Dogs, Cats, Books, and the Average Man

A Letter to the Editor

From "The Yellow Dwarf"

SIR:

I hope you will not suspect me of making a bid for his affection, when I remark that the Average Man loves the Obvious. By consequence (for, like all unthinking creatures, the duffer's logical), by consequence, his attitude towards the Subtle, the Elusive, when not an attitude of mere torpid indifference, is an attitude of positive distrust and dislike.

Of this ignoble fact, pretty nearly everything—from the popularity of beer and skittles, to the popularity of Mr. Hall Caine's novels; from the general's distaste for caviare, to the general's neglect of Mr. Henry James's tales—pretty nearly everything is a reminder. But, to go no further afield, for the moment, than his own hearthrug, may I ask you to consider a little the relative positions occupied in the Average Man's regard by the Dog and the Cat?

The Average Man ostentatiously loves the Dog.

The Average Man, when he is not torpidly indifferent to that princely animal, positively distrusts and dislikes the Cat.

I have used the epithet "princely" with intention, in speaking of

of the near relative of the King of Beasts. The Cat is a Princess of the Blood. Yes, my dear, always a Princess, though the Average Man, with his unerring instinct for the malappropriate word, sometimes names her Thomas. The Cat is always a Princess, because everything nice in this world, everything fine, sensitive, distinguished, everything beautiful, everything worth while, is of essence Feminine, though it may be male by the accident of sex;—and that's as true as gospel, let Mr. W. E. Henley's lusty young disciples shout their loudest in celebration of the Virile.—The Cat is a Princess.

The Dog, on the contrary, is not even a gentleman. Far otherwise. His admirers may do what they will to forget it, the circumstance remains, writ large in every Natural History, that the Dog is sprung from quite the meanest family of the Quadrupeds. That coward thief the wolf is his bastard brother; the carrion hyena is his cousin-german. And in his person, as in his character, bears he not an hundred marks of his base descent? In his rough coat (contrast it with the silken mantle of the Cat); in his harsh, monotonous voice (contrast it with the flexible organ of the Cat, her versatile mewings, chirrupings, and purrings, and their innumerable shades and modulations); in the stiff-jointed clumsiness of his movements (compare them to the inexpressible grace and suppleness of the Cat's); briefly, in the all-pervading plebeian commonness that hangs about him like an atmosphere (compare it to the high-bred reserve and dignity that invest the Cat). The wolf's brother, is the Dog not himself a coward? Watch him when, emulating the ruffian who insults an unprotected lady, he puts a Cat to flight in the streets: watch him when the lady halts and turns. Faugh, the craven! with his wild show of savagery so long as there is not the slightest danger —and his sudden chopfallen drawing back when the lady halts and turns!

turns! The hyena's cousin, is he not himself of carrion an impassioned amateur? At Constantinople he serves ('tis a labour of love; he receives no stipend) he serves as Public Scavenger, swallowing with greed the ordures cast by the Turk. Scripture tells us to what he returneth: who has failed to observe that he returneth not to his own alone? And the other day, strolling upon the sands by the illimitable sea, I came upon a friend and her pet terrier. She was holding the little beggar by the scruff of his neck, and giving him repeated sousings in a pool. I stood a pleased spectator of this exercise, for the terrier kicked and spluttered and appeared to be unhappy. "He found a decaying jelly-fish below there, and rolled in it," my friend pathetically explained. I should like to see the Cat who could be induced to roll in a decaying jelly-fish. The Cat's fastidiousness, her meticulous cleanliness, the time and the pains she bestows upon her toilet, and her almost morbid delicacy about certain more private errands, are among the material indications of her patrician nature. It were needless to allude to the vile habits and impudicity of the Dog.

Have you ever met a Dog who wasn't a bounder? Have you ever met a Dog who wasn't a bully, a sycophant, and a snob? Have you ever met a Cat who was? Have you ever met a Cat who would half frighten a timid little girl to death, by rushing at her and barking? Have you ever met a Cat who, left alone with a visitor in your drawing-room, would truculently growl and show her teeth, as often as that visitor ventured to stir in his chair? Have you ever met a Cat who would snarl and snap at the servants, Mawster's back being turned? Have you ever met a Cat who would cringe to you and fawn to you, and kiss the hand that smote her?

Conscious of her high lineage, the Cat understands and accepts the

the responsibilities that attach to it. She knows what she owes to herself, to her rank, to the Royal Idea. Therefore, it is you who must be the courtier. The Dog, poor-spirited toady, will study your eye to divine your mood, and slavishly adapt his own mood and his behaviour to it. Not so the Cat. As between you and her, it is you who must do the toadying. A guest in the house, never a dependent, she remembers always the courtesy and the consideration that are her due. You must respect her pleasure. Is it her pleasure to slumber, and do you disturb her: note the disdainful melancholy with which she silently comments your rudeness. Is it her pleasure to be grave: tempt her to frolic, you will tempt in vain. Is it her pleasure to be cold: nothing in human possibility can win a caress from her. Is it her pleasure to be rid of your presence: only the physical influence of a closed door will persuade her to remain in the room with you. It is you who must be the courtier, and wait upon her desire.

But then!

When, in her own good time, she chooses to unbend, how graciously, how entrancingly, she does it! Oh, the thousand wonderful lovelinesses and surprises of her play! The wit, the humour, the imagination, that inform it! Her ruses, her false leads, her sudden triumphs, her feigned despairs! And the topazes and emeralds that sparkle in her eyes; the satiny lustre of her apparel; the delicious sinuosities of her body! And her parenthetic interruptions of the game: to stride in regal progress round the apartment, flourishing her tail like a banner: or coquettishly to throw herself in some enravishing posture at length upon the carpet at your feet: or (if she loves you) to leap upon your shoulder, and press her cheek to yours, and murmur rapturous assurances of her passion! To be loved by a Princess! Whosoever, from the Marquis de Carabas down, has been loved by

by a Cat, has savoured that felicity. My own particular treasure of a Cat, at this particular moment is lying wreathed about my neck, watching my pen as it moves along the paper, and purring approbation of my views. But when, from time to time, I chance to use a word that doesn't strike her altogether as the fittest, she reaches down her little velvet paw, and dabs it out. I should like to see the Dog who could do that.

But—the Cat is subtle, the Cat is elusive, the Cat is not to be read at a glance, the Cat is not a simple equation. And so the Average Man, gross mutton-devouring, money-grubbing mechanism that he is, when he doesn't just torpidly tolerate her, distrusts her and dislikes her. A great soul, misappreciated, misunderstood, she sits neglected in his chimney-corner; and the fatuous idgit never guesses how she scorns him.

But—the Dog is obvious. Any fool can grasp the meaning of the Dog. And the Average Man, accordingly, recreant for once to the snobbism which is his religion, hugs the hyena's cousin to his bosom.

What of it?

Only this: that in the Average Man's sentimental attitude towards the Dog and the Cat, we have a formula, a symbol, for his sentimental attitude towards many things, especially for his sentimental attitude towards Books.

Some books, in their uncouthness, their awkwardness, their boisterousness, in their violation of the decencies of art, in their low truckling to the tastes of the purchaser, in their commonness, their vulgarity, in their total lack of suppleness and distinction, are the very Dogs of Bookland. The Average Man loves 'em. Such as they are, they're obvious.

And other books, by reason of their beauties and their virtues, their

their graces and refinements; because they are considered finished; because they are delicate, distinguished, aristocratic; because their touch is light, their movement deft and fleet; because they proceed by omission, by implication and suggestion; because they employ the *demi-mot* and the *nuance;* because, in fine, they are Subtle—other books are the Cats of Bookland. And the Average Man hates them or ignores them.

Yes. Literature broadly divides itself into Cat-Literature, despised and rejected of the Average Man, and Dog-Literature, adopted and petted by him. What is more like the ponderous, slow-strutting, dull-witted Mastiff, than the writing of our tedious friend Mr. Caine? What more like a formless, unclipped white Poodle, with pink eyes, than the gushing of Miss Corelli? In the lucubrations of Mr. J. K. Jerome and his School, do we not recognise the Dog of the Public House, grinning and wagging his tail and performing his round of inexpensive tricks for whoso will chuck him a biscuit? And in the long-drawn bellowings of Dr. Nordau, hear we not the distempered Hound complaining to the moon? The books of Mr. Conan Doyle are as a litter of assorted Mongrels, going cheap—*regardez moi leurs pattes!* Mr. Anthony Hope produces the smart Fox Terrier; Mr. George Moore, the laborious Dachshund; whilst Messrs. Crockett and MacLaren breed you the sanctimonious Collie. To cross the Channel, for an instant, we find the works of Mons. Crapule Mendès, poking their noses into whatever nastiness is going, and doing the other usual canine thing. And then, to come back to England, and to turn our attention upon Journalism, we mustn't forget *Mr. Punch's* collaborator Toby; nor Lo-Ben, the former ruling spirit of the *Pall Mall Gazette;* nor the Jackals and Pariahs of Lower Grubb Street; nor the Butcher's Dog, whose carnivorous yawling is the predominant note

note of a certain sixpenny weekly, which I will not advertise by naming.

Cat-Literature, in the nature of things, it is less easy to put one's finger on. Good books have such an unpleasant way of being rare. Still, in Paris, there are MM. France, Bourget, and Pierre Loti (oh, that sweet Pierre Loti, with his Moumoutte Blanche and his Moumoutte Chinoise!); and, in England, at least two or three Literary Cats are born every year. There are many sorts of Cats, to be sure; and some Cats are not so nice as other Cats; but even the shabbiest, drabbiest Cat, lurking in the area, is interesting to those who have learned the Cat language, and so can commune with her. That is one of the prettiest differences between the Dog and the Cat:—the Dog will learn your language, but you must learn the Cat's. Dog-Literature is written in the language of the Average Man, a crude, unlovely language, necessarily. Cat-Literature is written in a complex shaded language all its own, which the Average Man is too stupid or too indolent to learn.

Yes, even in poor old England, we may be thankful, a Literary Cat is born two or three times a year. Miss Dowie and Miss D'Arcy, Mr. Grahame, Mrs. Meynell, Mr. Crackanthorpe—they are among the most careful and successful of our native breeders. Mr. Harland has given us some very pretty Grey Kittens; and for the artificially educated Cat, in green apron and periwig, we naturally turn to Mr. Beerbohm — whose collected works, by the bye, I am glad to see have at last been published, accompanied by a charming Cat-like bibliography and preface from the hand of Mr. Lane. But of course, in any proper Cat Show, the Cats of Mr. Henry James would carry off the special grand *prix d'honneur*.

And now, Mr. Editor, these philosophical reflections may be not inappositely punctuated by a piece of news.

I beg

I beg to announce to you the recent appearance in Cat-Literature of a highly curious and diverting sport or variation. Perhaps your attention has already been directed to it? Have you seen *March Hares?*

March Hares, by George Forth, is a most spirited, lithe-limbed, and surprising Cat. It will mystify and irritate the Average Man, as much as it will rejoice his betters. He will discover that he has been made a fool of, at the end of every bout; for it is Cat's play perpetually—a malicious sequence of ruses and false leads. He will declare that it is madder even than its name, for the method that governs its capricious pirouettings is a method much too subtle for his coarse senses to apprehend. Indeed, I can almost hope that *March Hares* was conceived and brought to parturition, for the deliberate purpose of giving the Average Man a headache. If it were frank Opéra-bouffe, he wouldn't mind; but it is Opéra-bouffe masquerading as legitimate drama. The Average Man will take it seriously—and presently begin to stare and swear. He will feel as if Harlequin were circling round him, jeering at him and flouting him, making disrespectful gestures in his face, whacking his skull with wooden sword, and throwing his sluggish intellects promiscuously into a whirl of bewilderment and anger.

Mr. David Mosscrop, self-defined as an habitual criminal, is a dissipated young Scottish Professor of Culdees, who draws a salary of four-hundred odd pounds per annum, and, for forty-nine weeks out of the fifty-two, renders no equivalent of service. Accordingly, he lives in chambers, at Dunstan's Inn, and lounges at seven o'clock in the morning of his thirtieth birthday, against the low stone parapet of Westminster Bridge, nursing a bad attack of vapours, and wondering vaguely whether a chap "who does not know enough to keep sober over-night, should not be thrown like garbage into the river."

What

What more natural than that he should here encounter a young lady "almost tall," with "butter-coloured hair," and treat her to an outfit of silk stockings and a pair of patent-leather boots "of the best Parisian make"? Inevitably, after that, he invites her to breakfast at an Italian ordinary, where she drinks freely of Chianti and Maraschino, and lies to him like fun about her identity and her extraction. "My name is Vestalia Peaussier. My father was a French gentleman—an officer, and a man of position. He died—killed in a duel—when I was very young. . . . . My mother was the daughter of a very old Scottish house." And Vestalia has just been turned out of her lodgings for non-payment of rent, and insinuates that she is looking to the streets for a career.

Mosscrop, properly enough shocked at this, hurries her away upon his arm to the British Museum, where he entertains her with his ideas about Nero, Richard Cœur de Lion, King John, the Monkish Chroniclers, and the lions of Assur-Banipal. She listens, with her shoulder against his—"but now he has other auditors as well."

"Excuse me, sir," the urgent and anxious voice of a stranger says close behind him, "but you seem to be extraordinarily well posted indeed on these sculptures here. I hope you will not object to my daughter and me standing where we can hear your remarks."

The stranger is Mr. Skinner, from Paris, Kentucky, U.S.A. His daughter, Adele, is a handsome girl with "coal-black tresses," who looks askance at the "butter-coloured" locks of Vestalia Peaussier.

Skinner persists in his advances. "I should delight, sir, to have my daughter be privileged to profit by your remarks." David speaks somewhat abruptly: "You are certainly welcome, but it

happens that I have finished my remarks, as you call them." Skinner observes, and the reader will agree with him, that "that's too bad;" for David's remarks were lively and instructive. And Skinner, with a view to mutual intellectual improvement, asks David to call upon him at the Savoy Hotel.

Then David and Vestalia lunch together at the Café Royal, drinking a bottle of 34A, cooled to 48. And then they go to Greenwich and eat fish. And at last David conducts her to his chambers, and sends her to bed in the room of his absent neighbour Linkhaw, supposed to be seeking recreation in Uganda, or "maybe in the Hudson Bay Territory." And Linkhaw, inopportune villain, chooses, of course, this night of all nights for playing the god from the machine. Footsteps come echoing up the staircase. A key rattles in Linkhaw's lock. "Stop that, you idiot!" David commands fiercely. "Ah, Davie, Davie, still at the bottle," replies a well known voice from out of the obscurity; and Linkhaw is dragged by Davie into Davie's den.

From the advent of Linkhaw the plot thickens terribly, the Cat's play becomes fast and furious. First of all, Linkhaw isn't Linkhaw, but the Earl of Drumpipes, in the Peerage of Scotland. And secondly, Vestalia isn't Vestalia, but Linkhaw's thoroughly bad lot of a wife, whom he imagines "dead as a mackerel, thank God." And thirdly, she isn't either, but the entirely virtuous niece of Mr. Skinner, who turns out to be a renegade Englishman himself. And Peaussier was only Skinner Gallicised! Then the question rises, Is Mosscrop a gentleman? Drumpipes, with northern caution, admits that he is "a professional man, a person of education." It is certain, anyhow, that Drumpipes would be blithe to make a Countess of Miss Skinner: she is rich, and she is pleasing. Her Popper is in Standard oil. But there are democratic prejudices against his title, though David reminds him that

that it is "nothing better than a Scottish title," and Drumpipes retorts that the Pilliewillies were great lords in Slug-Angus "before the Campbells were ever heard of, or the Gordons had learned not to eat their cattle raw." Whereupon they almost come to blows about the compensation to be paid for a ruined "moosie." After some persuasion, however, Mosscrop good-naturedly consents to assume his friend's embarrassment, and while Drumpipes, as Linkhaw, makes love to the dark Adele, Mosscrop, as Drumpipes, arranges a coaching-party, a luncheon, and a tableau—whereof he and Vestalia are the central figures. Then the waiter comes in with the tureen; and the Cat's play is ended. *Voilà*, as the French say, *tout*.

March Hares, by George Forth. Who is George Forth? I'll bet half-a-sovereign that "George Forth" is a pseudonym, and that it covers at least two personalities, perhaps three or four. If *March Hares* is not the child of a collaboration, then my eyesight is beginning to fail. Who are the collaborators? Oddly enough, they are quite manifestly members of a group I have never professed to love—they are manifestly pupils of Mr. W. E. Henley. I can only gratefully suppose either that the Master's influence is waning, or that the Publisher's Adviser pruned their manuscript, and the Printer's Reader put the finishing touches to their proofs; for Brutality is absent. I saw it stated in a daily paper, a week or so ago, that George Forth was Mr. Harold Frederic; but that's a rank impossibility. Mr. Harold Frederic has proved that he can cross Bulldogs with Newfoundlands, that he can write able, unreadable *Illuminations* in choice Americanese. He could no more flitter and flutter and coruscate, and turn somersaults in mid-air, and fall lightly on his feet, in the Cat-fashion of George Forth, than he could dance a hornpipe on the point of a needle. It is barely conceivable that Mr. Harold Frederic

Frederic may have been one of the collaborators, but, in that case, I'll eat my wig if the others didn't mightily revise his "copy." *Nenni-da!* George Forth were far more likely to be, in some degree, Mr. George Steevens—late of the *P.M.G.*, much chastened and improved. Perhaps he is also, in some degree, Mr. Marriott Watson? And (*cherchez la femme*) who knows that a lady may not supply an element of his composition? But these are mere conjectures. The long of it is and the short of it is that I'm devoured by curiosity; and I'll offer a bottle of his favourite wine to any fellow who'll provide me with an authenic version of George Forth's "real names."

You will remember, Mr. Editor, the magnificent retort of the French King to the malapert counsellor who ventured to remind him of that silly old Latin saw about *vox populi* and *vox Dei*. With the same splendid and conclusive scorn might you and I dismiss the opinions of the Average Man—especially his opinions about Dogs, Cats, and Books. So long as they remain his own, and are not shared by his superiors, they import as little as the opinions of the Average Dugong. But the tiresome thing is, they are infectious; and his superiors are constantly exposed to the danger of catching them. When he speaks as an individual, the Average Man only bores without convincing you. But when he speaks by the thousand, somehow or other, he is as like as not to set a fashion, or even to establish a tradition. He has already established a tradition about Dogs and Cats; and nowadays he is beginning to set the fashion about Books. Nice people are beginning to accept his opinions upon this, the one subject above all subjects which he is least qualified to touch. I actually know nice people who have read Mr. Conan Doyle! And I have actually met nice people who do not read Mr. Henry James!

And

And that is all the fault of the Average Man. Why can't the dunce be gagged? Mr. James, for instance, has just published a new volume of his incomparable tales. *Embarrassments* 'tis called. Of course, it must be as a volume composed in Coptic for the Average Man; but nice people would find it a casket of inexpressible delights, if only the Average Man could be silenced long enough to let them hear of it. For my part, I do what I can. I remember the example of Martin Luther, and I hurl my ink-pot. But the Devil is still abroad in the world, seeking whom he may devour; and the Average Man will no doubt go on gabbling—the Devil take him!

I have the honour, dear Mr. Editor, to subscribe myself, as ever,

Your obedient Servant,

THE YELLOW DWARF.