

A Birthday Letter

From "The Yellow Dwarf"

MR. EDITOR :
I was vastly diverted (as no doubt were you) by the numerous and various results that followed the appearance of my letter about books and things in the October number of your Quarterly. May we not reckon amongst these, for instance, the departure of Mr. Frank Harris for South Africa, and the reorganisation by Mr. William W. Astor of the entire staff of the *Pall Mall Gazette*? And I love to think it was with a view to soothing the hurt I had inflicted upon a whole Tribe of Pressmen, that a compassionate Government nominated a representative Pressman to the post of Laureate.

I was diverted, too, by the numerous and various guesses that were hazarded at my identity. Perhaps it will be kind if I "make a statement" upon this subject. Roundly, then, one and all the guessers were at fault. I am not Mr. Max Beerbohm, nor Professor Saintsbury, nor Mr. Rider Haggard; still less, if possible, am I Mrs. Humphry Ward; and least of all, sir, yourself. I'm reluctant to deprive you of the glory, but I mauna tell a lee. I can't deny—I wish to gracious I could—that you tampered a little with my proofs, expunging choice passages, appending footnotes, and even here and there inserting a comma
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or a parenthesis in the text; that, I suppose, is the Editor's consolation. But beyond that, you had no more to do with the composition of my letter, than I myself had to do with the funny little explosive paragraph in the *Saturday Review*, which attributed it to you. It was sweet, by the bye, to hear the *Saturday Review* pathetically complaining of anonymity. Are the "slatings" in its own columns invariably signed? Do tell me, àpropos of this, and if the question be not indiscreet, what *is* the secret of the *Saturday Review's* perennial state of peevish animosity towards yourself? Is it possible that in the course of your editorial duties you have ever had occasion to reject a manuscript offered by a member of its staff?

If, as a matter of fact, the elevation of Mr. Alfred Austin to the Laureateship was determined by words of mine, I cannot but rejoice. All things considered, a more appropriate selection could scarcely have been made. Equally to "Press and Public," in this age of the Pressman's ascendancy, a Pressman Laureate should be a gratifying spectacle. For me, the choice always lay between Mr. Alfred Austin and Sir Edwin Arnold—on the one hand the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, on the other hand the Tartufe, of the kind of scribbling that nowadays has come to take the place of Literature. Talk of Mr. Swinburne, of Mr. Morris, of Mr. Meredith, of Mr. Watson, always seemed to me beside the mark; these gentlemen are Poets; what have they in common with "Press and Public"? And how precipitantly and perfectly did Mr. Austin prove his mettle, vindicate his qualifications for "the job." I allude, of course, to that singularly pure example of journalese, *Jameson's Ride*. Most people, to be sure, write it (and some even pronounce it) Raid—Jameson's Raid. But Mr. Austin knows

knows his readers (which is more than I do), and boldly and obligingly he spells it *Ride*; thus incidentally ranging himself with the advocates of Orthographical Reform. I was disappointed to observe that a subsequent performance of the Pressman Laureate's was a celebration of the virtues of *Alfred the Great*. Why this backsliding? Why not *Alfred the Grite*?

And now, sir, can you, can any sane Christian man, can Mr. George du Maurier himself, explain the success of *Trilby*? That the book should have had a certain measure of success, nay, a considerable measure of success, were, indeed, explicable enough. It is the production of a gentleman who for years and years has charmed and amused us by his drawings. Curiosity to see what he could turn out in the way of a novel illustrated by himself, might account for an edition or two. (Imagine a volume of black-and-white sketches published to-morrow from the pencil of Mr. Edmund Gosse, with legends in prose and verse by the artist. I, for one, should not sleep till I possessed it.) And then the book itself is an amiable, sugar-and-watery sort of book enough, and that ought to account for a few more editions. But the furious, but the uncontrollable, but the unprecedented success of *Trilby*—explain me that.

One has always known that to command an immediate success in English-speaking lands (their inhabitants, as Mr. Carlyle vigorously put it, being mostly—what they are), a novel must either discuss a "problem," or attain a certain standard of silliness, vulgarity, and slipshod writing, or haply do both: and if there are exceptions to this rule, they only prove it. Well, one can hardly accuse *Trilby* of discussing a "problem." And as for silliness, vulgarity, and slipshod writing—honestly, does *Trilby*, in point of these qualities, surpass just the usual slipshod, vulgar, and silly English

English novel, which perchance sells it five or ten thousand copies, and mercifully stops at that ?

Oh, *Trilby* is slipshod, vulgar, and silly enough, in all conscience. The question I propound is exclusively a question of excess. *Trilby* is slipshod, vulgar, and silly ; and *Trilby* is exquisitely tiresome and irritating, into the bargain. I have read it. Yes, though loth to appear boastful, yet with a natural pride in my perseverance, I may pledge you my word that I have read it. Laboriously, patiently, doggedly, I have plodded through its four hundred and forty-seven mortal pages—four hundred and forty-seven ! I have learned in suffering what I am fain to teach. It is true, from his title-page, the humane and complimentary author warned me of what I must expect :

“ Aux nouvelles que j'apporte
Vos beaux yeux vont pleurer.”

But I was foolhardy, and pressed on. My “ beaux yeux ” did indeed weep much and often, for sheer weariness, for sheer exasperation, for sheer disgust sometimes, before I had reached the last of his “ nouvelles.” The very first of them was rather a stagerer. Fancy a fellow-man, at this hour of the afternoon, as the very first of his “ nouvelles,” informing you that “ goods trains in France are called *la Petite Vitesse.*” But if we once begin to cry “ Fancy ” over *Trilby*, we shall never have done. The book fairly bristles with solecisms and ineptitudes. Fancy any gent but a commercial gent blithely writing of “ Botticelli, Mantegna, and Co.” Fancy any scholar but a board-school scholar writing, “ Not but what little Billee had his faults.” Fancy any author but an author of the rank of Mr. Jerome writing, “ It was the fashion to do so ”—that is, to wear long side-whiskers—“ it was the fashion to do so, then, for such of
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our gilded youth as could afford the time (and the hair)." And fancy this—on page 13, ominous number—this dark, mysterious intimation that the exciting parts are coming: "He never forgot that Impromptu, which he was destined to hear again one day in strange circumstances."

Yes, *Trilby* is slipshod enough, vulgar enough, silly enough, in all conscience. But upon my soul, I cannot see that it is more slipshod, or vulgarer, or sillier, than the common run of contemporary English novels. Indeed, on the whole, I should say it was, if anything, a shade less silly, a shade less vulgar and slipshod, than the novels of Miss Marie Corelli, for example, or those of "Rita." Why, then, should it excel them as it does in popularity?

I think *Trilby's* advantage is an advantage of kind, rather than of degree. I think the silliness of *Trilby* is a more insidious kind of silliness, its vulgarity a more insidious kind of vulgarity, its slipshod writing a more insidious kind of slipshod writing, than the feeble-minded multitude have been baited with before, in a novel. The writing, for instance, if you will study it, resembles no other form of human writing quite so much as that jauntily familiar, confidential, colloquial form of writing which all lovers of advertisements know and appreciate in the circulars of *Mother Seigel's Syrup*. Nay, do you rub your eyes? Listen to this excerpt:

"It is a wondrous thing, the human foot—like the human hand; even more so, perhaps; but, unlike the hand, with which we are so familiar, it is seldom a thing of beauty in civilised adults who go about in leather boots and shoes.

"So that it is hidden away in disgrace, a thing to be thrust out of sight and forgotten. It can sometimes be very ugly indeed—the ugliest thing there is, even in the fairest and highest and most gifted
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of her sex ; and then it is of an ugliness to chill and kill romance, and scatter love's young dream, and almost break the heart.

“And all for the sake of a high heel and a ridiculously pointed toe—mean things, at the best !

“Conversely, when Mother Seigel——”

Ah, no—I beg your pardon—it is “Mother Nature.” But doesn't one instinctively expect “Mother Seigel” ? And wouldn't the effect have been better if one had found “Mother Seigel” ? And hadn't the author of *Trilby* a sound commercial inspiration when he selected the style of Mother Seigel's circulars as the model on which to form his own ? No doubt the selection was unconscious ; but there it stands ; and I cannot but believe it has had much to do with the book's success. When we remember that the overwhelming majority of people who read, in these degenerate days, belong to the class of society one doesn't know, that they are destitute of literary traditions, that they have received what they fondly misname their “education” at the expense of the parish and that they come to *Trilby* hot from the works of Mr. All Kine, surely we need not marvel that the Mother Seigel style of writing is the style of writing that “mostly takes their hearts.”

The peculiarly insidious kind of silliness which, hand in hand with its sister graces, a peculiarly insidious kind of vulgarity, and a peculiarly insidious kind of slipshod writing, is presumably a super-inducing cause of *Trilby's* popularity, one would have difficulty in characterising by a single word. One feels it everywhere ; everywhere, everywhere, from first line to last ; but the appropriate epithet eludes one. Is it a sentimental silliness ? A fatuously genial silliness ? A priggish silliness ? A prudently prudish silliness ? Yes, yes ; it is all this ; but it is something else. The essential flavour of it is in something else. If you will permit me to use the word, sir, I would suggest that the crowning quality

quality of the silliness of *Trilby* is WEGOTISM. I mean that the author's constant attitude towards his reader is an attitude of Me-and-Youness. "Me and you—we see these things thus; we feel thus, think thus, speak thus; and thereby we approve ourselves a couple of devilish superior persons, don't you know? Common, ordinary, unenlightened persons wouldn't understand us. But we understand each other." That is the tone of *Trilby* from first line to last. The author takes his reader by the arm, and flatters his self-conceit with a continuous flow of cheery, unctuous, cooing Wegotism. Conceive the joy of your average plebeian American or Briton, your photographer, your dentist, thus to be singled out and hob-a-nobbed with by a "real gentleman"; made a companion of—the recipient of his softly-murmured reminiscences and reflections, all of them trite and obvious, and couched in a language it is perfectly easy to understand. "Botticelli, Mantegna, and Co.!" Why, that phrase alone, occurring on page 2, would make your shop-walker's lady feel at home from the commencement.

I have mentioned the priggishness of *Trilby*. Were there ever three such insufferable prigs as Taffy, the Laird, and little Billee?—No, no; I don't mean three; two, two; for Taffy and the Laird are one and indistinguishable.—Were there ever two such insufferable prigs as Taffy-the-Laird and Little Billee? And isn't their priggishness all the more offensive because they are vainly posing the whole time for devil-may-care, rollicking good fellows? I personally know nothing about the Latin Quarter; but you, sir, are regarded as its exegetist. May I ask you for a little information? In your day, in the Latin Quarter, wouldn't the students amongst whom they dwelled have risen in a mass and "done something" to Taffy-the-Laird and little Billee? I have heard grisly stories. I have heard that students in the

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Latin Quarter, especially students of Art, are sometimes not without a certain strain of unrefinement in their natures. I have heard that they devoutly hate a prig. I have heard that, though you may *be* as virtuous and proper as ever you like in the Latin Quarter, you were exceedingly well-advised not to *seem* so; that if you would "do good," you must indeed do it "by stealth," and not blush merely, but suffer corporal penalties, if you "find it fame." I have heard of prigs being seized at midnight by mobs armed with cudgels; of their clothing being torn from their backs, and their persons embellished with symbolic pictures and allusive texts, in paint judiciously mixed with *siccatis*, so that it dried in before soap and water were obtainable. Tell us, sir, why didn't "something happen" to Taffy-the-Laird and little Billee?

Though I may seem to address you in a gladsome spirit, believe me, it is with pain that I have brought myself to write unkind things of *Trilby*. Its author is a highly distinguished gentleman, whose work in his own department of art, everybody with an eye for good drawing, and a sense of humour, should be thankful for. But the fact of the matter is that the art of writing must be *learned*; must be as thoroughly and as industriously studied and practised and considered as any other art. They understand this in France; but in England people imagine that any fool can write a novel—"it's as easy as lying." That is why English novels, for downright absolute worthlessness, take the palm amongst the novels of the world. It is no shame to a highly distinguished draughtsman that, trying his hand in the art of fiction, he should have achieved a grotesque artistic failure. You or I would probably achieve a grotesque artistic failure, if we should try our hands at a cartoon for *Punch*. The shame is to the public, which has hailed an artistic failure as an artistic triumph.

triumph. Sometimes, for brief intervals, one forgets how elementally imbecile our Anglo-Saxon Public is ; and then things like the success of *Trilby* come to make us remember it, and put on mourning.

And now, hence loathed melancholy, and let me turn to the more inspiriting business of congratulating the YELLOW BOOK upon the completion of the second year of its existence, and the beginning of the third. I have followed your adventurous career, sir, from the first, with sympathy, with curiosity, with amusement. You have made a sturdy fight against tremendous odds. From the appearance of your initial number until quite recently, you have had all the newspapers of England, with half-a-dozen whimsical exceptions, all the dear old fusty, musty newspapers of England arrayed against you, striving in their dear old wheezy, cumbrous way, to crush you, treating you indeed (please don't run your pen through this) as the *book-émisnaire* of modern publications. You have survived ; and many of your erstwhile enemies have become your lukewarm friends. (I wish you joy of 'em ; I'm not sure you weren't better off without 'em.) That is surely a merry record.

It was always droll, the hysterical anger the YELLOW BOOK provoked in those village scolds, the newspapers. I remember reading with peculiar glee an article which used to be inserted periodically in the columns of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, before its reformation, in which you were compared at once to the Desert of Sahara and the *Family Herald* ; my eye, what a combination ! The real truth is that in spite of many faults (I'll speak of them again in a minute), in spite of many faults, the YELLOW BOOK has been from the commencement a very lively and entertaining sort of YELLOW BOOK indeed ; in literary and artistic interest, and in mechanical excellence, far and far and far-away superior to any

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other serial in England—though that, to be sure, you may object, isn't saying much. Consider, for an instant, your first number alone: the printing of it, the paper, the binding, the shape of its page, the proportion of text and margin; the absence of advertisements, so that we could approach its contents without being preoccupied by a consciousness of the merits of Eno's Fruit Salt and Beecham's Pills; and the pictures, and the care with which they were reproduced, and then—and then the Literature! There was Mr. Henry James, a great artist at his best, in *The Death of the Lion*; there was Mr. Max Beerbohm, with his delicious, his immortal *Defence of Cosmetics*, that unique masterpiece of affectation, preciousity, and subtle fooling; there were Mr. Hubert Crackanthorpe and Mr. Edmund Gosse, Professor Saintsbury and Mr. Richard Le Gallienne, Mr. William Watson and Dr. Garnett, Mr. George Moore and Mr. John Davidson; and there was Miss Ella D'Arcy, with her *Irremediable*, a short story which has since made a long reputation. *Wasn't* it a jolly company? I shall be grateful if any one will tell me of a single number of any other periodical one quarter so fresh, so varied, so diverting. I protest it was a thing that England ought to have been proud of. And yet, what happened? Oh, nothing which, taking one consideration with another, you might not have expected. All the newspapers of England, with two or three cool-headed exceptions, went into paroxysms of frenetic rage. The foolish old things pulled horrid faces, called naughty names, hissed, spluttered, shook their fists, and in short, did all that could be done, by mere mouthings and gesticulations, to frighten the tender infant to death in its cradle. The noise was deafening, the spectacle far from pretty, but the infant seemed to like it. He smiled, and crowed, and flourished, and—may live to be hanged yet.

Why were the newspapers so vexed, you wonder? Partly, I surmise,

surmise, because, like the wicked fairies in the fairy-tales, they hadn't been invited to the christening; partly because you, sir, had perhaps declined offers of "copy" from some of their enterprising young men; but chiefly, chiefly, because the YELLOW BOOK was new, and daring, and delightful, and seemed likely to please the intelligent remnant of the public, and to become a power in the land. The old story of envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. "For was there ever anything projected that savoured of newness or renewing, but the same endured many a storm of gainsaying or opposition." Fortunately, however, there was neither murder nor sudden death. The YELLOW BOOK smiled and flourished, and from season to season has continued to smile and flourish—till now, here am I, giving it a Reader's benediction on its third birthday.

At the same time, however, I must beg leave to accompany my benediction by a few words of wholesome counsel. Brilliant as your first number was, brilliant as on the whole all your numbers have been, each and every one of them, if the truth must be told, has contained more than a delicate modicum—yea, even an unconscionable deal—of rubbish. Why do you do it, sir? As a concession to the public taste? Bother the public taste! Because better stuff you can't procure? You could hardly procure worse stuff than some of the stuff I have in mind. I won't specify; 'twould be invidious to do so, and labour lost besides, for I know your habits of mangling people's proofs. But examine your own conscience and your tables of contents—*vous verrez!* Against certain evil editorial courses, sir, do let me warn you. Don't publish rubbish because it is signed by "a name;" and don't do so, either, because it is written by a friend, or a friend's friend, or a friend's young lady, or a friend's maiden aunt. Don't in a word permit yourself to be "got at." Cultivate your discoveries. Cultivate that admirable Baron Corvo,
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whose contributions to your seventh volume no pressman noticed and no reader skipped; those exquisitely humorous renderings of an Italian peasant's saint-lore, which read almost as if they had been taken down verbatim from an Italian peasant's lips. Cultivate Mrs. (or Miss?) Mary Howarth, whose Norwegian story *The Deacon* many of us thought the most notable thing in your Volume VIII. Cultivate Mr. Stanley Makower; and the "C.S." and the "O." whom you have cultivated too little of late—cultivate them. Cultivate Mr. Marriott Watson (despite his tendency to stand on tip-toe and grope for rare words in the upper ether); cultivate Mr. Kenneth Grahame; and if I do not say cultivate Mr. Henry Harland, it's because I rejoice to see that you've never shown the faintest disposition to neglect him. And drop, drop—ah, how I should like to tell you whom to drop; but you wouldn't print it.

One word more, and I'll have done. Don't make your volumes too thick. Your last ran to upwards of four hundred pages; it's too much; it discourages people; stop at three hundred, or at two hundred and fifty. And, if you want to be really kind, reduce your price. Five shillings a quarter for mere Literature is more than flesh and blood can bear. Reduce your price to three-and-sixpence or half-a-crown. Five shillings? Lord-a-mercy, sir, do you think we are made of money?

Your obedient servant,

THE YELLOW DWARF.

P. S.—And—abolish your "Art Department." What on earth can any one want with pictures in a Literary Magazine? Believe me, they only interrupt. It ain't the place for them. They don't hang sonnets and stories between the paintings at the Royal Academy.