

F.5 Best Seller

by O. Henry

1. **Before you read the story write down the answers to these questions.**

- Which was the latest book that you read?
- Who was the author?
- Who were the main characters?
- When did you read the book?
- How long did you take to complete reading it?
- What genre did it belong to?
- Why would/wouldn't you recommend it?

2 **Now read the story.**

1. One day last summer, I went to Pittsburgh-well, I had to go there on business.
2. My chair-car was profitably well-filled with people of the kind one usually sees on chair-cars. Most of them were ladies in brown-silk dresses cut with square yokes, with lace insertion and dotted veils, who refused to have the windows raised. Then there was the usual number of men who looked as if they might be in almost any business and going almost anywhere. I leaned back idly in chair No. 7, and looked with **tepidest** curiosity at the small, black, bald-spotted head just visible above the back of No.9.
3. Suddenly No.9 hurled a book on the floor between his chair and the window, and, looking, I saw that it was "The Rose Lady and Trevelyan," one of the best-selling novels of the present day. And then, the critic veered his chair toward the window, and I knew him at once for John A. Pescud of Pittsburgh, travelling salesman for a plate-glass company - an old acquaintance whom I had not seen in two years.
4. In two minutes we were faced, had shaken hands, and had finished with such topics as rain, prosperity, health, residence, and destination. Politics might have followed next; but I was not so ill-fated.

tepidest : Feeling for showing little interest or enthusiasm

5. I wish you might know John A. Pescud. He is of the stuff that heroes are not often lucky enough to be made of. He is a small man with a wide smile, and an eye that seems to be fixed upon that little red spot on the end of your nose.
6. He believes that "our" plate-glass is the most important commodity in the world, The Cambria Steel Works, the best company and that when a man is in his home town, he ought to be decent and law-abiding.
7. During my acquaintance with him earlier I had never known his views on life, romance, literature and ethics. We had browsed, during our meetings, on local topics and then parted.
8. Now I was to get more of his ideas. By way of facts, he told me that business had picked up since the party conventions and that he was going to get off at Coketown.
9. "Say," said Pescud, stirring his discarded book with the hand, "did you ever read one of these best-sellers? I mean the kind where the hero is an American **swell**-sometimes even from Chicago - who falls in love with a royal princess from Europe who is travelling under an **alias** and follows her to her father's kingdom or principality? I guess you have. They're all alike.
10. ____ "Well, this fellow chases the royal chair-warmer home as I said, and finds out who she is. He meets her in the evening and gives us ten pages of conversation. She reminds him of the difference in their stations and that gives him a chance to ring in three solid pages about America's uncrowned sovereigns.
11. "Well, you know how it runs on, if you've read any of 'em-he slaps the king's Swiss bodyguards around like every thing whenever they get in his way. He's a great fencer, too.
12. "Yes," said Pescud, "but these kind of love-stories are rank on-the-level. I know something about literature, even if I am in plate-glass.
13. "When people in real life marry, they generally hunt up somebody in their own station. A fellow usually picks out a girl who went to the same high-school and belonged to the same singing-society that he did."
14. Pescud picked up the best-seller and hunted his page.
15. "Listen to this," said he. "Trevelyan is sitting with the Princess Alwyna at the back end of the tulip-garden. This is how it goes:



16. "Say not so, dearest and sweetest of earth's fairest flowers. Would I aspire? You are a star set high above me in a royal heaven; I am only-myself. Yet I am a man and I have a heart to do and dare. I have no title save that of an uncrowned sovereign; but I have an arm and a sword that yet might free Schutzenfestenstein from the plots of traitors."
17. "Think of a Chicago man packing a sword, and talking about freeing anything that sounded as much like canned sardines!"
18. "I think I understand you, John," said I. "You want fiction- writers to be consistent with their scenes and characters. They shouldn't mix **Turkish pashas** with **Vermont farmers**, or English Dukes with Long Island **clamdiggers** or Cincinnati agents with the Rajahs of India."
19. "Or plain business men with **aristocracy** high above 'em," added Pescud. "It doesn't jibe. I don't see why people go to work and buy hundreds of thousands of books which are best sellers. You don't see or hear of any such capers in real life."
20. "Well John," said I, "I haven't read a best-seller in a long time. May be I've had notions about them somewhat like yours. But tell me more about yourself. Getting along all right with the company?"
21. "Bully," said Pescud, brightening at once. "I've had my salary raised twice since I saw you, and I get a commission, too. I've bought a neat slice of real estate. Next year the firm is going to sell me some shares of stock. Oh, I'm in on the line of **General Prosperity**."
22. "Met your affinity yet, John?" I asked.
23. "Oh, I didn't tell you about that, did I?" said Pescud with a broader grin.
24. "O-ho!" I said. "So you've taken off enough time from your plate-glass to have a romance?"
25. "No, no," said John. "No romance-nothing like that! But I'll tell you about it,
26. "I was on the south-bound, going to Cincinnati, about eighteen months ago, when I saw, across the aisle, the finest looking girl I'd ever laid eyes on. Nothing spectacular, you know, but just the sort you want **for keeps**."
27. She read a book and minded her business, which was, to make the world prettier and better just by residing in it. I kept on looking out of the side-doors of my eyes, and finally the proposition got out of the carriage into a case of cottage

Turkish pashas : a high official of the Ottoman empire

Vermont : a state of north east US bordering Canada

clamdiggers : people who hunt for clams (edible shell fish)

aristocracy : class of people of high social rank

general prosperity : doing well

for keeps : for ever, permanently

with a lawn and vines running over the porch. I never thought of speaking to her, but I let the plate glass business go to smash for a while."

28. "She changed cars at Cincinnati and took a sleeper to Louisville. There she bought another ticket and went on through Shelbyville, Frankford, and Lexington. Along there, I began to have a hard time keeping up with her. The trains came along when they pleased, and didn't seem to be going anywhere in particular, except to keep on the track and on the right way as much as possible. Then they began to stop at junctions instead of towns, and at last they stopped altogether
29. "I contrived to keep out of her sight as much as I could, but I never lost track of her. The last station she got off at was away down in Virginia, about six in the evening. There were about fifty houses.
30. "The rest was red mud, mules, and speckled hounds.
31. "A tall old man, with a smooth face and white hair, looking as proud as Julius Caesar was there to meet her. His clothes were **frazzled** but I didn't notice that till later. He took her little satchel, and they started over the plank walks and went up a road along the hill. I kept along a pace behind 'em, trying to look like I was hunting a **garnet** ring in the sand that my sister had lost at a picnic, the previous Saturday.
32. "They went in a gate on top of the hill. It nearly took my breath away when I looked up. Up there in the biggest grove, I had ever seen was a huge house with round white pillars, about a thousand feet high, and the yard was so full of rose-bushes and box-bushes and lilacs that you couldn't have seen the house if it hadn't been as big as the Capitol at Washington.
33. "'Here's where I have to trail,' say I to myself. I thought before that she seemed to be in moderate circumstances, at least. This must be the Governor's mansion, or the Agricultural Building of a new World Fair, anyhow. I'd better go back to the village and get posted by the postmaster, for some information.
34. "In the village, I found a fine hotel called the Bay View House. The only excuse for the name was a bay horse grazing in the front yard. I set my sample-case down, and tried to be ostensible. I told the landlord, I was taking orders for plate-glass".
35. "By-and-by, I got him down to local gossip and answering questions.
36. _ "'Why?', says he, 'I thought everybody knew who lived in the big white house on the hill. It's Colonel Allyn, the biggest man and finest quality in Virginia, or anywhere else. They're the oldest family in the State. That was his daughter who had got off the train. She's been up to Illinois to see her aunt, who is sick.'

37. "I registered at the hotel, and on the third day I caught the young lady walking in the front yard, down next to the paling fence. I stopped and raised my hat - there wasn't any other way.
38. 'Excuse me,' says I, 'can you tell me where Mr. Hinkle lives?'
39. "She looks at me as cool as if I was the man come to see about the weeding of the garden, but I thought I saw just a slight twinkle of fun in her eyes.
40. 'No one of that name lives in Birchton,' says she. 'That is,' she goes on, 'as far as I know'.
41. "Well, that tickled me. 'No kidding,' says I. 'I'm not looking for smoke, even if I do come from Pittsburgh.'
42. 'You are quite a distance from home,' says she.
43. 'I'd have gone a thousand miles farther,' says I.
44. 'Not if you hadn't woken up when the train started in Shelbyville,' says she; and then she turned almost as red as one of the roses on the bushes in the yard. I remembered I had dropped off to sleep on a bench in the Shelbyville station, waiting to see which train she took, and only just managed to wake up in time.
45. "And then I told her why I had come, as respectful and earnest as I could. And I told her everything about myself, and what I was making, and how that all I asked was just to get acquainted with her and try to get her to like me.
46. "She smiles a little, and blushes some, but her eyes never get mixed up. They look straight at whom so ever she's talking to.
47. 'I never had any one talk like this to me before, Mr. Pescud,' says she. 'What did you say your name is-John?'
48. 'John A.,' says I.
49. " 'And you came mighty near missing the train at Powhatan Junction, too,' says she, with a laugh that sounded as good as a mileage-book to me."
50. " 'How did you know?' I asked.
51. " 'Men are very clumsy,' said she. 'I know you were on every train. I thought you were going to speak to me, and I'm glad you didn't.
52. "Then we had more talk; and at last a kind of proud, serious look came on her face, and she turned and pointed a finger at the big house.
53. 'The Allyns,' says she, 'have lived in Elmcroft for a hundred years. We are a proud family. Look at that mansion. It has fifty rooms. See the pillars and porches and balconies. The ceilings in the reception-rooms and the ball-room are twenty-eight feet high. My father is lineal descendant of the Belted Earls.'

54. “‘Of course,’ she goes on, ‘my father wouldn’t allow a drummer to set his foot in Elmcroft. If he knew that I was talking to one over the fence, he would lock me in my room.’
55. “‘Would you let me come there?’ says I. ‘Would you talk to me if I was to call? For,’ I goes on, ‘if you said yes, I might come and see you?’
56. “‘I must not talk to you,’ she says, ‘because we have not been introduced. It is not exactly proper. So I will say good-bye, Mr.—’
57. “‘Say the name,’ says I. ‘You haven’t forgotten it.’”
58. “‘Pescud,’ says she, a little mad.
59. “‘The rest of the name!’ I demands, as cool as I could be.”
60. “‘John,’ says she.
61. “‘John-what?’ I says.
62. “‘John A.,’ says she, with her head high. ‘Are you through, now?’
63. “‘I’m coming to see the belted earl tomorrow,’ I says.
64. “‘He’ll feed you to his fox-hounds,’ says she, laughing.
65. “‘If he does, it’ll improve their running,’ says I. ‘I’m something of a hunter myself.’”
66. “‘I must be going in now,’ says she. ‘I oughtn’t to have spoken to you at all. I hope you’ll have a pleasant trip back to Minneapolis-or Pittsburgh, was it? Good-bye!’
67. “‘Good-night,’ says I, ‘and it wasn’t Minneapolis. What’s your name, first, please?’
68. “She hesitated. Then she pulled a leaf off a bush, and said:
69. “‘My name is Jessie,’ says she.
70. “‘Good-night, Miss Allyn’, says I.
71. “The next morning at eleven, sharp, I rang the doorbell of that World Fair main building. After about three quarters of an hour, an old man of about eighty showed up and asked what I wanted. I gave him my business card, and said I wanted to see the Colonel. He showed me in.
72. “Say, did you ever crack open a wormy English walnut? That’s what that house was like. There wasn’t enough furniture in it to fill an eight-dollar flat. Some old horsehair lounges and three-legged chairs and some framed ancestors on the walls were all that



Earl : a British nobleman between a viscount and a marquess

Belted Earl : until the 17th century, an earl was invested by the king with a sword he wore at his waist hence he was called a ‘belted earl’

met the eye. But when Colonel Allyn comes in, the place seemed to light up. You could almost hear a band playing, and see a bunch of old- timers in wigs and white stockings dancing a **quadrille**. It was the style of him, although he had on the same shabby clothes I saw him wear at the station. For about nine seconds he had me **rattled**, and I came mighty near getting cold feet and trying to sell him some plate-glass. But I got my nerve back pretty quick. He asked me to sit down, and I told him everything. I told him how I had followed his daughter from Cincinnati, and what I did it for, and all about my salary and prospects, and explained to him my little code of living - to be always decent and right in your home town. At first, I thought he was going to throw me out of the window, but I kept on talking.

73. "Well, that got him laughing, and I'll bet that was the first laugh those ancestors and horsehair sofa had heard in many a day.
74. "We talked two hours. I told him everything I knew; and then he began to ask questions and I told him the rest. All I asked of was to give me a chance. If I couldn't make a hit with the little lady, I'd clear out, and not bother them any more. At last he says:
75. " 'There was a Sir Courtenay Pescud in the time of Charles I, if I remember rightly.'
76. " 'If there was,' says I 'he can't claim kin with our bunch. We've always lived in and around Pittsburgh. I've got an uncle in the real-estate business, and one in trouble somewhere out in Kansas. You can inquire about any of the rest of us from anybody in the old Smoky Town, and get satisfactory replies. Did you ever run across that story about the captain of the whaler, who tried to make a sailor say his prayers?' says I.
77. " 'It occurs to me that I have never been so fortunate,' says the Colonel.
78. "So I told it to him. Laugh! I was wishing to myself that he was a customer. What a bill of glass, I'd sell him! And then he says:
79. " 'The relating of anecdotes and humorous occurrences has always seemed to me, Mr. Pescud, to be a particularly agreeable way of promoting and perpetuating amenities between friends. With your permission, I will relate to you a fox-hunting story with which I was personally connected, and which may furnish you some amusement'
80. "Two evenings later, I got a chance to speak a word with Miss Jessie alone on the porch while the Colonel was thinking up another story.
81. " 'It's going to be a fine evening,' says I.

82. 'He's coming,' says she. 'He's going to tell you, this time, the story about the old African and the green watermelons. It always comes after the one about the Yankees and the game rooster. There was another time; she goes on, 'that you nearly got left- it was at Pulaski City.'
83. "'Yes,' says I, 'I remember. My foot slipped as I was jumping on the step, and I nearly tumbled off.'
84. "'I know,' says she. 'And - and I- I was afraid you had, John A. I was afraid you had.'
85. "And then she skips into the house through one of the big windows."
86. "Coketown!" droned the porter, making his way through the slowing car.
87. Pescud gathered his hat and baggage with the leisurely promptness of an old traveller.
88. "I married her a year ago," said John, "I told you I built a house in the East End. The belted- I mean the Colonel-is there, too. I find him waiting at the gate whenever I get back from a trip to hear any new story, I might have picked up on the road,"
89. I glanced out of the window. Coketown was nothing more than a **ragged** hillside dotted with **a score** of black dismal huts propped up against dreary mounts of slag and clinkers. It rained in slanting torrents, too and the rills foamed and splashed down through the black mud to the railroad- tracks.
90. "You won't sell much plate-glass here, John," said I. "Why do you get off at this end-o'-the-world?"
91. "Why?," said Pescud, "the other day I took Jessie for a little trip to Philadelphia, and coming back she thought she saw some petunias in a pot in one of those windows over there just like some she used to raise down in the old Virginia home. So I thought, I'd drop off here for the night, and see if I could dig up some of the cuttings or blossoms for her. Here we are. Good-night, old man. I gave you the address. Come out and see us when you have time."
92. The train moved forward. One of the dotted brown ladies insisted on having windows raised, now that the rain had started beating against them. The porter came along with his mysterious wand and began to light the car.
93. I glanced downward and saw the best-seller. I picked it up and set it carefully farther along on the floor of the car, where the raindrops would not fall upon it. And then, suddenly, I smiled, and seemed to see that life has no geographical bounds.
94. "Good-luck to you, Trevelyan," I said. "And may you get the petunias for your princess!"

About the Author

O. Henry is the pseudonym of William Sydney Porter (1862-1910), an American writer of short stories, best known for his ironic plot twists and surprise endings. Born and raised in Greensboro, North Carolina, O. Henry was fascinated by New York street life, which provided a setting for many of his later stories. During the last ten years of his life, O. Henry became one of the most popular writers in America publishing over 500 short stories in dozens of widely read periodicals. His style of storytelling became a model not only for short fiction, but also for American motion pictures and television programmes. Writing at the rate of more than one story per week, O. Henry published ten collections of stories during a career that barely spanned a decade. In 1919, the O. Henry Memorial Awards were founded by the Society of Arts and Science for the best American short stories published each year.

3.A. Based on your reading of the story, answer the following questions by choosing the correct option.

- (a) "Bully," said Pescud brightening at once. He means to say that he was
- A. being intimidated by his boss.
 - B. harassing his subordinates.
 - C. doing very well at his job.
 - D. meeting all the sales targets.
- (b) The narrator says that life has no geographical boundaries implying that
- A. human beings are essentially the same everywhere.
 - B. one can travel freely to other countries.
 - C. boundaries exist only on maps.
 - D. one should work towards the good of mankind.
- (c) Classify (1) to (4) as fact (F) or opinion (O), based on your reading of the story.
- (1) Pescud had hurled the bestseller to the floor.
 - (2) People in real life marry somebody in their own station.
 - (3) Pescud got an opportunity to meet Jessie all alone two evenings after he met her father.
 - (4) Pescud believed that plate-glass was the most important commodity.
- A. F-1, 3, 4; O-2
 - B. F-1, 3; O-2, 4
 - C. F-1, 2, 4; O-3
 - D. F-2; O-1, 3, 4

(d) **Select the suitable option for the given statements, based on your understanding of the story.**

- (1) The author's description of Coketown brings out the ugly face of industries that operated there.
- (2) Pescud got off at Coketown as it had good business prospects for a plate-glass salesman.
- A. (1) is false but (2) is true.
- B. (1) is true but (2) is false.
- C. (1) is the cause for (2)
- D. (2) is a fact but unrelated to (1)

3.B. Read the extracts and answer the questions by selecting the correct options.

1. *I contrived to keep out of her sight as much as I could, but I never lost track of her. The last station she got off at was away down in Virginia, about six in the evening. There were about fifty houses.*

The rest was mud, mules, and speckled hounds.

A tall old man, with a smooth face and white hair, looking as proud as Julius Caesar was there to meet her. His clothes were frazzled but I didn't notice that till later. He took her little satchel, and they started over the plank walks and went up a road along the hill. I kept along a piece behind 'em, trying to look like I was hunting a garnet ring in the sand that my sister had lost at a picnic the previous Saturday.

- (i) The extract tells us that Virginia was a _____ populated town.
 - A. densely
 - B. highly
 - C. sparsely
 - D. hardly
- (ii) Choose the option that uses the word 'frazzled' in the same way as the extract.
 - A. I feel pretty frazzled most weeks these days.
 - B. The cuffs of his brown shirt looked frazzled.
 - C. Father finally arrived home, tired and frazzled.
 - D. Mother was frazzled looking after all the guests had left.
- iii) Read the statements (1) & (2) given below, and choose the option that correctly evaluates the statements.

(1): The speaker pretended that he was searching for a lost ring.

(2): The speaker wanted to hide the fact that he had been following her.

- A. [1] is true but [2] is false.
 B. [2] is contradictory to [1].
 C. [1] is the reason for [2].
 D. [2] is the result of [1].
- iv) Select the option that displays the characteristics of the speaker.
- | | |
|--------------|--------------|
| 1. discreet | 2. vain |
| 3. ambitious | 4. observant |
| 5. finicky | 6. cautious |
- A. 1, 4 and 6
 B. 2, 3 and 5
 C. 1, 3 and 6
 D. 2, 4 and 5
2. *For about nine seconds he had me rattled, and I came mighty near getting cold feet and trying to sell him some plate-glass. But I got my nerve back pretty quick. He asked me to sit down, and I told him everything. I told him how I followed his daughter from Cincinnati, and what I did it for, and all about my salary and prospects, and explained to him my little code of living -to be always decent and right in your home town. At first, I thought he was going to throw me out of the window, but I kept on talking.*
- Well, that got him to laughing and I'll bet that was the first laugh those ancestors and horsehair sofa had heard in many a day.*

- i) Select the option that matches the expression with the meaning correctly.

Column A	Column B
I. getting cold feet	a. to be exhausted
II. dead on my feet	b. to become used to a new situation
III. get your feet wet	c. carried away by someone on an emotional level
	d. feeling nervous about something

- A. I-c, II-b, III-a
 B. I-d, II-a, III-b
 C. I-a, II-c, III-d
 D. I-b, II-d, III-c

- ii) Select the option that lists the statements which can be a part of one's 'code of living'.
1. Keep your word.
 2. Never quit on yourself or your family.
 3. Think about the future and ignore the present.
 4. Focus on materialistic possessions.
 5. Stay true to yourself.
 6. Look back and wonder about your decisions.
- A. 1, 3 and 6
 - B. 2, 4 and 5
 - C. 2, 5 and 6
 - D. 1, 2 and 5
- iii) "I'll bet that was the first laugh those ancestors and horsehair sofa had heard in many a day." The tone of the speaker is
- A. satirical.
 - B. ironical.
 - C. humorous.
 - D. sarcastic.
- iv) Which option best describes the sequence of the speaker's emotions in the given extract.
- A. nostalgia-friendliness-jitters-disappointment
 - B. curiosity-nostalgia-fear-mild sadness
 - C. jitters-confidence-apprehension-delight
 - D. shyness—friendliness-excitement-nostalgia

4. Answer the following questions briefly.

- a) One day last summer the author was travelling to Pittsburg by chair car. What does he say about his co-passengers?
- b) What was John A. Pescud's opinion about best sellers? Why?
- c) What does John say about himself since his last meeting with the narrator?
- d) How did John's first meeting with Jessie's father go? What did John tell him?
- e) Why did John get off at Coketown?
- f) John is a hypocrite. Do you agree with this statement? Elucidate.
- g) Do you think Colonel Allyn enjoyed Pescud's company? Why/ Why not?
- h) Describe John A. Pescud with reference to the following points:

- o His physical appearance
- o His philosophy on behaviour
- o His profession
- o His first impression of his wife
- o His success

5. 'Irony' refers to the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite to their literal meaning. Working in pairs, bring out the irony in the following :

- a) The title of the story, "The Bestseller".
- b) Pescud's claim, "When people in real life marry, they generally hunt up somebody in their own station. A fellow usually picks out a girl who went to the same high-school and belonged to the same singing-society that he did."
- c) The name Trevelyan.

6. Answer in detail.

- (a) Pescud had the qualities of a good salesman. Justify this statement by citing examples from the text.
- (b) Imagine you are Andrew Smith, the author of the bestseller, 'The Rose Lady and Trevelyan'. You happen to meet Pescud during one of your train journeys and realise he is one of your biggest critics. Write down the possible conversation.

You may begin like this :

Pescud: Hello sir! It's a pleasure to have this chance meeting with you. I have read your book, 'The Rose Lady and Trevelyan' but I must say that I beg to differ with your idea of romance. I feel it is far from reality.

Andrew: Hello Mr Pescud! I am glad that you are candid in your opinion about my book. So, tell me what's your notion of an ideal romance?

7. Working in groups of four, write an article on the following :

The elderly seek attention and company from younger members of their family. They are eager to listen and long to share their life experiences. John A Pescud is not only respectful but also very patient with Colonel Allyn, Jessie's father.

As a reporter, write an article for a newspaper, on the importance of the elderly in our lives.

□□□

