

By JOHN CARTER

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FRIENDS PUT INTO FICTION ARE APT TO BECOME ENEMIES

H. G. Wells's Plan to Use Real People as Characters in a Novel Has Been Tried Before, Often With Disastrous Results to the Author



Left—
Eleanora
Duse, in
"La Citta
Morta."

Maurier avenged himself on James McNeill Whistler for one of the latter's spiteful witticisms.

Du Maurier explained the incident as follows: "Mr. Du Maurier and Mr. Wilde (Oscar) happening to meet in the rooms where Mr. Whistler was holding his first exhibition of Venice etchings, the latter brought the two face to face and, taking each by the arm, inquired: 'I say, which one of you two invented the other, eh?' The obvious retort to that, on my part, would have been that, if he did not take care, I would invent him, but he had slipped away before either of us could get a word out."

Accordingly, "Tribby" contained a burlesque of Whistler, under the

the offending passages deleted and Joe Sibley's name changed to Anthony. Whistler made the most of his petty triumph and, according to the late Joseph Pennell, dismissed the incident in these insolent and characteristic terms:

"Well, you know, what would have happened to the new Thackeray if I hadn't been willing? But I was gracious, and I gave my approval to the sudden appearance in the story of an Anthony, tall and stout and slightly bald. The dangerous resemblance was gone. And I wired—well, you know, ha! ha!—I wired to them over in America, 'Congratulations and complete approval of author's new and obscure friend, Bald Anthony!'"

While English literature was thus being emasculated of personalities, on the Continent, particularly in France, there was springing up an entirely new type of novel. This was known as the roman à clef—the Novel with a Key. These books were built around a personality, or an incident in the private lives of a personality, in the literary world, and those in the know were—well!—in the know, while those outside saw merely what was outside.

Some Capitalized Episodes

As the literary critic of the Paris Temps points out, George Sand and Alfred de Musset provide a notable instance of the possibilities of this cryptographic literature. The author and the poet went on a pagau honeymoon to Venice. There De Musset fell ill, he and George Sand had a quarrel, and the latter deserted him for the superior attractions of the Italian physician who was summoned to the bedside of the ailing lover. The literary possibilities of such a situation were too attractive to miss. Accordingly, George Sand celebrated the incident in her novel, "She and He." Alfred de Musset presented his side of the story in the "Confessions of a Child of the Century" and used the stuff all over again in his "New Poems." George Sand was used to that sort of thing, however, and put another of her lovers, the musician Chopin, into "Lucrezia Floriani" under the name of Prince Karol. Her own personality was so appealing that Balzac put her into several novels under the name of Camille des Touches.

The most notorious instance in this Key Novel in recent European literature is provided by Gabriele d'Annunzio's "Il Fuoco" ("Fire"). According to the legend, d'Annunzio decided that a love affair with Eleanora Duse, the great Italian tragedienne, would provide him with wonderful copy for a new novel. With this object in view, he is understood to have made love to Duse. After the "infatuation" was over, Duse learned that d'Annunzio was incorporating his affair in a new novel. She is said to have urged him to name a price to suppress publication and he is said to have

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Right—
Georges
Sand.

Courtesy
Kennedy
& Co.

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GENERALLY authors borrow heavily from the personality of their acquaintances, and many a bon mot, many a profound thought expressed over the dinner table, finds its way into next season's best seller. As a rule, however, authors are cautious in the matter of importing their friends wholesale. In the first place, it is one of those habits which make friendship so perishable. In the second place, it may lead to a libel suit. In the third place, it is distinctly lazy. The dividing line between life and literature is lightly drawn, to be sure, but it exists, and any attempt to move objects across the invisible frontier is keenly resented by every one concerned.

Recent advices from London indicate that H. G. Wells contemplates a bigger and better novel, entitled "The World or William Clissold," a startling feature of which is the inclusion of living people under their true names, among them Dr. Jung, George Bernard Shaw and John Maynard Keynes. Wells's apology for this innovation maintains that, "You cannot have a man like William Clissold going about the world of today and never meeting anybody one has ever heard of." Nevertheless, Mr. Keynes and Mr. Shaw would seem to have some rights in the matter, and unless Mr. Wells is exceedingly careful in his treatment of the indefatigable statistician and the bristly Hibernian playwright he may hear from their respective solicitors.

In putting his friends into his book Wells is returning to an earlier attempt along the same line. In his first period of novel-writing Wells drew heavily upon his friends for material, satirizing the Labor economists, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, in "The New Machiavelli." And the appearance of "Boon" in 1915 contained a certain parody of Henry James which both bewildered and offended that artificer of labyrinthian prose. James wrote a letter of mild protest, which drew from Wells the apologetic statement that "Boon" was "just a waste-paper basket. . . . But since it was printed I have regretted a hundred times that I did not express our profound and incurable difference and contrast with a better grace."

James's reply, dated July 10, 1915, remarked acidly: "I am bound to tell you that I don't think your letter makes out any sort of case for the

bad manners of 'Boon,' as far as your indulgence in them at the expense of your poor old H. J. is concerned. . . . Your comparison of the book to a waste-basket strikes me as the reverse of felicitous, for what one throws into that receptacle is exactly what one doesn't commit to publicity and make the affirmation of one's estimate of one's contemporaries by." Wells's answer to this gentle broadside has never been made public.

The ethics of such procedure have never been rightly determined. For there are two ways of handling acquaintances. In one instance you can attack them; in another you can give them a puff. In the good virtue days of Tobias Smollett the attack was more the fashion than the puff. As Chesterton observed of eighteenth century censorship and nineteenth century license, under the restrictions of the eighteenth century, you could write, "The Prince of Wales is a profligate and a liar," while under the freedom of the nineteenth century you could write, "The Prince of Wales is a model family man."

Smollett's Old Grudges

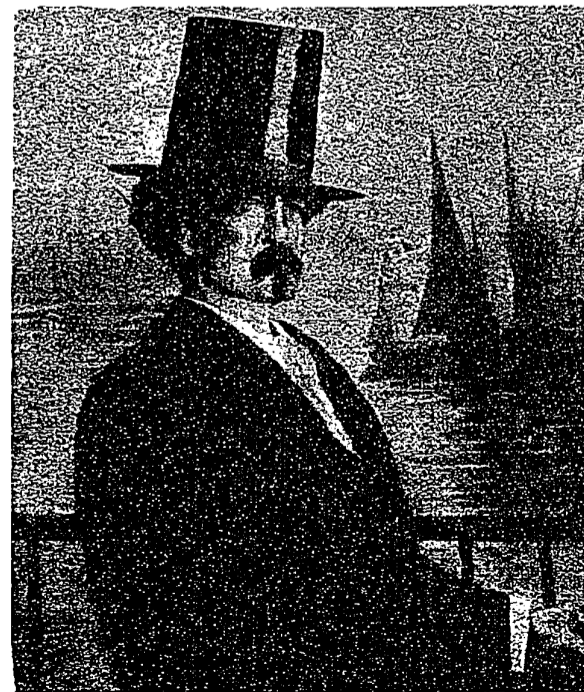
Smollett was a vigorous pamphleteer, and carried his literary animosities over into his novels. For example, in "Peregrine Pickle" he lampooned Henry Fielding for his marriage to his cook, satirized Aken-side, the scholar; referred to Garrick as "a parasite and buffoon," called Lyttelton "a dunce," attacked Newcastle, Bute and Pitt and mocked the King and the "sweet Princes of the royal blood." In "The Regicide" he continued his attack with a vigorous arraignment of theatrical managers in general and Garrick and Lord Chesterfield in particular.

As the eighteenth century yielded to the gentility of Victorianism a change came over the spirit of the dream, and the puff became predominant. Disraeli's "Manfred" drew a romantic picture of Baron Rothschild in the character Sidonia. Thackeray tried to return to the attack by putting Hereford into "Vanity Fair" as the wicked Marquis Steyne, originally under his own name. However, the attack became outmoded. No longer was it safe to use the novel as a vehicle even for mild abuse, as Du Maurier was to learn to his cost in the case of "Tribby."

In the original version of "Tribby," published in Harper's in 1894, Du

name of Joe Sibley, with drawings which left no doubt of the painter's identity. A passage in the novel described Joe Sibley (or Whistler) as "the Idle Apprentice, the King of Bohemia, le roi des truands, to whom everything was forgiven, as to François Villon, à cause de ses gentillesses . . . always in debt . . . vain, witty, and a most exquisite and original artist . . . with an unimpeachable moral tone . . . also eccentric in his attire . . . the most irresistible friend in the world as long as his friendship lasted—but that was not forever . . . his enmity would take the simple and straightforward form of trying to punch his ex-friend's head; and, when the ex-friend was too big, he would get some new friend to help him. . . . His bark was worse than his bite . . . he was better with his tongue than his fists. . . . But, when he met another joker, he would collapse like a pricked bladder. He is now perched on such a topping pinnacle (of fame and notoriety combined) that people can stare at him from two hemispheres at once."

This sort of thing was all very well when Whistler said it, but he could not bear ridicule of any kind from another. He immediately protested to the editor of Harper's, who, in accord with the lavender and old-lace traditions of the age of William Dean Howells, promptly had



James McNeill Whistler, by Walter Greaves. Exhibited at the Arthur Ackermann Galleries, New York.

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named, and received, a substantial sum.

However, the artist got the better of the man of business in d'Annunzio and he published the novel after all. Whether the fable which preceded its appearance was mere press-agentry or not, certainly "Il Fuoco" gave a picture of a love affair with a woman who was clearly recognizable as Duse, and has remained a stain upon the literary career of d'Annunzio. However, "a poet's a man who kisses and then tells," so anything is forgiven to the darling of the Italian intelligentsia and the hero of the raid on Flume.

The recent rush of autobiographical novels in this country produced a picture of friendly impersonations. Nearly every one wrote a book and nearly every book contained a portrait gallery of the writer's collegiate acquaintances. Scott Fitzgerald's "This Side of Paradise," Stephen Vincent Bennet's "The Beginning of Wisdom" and Cyril Hume's "Wife of the Centaur" were densely populated by the friends of the authors.

Favored Device

Very few of recent American books have avoided this device. Woodward Boyd's "The Love Legend" contained a picture of Chicago after the war, with thumb-nail sketches of Ben Hecht, Max Bodenheim and other Mid-Western literati; Tom Beer's "Fair Rewards" included Huneker and Anna Held; Gertrude Atherton's "Black Oxen" gave rein to the journalistic trio of F. P. Adams, Don Marquis and Heywood Brown; Carl Van Vechten's "Peter Whiffle" was compact of personalities, while even Sinclair Lewis's "Arrowsmith" included an appreciative picture of Jacques Loeb, under the cognomen of Max Gottlieb.

But American usage seems to demand that any treatment of living persons shall reverse the principle, "De mortuis nil nisi bonum." Whenever an American writer finds a ready-made character, he butters it up and down and sprinkles it well with sugar before serving.

This is perhaps the only legitimate way in which an author can borrow from life, particularly in a day when every author is the friend of every other author and log-rolling has been raised to the dignity of a professional ethic. Many social and professional debts can be discharged by an adroit incorporation; it may even help one's book sell if it is known that living people are its protagonists. And then, again, the flattered recipient of this favor may, in his turn, write a novel in which he will in-

clude the original author, and so the latter's name may be kept before the public and all go well in the fiction factory.

The trouble with this friendly business in the matter of literature is that it is all right, but it doesn't work. In the long run "the spear that knows no brother" has a better chance of victory than the spear for publicity purpose only.

If you take a man out of your daily life and set him down in the middle of a prospective novel, you find yourself face to face with a very old dilemma. Shall you tell the truth or shall you be nice? If you tell the truth, you are sure to be offensive. If you present your victim in a shower of rose-water and praise, what have you done? Well, you have been a pander, for one thing. For another, you have probably been insincere. And if you are insincere, what right have you to call yourself an artist?

Let us assume, therefore, that you are one of those people who are sincere at all costs. You decide to tell the truth, even about your friends. You have said nothing that is exactly libelous, but you have given him a picture of his true character. That means that you are minus a friend.

Then there is the final artistic consideration. Is photography art? The answer (except from photographers) has hitherto been emphatically in the negative. If you pick a character up out of real life, it's rather too easy to be artistic. Who ever got an idea of a man's real appearance from his fingerprints and Bertillon measurements? The man whom you have described with meticulous care and elaborate detail will seem stilted, artificial and wooden when you behold him in your own pen-and-ink.

Mr. Wells's experiment with Shaw and Keynes is logical and proper enough if he is merely trying to give a picture of an age, but even he would shrink from the idea of using his acquaintances as *dramatis personae*. For after all, it is a gross impertinence to take advantage of what a man has consciously or unconsciously revealed to you of himself in the privacy of a home or the intimacy of a dinner-table. And that should be the final criterion in a matter of this sort. Good breeding has recently discarded many superfluous extraneousities, but it has never changed its substance. The essence of good breeding demand one should not take an unfair advantage, and it is ill-bred to conscript your friends as cannon-fodder for your battle with the publishers and public. Besides that, it is a lazy, ill-advised and in-artistic device which leads nowhere.