

Fiction **5** **UNIT**

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 to 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.



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 Alwynna 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 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 time enough off 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**."

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



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 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 the right of 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 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.
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's 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 that 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 whatever 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 **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 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, cool as 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's Fair main building. After about three quarters of an hour an old man 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 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 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 to 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 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 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 beat 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), 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. Based on your reading of the story, answer the following questions by choosing the correct option.

- (a) The narrator says that John was "_____ of the stuff that heroes are not often lucky enough to be made of." His tone is sarcastic because _____
- (i) he hated John.
 - (ii) he felt that John was a threat to him.
 - (iii) John was not particularly good-looking.
 - (iv) nobody liked John.
- (b) Pescud felt that best-sellers were not realistic as _____
- (i) American farmers had nothing in common with European princesses.
 - (ii) men generally married girls from a similar background.
 - (iii) American men married girls who studied in America.
 - (iv) American men did not know fencing and were beaten by the Swiss guards.
- (c) "Bully", said Pescud brightening at once. He means to say that _____
- (i) he is a bully.
 - (ii) his manager was a bully.
 - (iii) he was being bullied by his co-workers.
 - (iv) he was doing very well at his job.



- (d) The narrator says that life has no geographical bounds implying that _____
- (i) human beings are essentially the same everywhere.
 - (ii) boundaries exist only on maps.
 - (iii) one should work towards the good of mankind.
 - (iv) he was happy to travel to other countries.

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) Who was the passenger of chair No.9? What did he suddenly do?
- (c) What was John A. Pescud's opinion about best sellers? Why?
- (d) What does John say about himself since his last meeting with the author?
- (e) How did John's first meeting with Jessie's father go? What did the author tell him?
- (f) Why did John get off at Coketown?
- (g) John is a hypocrite. Do you agree with this statement? Substantiate your answer.
- (h) Describe John A. Pescud with reference to the following points:
 - Physical appearance
 - His philosophy on behaviour
 - His profession
 - His first impression of his wife
 - His success

5. Complete the flow chart in the correct sequence as it happens in the story.

Hint: it begins from the time John Pescud first saw Jessie till the time they marry.

Jessie takes a sleeper to Louisville.

Pescud sees a girl (Jessie) reading a book in the train.

Pescud speaks to the girl (Jessie) for the first time.

Pescud follows her but finds it difficult to keep up.

Pescud goes to the village to find out about the mansion.

Jessie arrives at Virginia.

Pescud meets Jessie's father.

They get married a year later.

Pescud instantly gets attracted to the girl (Jessie)

Jessie informs Pescud that her father would not approve of them meeting.

They meet alone two days later.

6. ***Irony refers to the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of 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.

7. ***A newspaper reporter hears of the marriage of Pescud and Jessie. He interviews them and writes an article for the paper entitled : A Modern Romance.***

Working in groups of four, write the article.



