His Brother's Blood

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UNTIL RECENTLY, Ernest William Hornung (1866–1921) was remembered primarily as the creator of A. J. Raffles—an engaging young man who played cricket by day and burgled by night—and as the brother-in-law of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. But there is now a growing recognition that he was, in fact, one of the most prolific, versatile and popular authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sensitive and ingenious and with a poet’s eye when it came to descriptions. In personality and physical appearance he had, indeed, rather more in common with Rudyard Kipling than he did with Conan Doyle. (And, like Kipling, he had a son who was killed in the Great War: for the final ten years of his life the two men were on similar wavelengths and tending to become kindred spirits.)

In his youth, with a wealth of ideas and ceaseless inspiration at his command (and with a slightly impoverished family to support), he was a compulsive writer. His ene-
gy was astonishing. In an unpublished short story dating from the mid-1890s Ernest Hornung assumed (in one aspect, at any rate) the mantel of a novelist called Albert Hemming and, through the eyes of another character, we glimpse the author resuming his work after a brief word of greeting:

And with that he was down at his desk, and writing as fluently as though I had never come in; nor did he look up or speak for an hour and a quarter by my watch. His pen was going freely all the time. I sat still and watched him from the easy chair.... How he wrote and wrote!... The dip and scurry of his pen was almost continuous.... At last I heard him give a deep sigh, and throw down his pen. I rose and looked over his shoulder. The half-filled sheet which finished the chapter was numbered ninety-four. “Nearly a hundred pages already!” I cried; “and you only began the other day. What form you are in! Read me some of it.”

Hemming shook his head. “Six chapters, my boy, and I don’t say I haven’t seen worse. Still it isn’t fit for you to hear. There are similes to import etc and sentences to spruce up. When it’s finished, though, and I’ve sorted it up and down, it ought at all events to be the best of my things.”

Between 1890 and 1921 thirty books were published bearing the name E. W. Hornung—twenty novels (nine of them set primarily in Australia), seven collections of short stories (three of them relating the adventures of
Raffles), two books of poetry and one small book of wartime memoirs. There were also a number of short stories and articles which appeared in magazines and were then forgotten by the world at large. It was an impressive output. Behind the scenes, however, all was not quite so effortlessly efficient as it seemed. Following the major stage success of Raffles, in New York and London in 1906 and in several major European cities thereafter, Hornung became steadily more obsessed by the notion of writing for the stage, wrongly convinced that there were huge profits to be derived from this source. Several of his books were laboriously converted into plays which would never be produced. The stream of short stories slackened off and their quality deteriorated. The Thousandth Woman (1913) was the last of his completed novels. Intermittent work on a rather lacklustre production entitled An International Reputation was abandoned when the Great War began.

He realised, almost too late, that the art of writing fiction was slipping through his fingers, but by May 1919—after four harrowing years—he had resolved to recapture his old skills and to write a new novel. It would be set partly during and partly immediately after the War, and he declared that it would easily be his best. But in October (newly returned from a visit to Belgium, where he was
distressed to find that his son’s grave had been shelled out of existence) his inspiration momentarily dried up. “I am trying to get on terms with the books I had begun quite happily before we went,” he wrote; “but I have had many other things on my hands, & the spell is broken for the time being.” (The second book was a slim collection of poems, subsequently published as *The Young Guard.* ) He was chastened to discover that books dealing with the War (for the time being, at any rate) were no longer in great demand and glumly deleted such references from the new novel. “I am practically starting afresh,” he confessed a few days later, but hoped to reach his original target eventually.³ And by mid-November work was going full steam ahead and his confidence restored. “It will knock out all my other novels.” he declared in elation (but the word “novels” was underlined, since its popularity was obviously not going to outshine any of the collected short stories about Raffles).⁴

And that, regrettably, is the last recorded comment about the book that has so far come to light. He was presumably at work on it throughout most of 1920, and measured by earlier standards then his progress might have been regarded as rather slow. (And, at times, no more than tinkering with what had gone before.) But he
Indicates the ruthless editing and wholesale deletions Hornung engaged in towards the end of the manuscript. He would have intended to rewrite the whole of this page.
was reasonably well off and had no need—or desire—to churn out pot-boilers at this stage of his career: the production of a first-rate piece of work, one that would live, was his prime objective.

So *His Brother’s Blood* came at the very end of Hornung’s career, taking shape during the fifteen months preceding his death. The surviving manuscript runs to no more than 113 pages, with a vast number of changes and deletions. It probably represents no more than a third of the book that the author originally had in mind. Judged by earlier standards, his progress was slow and seemingly uncertain, although there were still times when (as in earlier days) a stream of pages would be almost entirely free of revisions. He was out of practice, admittedly, and was now in his mid-fifties (as distinct from his early twenties), with not the same amount of energy at his disposal, but by the same token it could be argued that he had learnt, in the light of a long experience, and with no specific deadline to be attained, to be more painstaking than in the days of his youth. Some of these revisions amount, however, to no more than two or three words jotted down in the margin, as a reminder to himself of how the phraseology needed to be recast, and sometimes (alas) they are indecipherable. I have done my best to bring
the text into line with the author’s last thoughts, where it is possible to interpret them, and this has sometimes involved recasting phraseology in the immediate vicinity of these changes in order to smooth them into place. In two instances toward the end of the six chapters, however, it has been necessary to reinstate some text which Hornung had struck out, since the opportunity to produce improved versions—which he probably intended to do as soon as he had returned, refreshed, from a holiday, in April 1921—was denied him. Details of these adjustments are set out in the “Notes,” which are preceded by a brief “Afterword” on how the tale may have been intended to develop.

In the internet age, it is fascinating to note that all the fictional works which Hornung published in book form over a period of twenty-four years (from 1890 to 1914), together with a posthumous collection of short stories assembled in 1923, are once again readily available to the general reader in a wide variety of formats. It is wonderful that, after being consigned to an attic and forgotten about for almost thirty-five years, it has become possible for some additional tales to emerge into the public domain—for *His Brother’s Blood* is not the only unfinished manuscript that has come to light—to supplement this
existing treasure-trove of Hornung stories. I feel privileged and delighted to be able to play a small part in facilitating their introduction to an even wider audience.

I must acknowledge, with gratitude, my indebtedness to the Cadbury Research Library of the University of Birmingham in allowing me access to the Hornung papers, stored in their spacious and splendid library and admirably catalogued by Mark Eccleston, and to Susan Worrall, the Director of Special Collections, and to her colleague Ivana Friar, for all their assistance in helping to bring this project to fruition. I am also hugely grateful to Bernard Hornung, acting on behalf of the Hornung family, for granting me permission to reproduce his great-great-uncle’s handiwork and for his enthusiastic encouragement in this venture.

In the best editorial tradition, there is nothing left for me to say except “And now read on.”

Peter Rowland
Wanstead, London
May 2015
NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. “A Dog and His Day,” Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham University (hereafter referred to as CRL), MS 127/A/2/1/3.

2. E. W. Hornung (hereafter referred to as EWH) to Shane R. Chichester (hereafter referred to as SRC), 15 June 1917 and 14 May 1919, CRL, MS 127/B/1/1/2/80 and 97.

3. EWH to SRC, 9 and 14 October 1919, CRL, MS127/B/1/1/2/102 and 103.

4. EWH to SRC, 14 Nov. 1919, CRL, MS127/B/1/1/2/104.

5. CRL, MS127/A/2/1/2.

6. The manuscripts were apparently passed to SRC, EWH’s devoted friend, protégé and admirer, by the author’s sister in the early 1940s. SRC evidently cherished some hopes of publishing them, but this idea never came to fruition. He died in 1969 and his papers (which included a host of letters from EWH, together with a considerable amount of supplementary material relating to the author) were presented to the CRL by his descendants in 2003. It was not until, after several years, the massive and intricate task of cataloguing them had been completed that it was possible for them to be made generally available to researchers.