

the amazing truth is that many of the short shorts turn out very well indeed. Indeed, considering the strict limitation of space, the authors turn in a very worthy performance, and now and then achieve a masterpiece.

I now give you three of the best magazine short shorts out of a great many that I have read, and also one short short written by a high-school boy. These stories are chosen not only for their quality, but also as examples of the kind and length of story you may hope to write yourself. Through the pages of this book there have been various exercises on the different parts of short-story structure. Now that you have had practice with each part, it is time to try to achieve a finished product. As you read the following short shorts, keep in mind that you are about to become the author of a story comparable in length and kind—and, I hope, in quality—to one of these.

The Beau Catcher

FREDERICK LAING

"The Beau Catcher" tempts me to yield once more to superlatives. It is a brilliant example of what can be done in 1200 words: "Great riches in a little room." In many respects it is a pattern story: it follows the formula as to rate of development of the situation, introduction of main character, location of climax, length of conclusion. But in the convincing reality of the characters, in the skill with which an honest lesson of life has been woven into the rather mechanical pattern of the short short, it has seldom been equaled. Read it for plot and for theme.

WHAT HAD REALLY brought her into Waller's department store was something definitely not romantic. She had promised her mother to get herself a pair of rubbers. As she wandered through she was looking wistfully at the things she couldn't afford or wouldn't be allowed to wear. That two-piece bathing suit, for instance. Renee Weston had one like it. . . .

Renee Weston, yes . . . whom Bert Howland was taking to the benefit dance this Saturday, this very night. And as for herself, who had asked her to go to the benefit dance at the country club? Why, nobody. For who was going to ask bashful Genevieve Smith?

She was walking along the aisles with her head down and her heart, to judge from the way she felt, dragging on the floor behind her. It was the sign in front of these hair ribbons that stopped her cold.

BEAU CATCHERS, it said.

And around the sign was a selection of those bow ribbons for your hair. Every color of the rainbow, it said—pick a color to suit your personality.

She stood there a moment with her head down. No, her mother

wouldn't let her wear a bow that big and showy, even if she had the nerve, which she hadn't. These beau catchers, they were the kind . . .

The kind Renee Weston would wear, she had started to think, when the saleslady broke into her train of thought: "This would be a nice one for you, dearie."

"Oh, no, I'm afraid I couldn't wear anything like that," she answered. But at the same time she was reaching wistfully for the green ribbon.

The saleslady looked surprised. "With that lovely copper-colored hair and those pretty eyes? Why, child, you could wear anything."

Maybe it was only a sales talk, but the ribbon was attached to a comb, and because she didn't need much urging, she fastened it into her hair.

"No, a little farther front," the saleslady said. "One thing you have to remember, honey, if you're going to wear anything a little out of the ordinary, wear it like nobody had a better right than you. In this world, you gotta hold your head up." She looked at the position of the ribbon critically. "That's better. Why, you look positively . . . exciting."

She looked in the mirror and, sure enough, the green color of the ribbon and the hint of red in her hair with the green of her eyes . . .

"I'll take it," she said, a little surprised at the note of decision in her voice.

"Now if you wanted to get another for formal wear," the saleslady said, "one like this, for instance, if you were going to a party or a dance . . ."

It was the last thing she wanted to talk about. She paid for the ribbon and started to get out of there so fast that she bumped smack into a big woman with a lot of packages, and almost got knocked silly.

As she neared the door, a funny old man was staring at her. A man with black eyes and a droopy gray mustache under a green fedora hat. You could tell from his eyes that he was smiling under the gray mustache. Smiling and looking at the beau catcher.

It was a conquest, even if it wasn't much. She gave him a glance. Just the merest passing look, but . . .

But the next moment a shiver of fright went through her, for the silly old thing was actually following her. That beau catcher couldn't . . . but this was really dreadful. She started to look around and then she heard him say, "Hey, keedol!" She ran like a rabbit and didn't stop running until she was a block down the street.

Then suddenly she found herself in front of Carson's drugstore and she knew for sure it was where she'd been intending to go from the start. Because practically any girl in town knew this was the drugstore where Bert Howland hung around Saturday afternoons, talking with his friends or playing the pinball machine.

She hesitated just a moment before she entered the drugstore. Then she took a deep breath.

He was there all right. He was sitting at the soda counter, and the minute she saw him—the way he was hunched over a cup of coffee, not drinking it, just looking ahead—she thought, Renee turned him down. She's going to the dance with somebody else.

She sat down at the other corner of the counter facing his profile, and Harry, the soda jerk, came over to take her order.

"Bring me a black and white soda," she said.

And as he went to get her the soda, she saw, out of the side of her eyelashes, that Bert Howland had turned and was staring at her.

She sat up straight, holding her head high, conscious, very conscious of that green beau catcher.

After a while he said, "Hi, Genevieve."

She turned, and did a neat little job there of looking surprised. "Why, Bert Howland," she said, "how long have you been sitting here?"

"All my life," he said. "Just waiting for you."

It was only a line, but ordinarily it would have left her stuttering. She wanted to reach up and make a few touches at her hair, just to feel the beau catcher to give her confidence, but she restrained herself.

"Flatterer," she said.

And a moment later, he was sitting on the stool beside her, looking at her in that same way, as though he'd just noticed she was alive.

"Wearing your hair a different way or something, aren't you?" he asked.

She reached for her soda and took a gulp. "Do you usually notice things like that?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I guess it's just the way you're holding your head up. Like you thought I ought to notice something."

She felt a slight flush at her cheeks and the tips of her ears. "Is that meant as a crack?"

"Maybe," he said, grinning, "and maybe not. Maybe I sort of like to see you hold your head like that."

It was about ten minutes afterward that the unbelievable happened. He said, "You know, they're having a dance at the country club tonight."

And when he actually came across with it, the invitation and everything, it was all she could do to keep from throwing her arms around him.

They left the drugstore a little later, and he offered to walk home with her. But suddenly she remembered that formal beau catcher, the one you wore to a party or a dance. She couldn't wear the one she had on. She would have to have one to match her evening dress. And so, though only this morning she would have practically wept for joy at the chance to have Bert Howland walk home with her, she told him now that she simply had to get to Waller's before it closed.

She got there just as the doors were being shut. A man tried to keep her out, but she brushed past him and dashed to the ribbon counter.

She looked for the blue-and-gold one. Gone! If they didn't have another . . .

The saleslady smiled when she saw who it was. "I knew you'd be back."

"H . . . how?" she asked, out of breath.

The saleslady reached under the counter. "I've been saving it

for you." But the beau catcher she brought out was not the blue-and-gold one. It wasn't even formal at all. In fact, it was . . .

"That's like the one I just bought," she said, puzzled.

And then she was standing with her mouth opened in amazement. Why, when the big woman had bumped into her it must have been knocked off. . . .

"It is the same one," the saleslady explained.

And with that knowledge a lot of things began to flash through Genevieve's mind. But suddenly she began to smile and then somehow she couldn't stop smiling. She let her head lift easily while half of her listened to the saleslady's story—a story about a man who had found his way to the ribbon counter with her beau catcher, a jolly old man in a green fedora hat.

SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. I did not mention the surprise ending in the headnote, because I wanted the story to have a fair chance. Were you surprised? How well does the ending pass the tests for a good surprise ending?
2. One of the structural problems the author faced was to contrive a meeting between Genevieve and Bert Howland. He solved it by saying that Bert "hangs out" at the drugstore on Saturday afternoons; then he sent Genevieve there to find Bert. But this arrangement may discredit Bert in the eyes of some readers as a "drugstore loafer." How could the meeting have been contrived to avoid this reaction?
3. One formula for short shorts says all characters must be introduced in the first 25 lines. Defend the later appearance of the little man in the green fedora hat.
4. State in your own words the theme of this story, or find a statement of it by one of the minor characters. Do you believe this theme? How can you judge the truth of themes?
5. Use the dictionary for: wistfully, fedora, profile.