

# Reference Wanted!

By J. D. Beresford

As usual, the compartment was nearly empty after we left Rickmansworth, and I anticipated that my one other fellow-passenger would probably get out at the next station and leave me to finish the dull journey alone. I did not, in any case, expect much entertainment from his society. He had a narrow forehead, and a preoccupied, rather scared, expression. It crossed my mind that he might have been a sufferer from shell-shock. I had seen that look in the eyes of one such case, a look at once timid, defensive, and suspicious. I was surprised when he came across the compartment to the seat opposite to me and began to talk.

We opened in the usual way by abusing the line, but he broke off in the middle to comment on the book I had been reading, Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*.

"Fine stuff, that," he commented, looked at me suspiciously for a moment, and then added, "What's that other book of his, Anna—something?"

"Anmma Karenin?" I suggested.

He nodded.

"But that's Tolstoi," I said.

"Very likely," he replied; "I've no memory for some things. No memory at all. But I've read more than you might expect. To be quite honest, when I was a bit younger I read too much."

I pricked up my ears. I saw the promise of getting him to talk about himself. And I can listen to anything a man has to tell me of his own history; it is only men's opinions that I find so boring. Why will people have opinions?

"And overstrained your mneniory?" I asked.

He shook his head and pursed his mouth. "It wasn't that that ruined my prospects," he said.

"No?" I commented, as provocatively as I could.

He leaned a little forward amid frowned within an effect of thoughtful concentration as he said, "You see, in some ways I've got too good a memory; the trouble with me is that I can't remember what I've remembered."

I raised my eyebrows interrogatively. I could see that he was warm, now, within the craving to confess himself.

"You aren't a writer, yourself, by any chance?" he asked.

"I've done a certain amount," I admitted.

"Thought you had rather that look," he said; and went on quickly as if he were afraid that I might, in the circumstances, be tempted to detail my own achievements; "and that being so, my case might interest you, professionally, as you might say'."

"It certainly would, if you care to. . . ." I began, but I saw that he was not listening. Those queer-looking eyes of his had taken on the expression of one who is engaged in some immense effort of memory.

"As a young man," he said—I guessed him to be, then, about thirty-five—"had a great ambition to become a writer; but although my mind was full of ideas, I had no gift for putting them into language. At first, I tried in the ordinary way, just as all beginners do, to write stories for the magazines; but they none of them got accepted. Which wasn't to be wondered at. I knew myself how bad they were, and I used to console myself a little with that knowledge. I may have

read somewhere that so long as you kept a cool head about your own writing, there was hope for you.

“Anyway, I left off writing for a time—I wasn’t twenty then—and took to studying. I read all the best authors—carefully, trying to see how the thing was done. I had a lot of spare time one way and another, and in the next five years I got through a wonderful lot of reading. I didn’t confine myself to English authors, either; I read a heap of translations from Russian, French, and German. And all that time I never once tried to write again, myself. I was just getting to learn my trade, I thought.

“Then I lost my job in the city’, amid while I was looking about for another one I had another shot at writing a magazine story. Well, it was certainly the nearest I’d got up to then of being the right thing. It was a lot better written than any of my other shots, but the plot was too weak. And I found that in learning to write I had lost all my ideas. I’d forgotten all the old ones, and no new ones came to me. At least, not at first.”

He paused a moment and looked out of the window before he continued, rather abruptly: “An idea came to me, though, in the train one day—the best I’d ever had. And I not only saw the whole story clear in my mind, but I saw just how it ought to be written. I went home and began it at once. I had it finished in two days. A little masterpiece I thought it was. I submitted it to one of the reviews, and it was accepted within a week.

“A fortnight later I’d written another. It was very different from the first—done in another mood, as you might say, and lighter altogether. But that one came, too, as an inspiration, and was accepted by one of the magazines. And, after that, I used to get inspirations every other day almost—all sorts of inspirations. I saw myself as the most versatile and gifted writer of the day. I fancied that when my stories were collected and published in book form they would cause a lot of attention. By the time my second story appeared in the magazine—that was the first to get into print—I had written about eight altogether, and they’d all been taken by some editor or another—except one.”

He paused again, and remained silent for so long that I prompted him by saying: “what was the matter with that one exception?”

He looked at me and sighed. “There wasn’t anything wrong with the story, as you might say,” he said; “but there a note from the editor in which he said that my story appeared to be a translation from some French writer, I’ve forgotten the name, and should not have been submitted as an original contribution. Rather a nasty note it was.

“And about a week later my first story came out in the review, and then there was the devil to pay. It seems that that was a translation, too, from the Russian, and had been printed English, in a collection of the fellow’s works. His name began with a T, too, I fancy, but it wasn’t Tolstoi.”

“Turgenev?” I suggested.

“Very likely,” he said wearily. “I can’t remember. All know is that every one of my stories were cribs. I’d remembered them all, and didn’t remember that I’d remembered. Well, I got back all the stories that hadn’t been published, but there was the very deuce of a row.”

The train was drawing into Aylesbury, and my companion up and collected his things from the rack. Before he got however, he paused to say, “Well, there you are. It was dreadful experience for me, but if you can make any use of professionally, so to speak, you’re welcome to it. Good-day you.

I had still four more stations to go, and I sat on, turning over that strange confession in my mind. The man had appeared to be honest, the story sounded true as he told it, yet his

phraseology and his accent were not those I should have expected from one of his literary experience.

But what worries me most of all is the vague but horribly persistent impression that somewhere, at some time, I have seen that story of his in print. . . .