alike in his obscurity, in his intolerable struggles, in the neglect which the world had vouchsafed him, in his lowly origins and his enormous achievement. Half mechanically he raised again his book to the light of the window. He had the scholar's necessity for something to read while he waited, and the intense desire to read the last few pages which he had written, as he remembered in a sort of ecstasy. The thought of their cadences thrilled him like the thought of a woman's kisses, or a woman's breast.

"What, then, is Sin?" he read on the dim page. "Sin is that which militates in an organised way against such great and glorious unions as tend towards the fitting propagation of humanity. All marriage laws which tend to tie together those who have conceived a disgust one for the other are Sin, for they sin against the future of the race. And he, too, sins who seeks to bind another to him against her will. As the deplumed cock, as the base and abashed bull that is beaten in contest, so is one of these hungry creatures that would seek to destroy a union based upon this true desire. There is no man so base as he who,

gazing upon such a warmth from his outer darkness, should seek to dimn it by the mere breath of a darkling thought. This man alone is impotent, this man alone is wholly base. And of him indeed it was prophetically said that it were better that a millstone were put about his neck and he were cast into the deep sea—into that sea which is more fell and bitter than the grave. . . ."

A great elation filled the mind of this lonely man; in the darkness and with proud eyes, his head erect, he gazed at the hungry phantoms of the white foam as it raced across the sea that stood up before his eyes like a dark wall. Its deep note came to his ears, rustling and calling to him unceasingly.

"My message to the world," he said. "That is my message to the world. And surely it is good enough for one man's achievement!"

Without more thought, automatically he stepped along the verandah, and, turning his back upon the sea, gazed into the glowing room. The woman was leaning upon the table looking downwards. One of her hands, reaching up over her shoulders, held the hand of the man behind her. The light was full upon them. Suddenly both their faces stiffened. The eyes of both of them gazed into his eyes. There was in neither of their glances any hostility, any horror, or even any fear. He thought, in his black and crazed vanity, that they looked towards him with a sort of baffled wonder, as if they were two children questioning a great, an insoluble secret. He imagined that they looked up to him as to something enormous, solemn, and mysterious.

His hands, holding the one a revolver and the other a book, dropped suddenly at his side. In a sudden flush of gigantic, of overwhelming satisfaction he felt himself to be a great God, a great pardoner. He had their lives in his hands, and they acknowledged it. He felt himself about to be no longer an outcast; he was acting under the behests of his own message to the world. He was the final benefactor of mankind!

And with great tears scalding his cheeks he waved suddenly the hand that held the book towards those two within the room.

He threw into this gesture the feeling of a conqueror

who relinquishes his vengeance in the moment of his triumph. Then, turning, he ran down the little steps of the verandah, across the thin, shaven turf of the little lawn. On the heavy sand his feet stumbled clumsily, but he ran on towards the sea that raced, white and clamorous, through the black night—because, although he felt himself to be a great conqueror he knew himself also to feel like the deplumed cock and the base and abashed bull that is beaten in contest. And that thought was very bitter to him.

Five years later Professor Wert Best, the President of the Omaha Kai University for Women, presided at a heresy trial that had been instituted against one of his sub-Instructors in Metaphysics. Later he received a wreath of roses imitated in electro-silver as a recognition of his services to Orthodox Eugenics, of which his University made a special study. He had married a middle-aged widow, who had much modified his earlier views, and had taken Holy Orders. The sea on the earlier night had been too wet.

The other woman, having borne up as well as she could against the shock, had given birth to a dead child. For the moment she is in an asylum. My friend who told me this story and who possesses a somewhat sardonic humour says that it is offerings such as these that genius exacts when it is out for a little fun. But it was no doubt a considerable and possibly a valuable principle that Mr. Best discovered and tried to act upon.