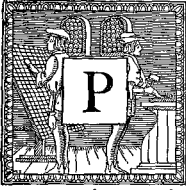


WANTED—A BLACK LIST BUREAU



PROBABLY no one but a magazine editor knows to what extent literary plagiarism is practised nowadays. While it is true that charges are frequently brought against even writers of note, it is equally true that many petty cases come to light and are known only to those intimately concerned. Such an accusation as that recently brought against so eminent an author as Mr. Thomas Hardy, which was fully discussed in these pages at the time, gives the reading world a new interest in the subject and causes much talk for a brief time.

But minor cases of plagiarism are so common, and so little—if, indeed, anything at all—is done to put a stop to them, that a suggestion as to how the matter may be successfully dealt with may accomplish some good purpose.

It is the general custom in every editorial office for the manuscript clerk to keep what is known as a "black list," whereon are recorded the names and addresses of those contributors who deliberately steal whatever happens to appeal to them as particularly salable. But these black lists are usually kept under lock and key and considered as sacred as the secrets of the confessional. In order, however, that many literary pirates may be brought to justice, it would doubtless be an advisable thing for the editors throughout the country to form what might be called a Black List Bureau—an institution that would prove of mutual benefit.

Each editor who joined this bureau would be expected to issue, immediately upon discovering a plagiarist, the complete history of that particular case and send it broadcast to his confrères, in exactly the same manner that the hotels protect themselves against dishonest patrons. As things now are, too little attention is paid to the numerous literary frauds that are practised. Editors, it is true, are busy men as a rule, but the time consumed in revealing a plagiarist's identity would be small compared to the amount of good that might be done. There is scarcely a

magazine which has not at some time been victimised by unscrupulous contributors, and so dangerous an element in the literary world should be sharply dealt with.

The initial step would be to find a locale for the bureau. Since the suggestion for its formation is made in these pages, perhaps the simplest and wisest plan would be to ask the editors of *THE BOOKMAN* to permit all lists of magazine plagiarists to go first through their hands, and by them be distributed to each member of the bureau. If this cannot for any reason be done, the writer will himself be happy to become the medium through whom the literary pirates are made known, and if sufficient encouragement is given to the scheme, more definite arrangements will be outlined and considered. What is needed, of course, is a central office, some one point from which the various names on the separate lists may be systematically sent to editors and publishers.

The Kipling incident of recent memory has set many a layman to laughing at the editorial policy that is said to be pursued in practically every magazine office of the country. It will be recalled that two men were discussing the possibility—or, rather, the impossibility—of a new writer having his work accepted by any periodical, one man claiming that it was absolutely absurd to believe that a good story, submitted to a magazine by a wholly unknown author, would stand any chance of acceptance. The conversation led to one of the participants copying, verbatim, one of Kipling's "most popular stories," changing only the title, the names of the characters, and the locale—which happened to be English, and which was made, with little difficulty, American. In no other way was the story mutilated; "not even a comma" was altered. In was then sent, in rotation, to about a dozen of the leading magazines, and was promptly rejected by every one of them. In the end, Kipling's original publishers are said to have purchased the manuscript, and I have no doubt they did. The persons who thus fooled every editor of importance in

the country wrote of their experience in a letter to the *New York Sun*, and numerous replies have been given space in that paper. The fact of the matter is that the incident proves nothing at all, except that two grown men made it evident that they had very little to do.

In the first place, no editor, I think, will deny that a story by Mr. Kipling might be very unsuitable to his purposes, even with the distinguished author's name signed on the manuscript. And I am not sure but that the names of any of Mr. Kipling's characters and the setting he might give a story would prove most important factors in the *tout ensemble* of the tale—far more important than "the changing of a comma." I believe that the name "Mulvaney" had no little to do with the success of the Mulvaney stories. Suppose Kipling had called his hero Martin! One might as well think of David Copperfield as David Carter, or of Becky Sharp as Mary Everett! It takes genius to invent even the names of the characters which live in literature.

And, too, it is highly probable that the story was recognised by some of the readers into whose hands it fell, but not definitely identified, not absolutely placed in their minds. An editor not long ago had a poem sent to him which he felt confident was one of the "Sonnets from the Portuguese," but he could not be certain. He happened to have no copy of Mrs. Browning's book at hand, and he was too occupied with other things to look it up. The poem therefore went back, and I suppose the woman who submitted it has been laughing ever since at the editor's ignorance. It is such cases as this, however, which should be followed up, if the Black List Bureau, above suggested, is to be of real service.

It would be folly to say that no editor should allow himself to be victimised by plagiarists. It is beyond reason to presume that a busy man can read from cover to cover the contemporary magazines, or read with any degree of intelligence one-tenth of the current fiction that is produced. The omnivorous magazine readers are not the magazine editors. Indeed, I venture to think that the man who is responsible for the make-up of any one of the modern periodicals is the last per-

son who reads another. He does, as a matter of business, glance through the contents of his contemporaries; but beyond such a cursory examination he is unfamiliar with what they contain.

Many people will recall a daring piece of plagiarism which was widely talked about in the newspapers several years ago. A story of Margaret Sutton Briscoe's which had originally appeared in *Harper's* only a year before, was copied almost verbatim by a woman who sent it to *Munsey's*, where it met with ready acceptance. A large percentage of the public was amazed that the editor of *Munsey's* could have been so lax in his reading as to have missed seeing the tale in *Harper's*! His failure to read Mrs. Briscoe's story did cause him some embarrassment; but to have charged him with negligence seemed too absurd for discussion.

It is only when plagiarists are unwise enough to filch poems so well known as to be almost committed to memory by every schoolboy, that the average editor feels reasonably safe. An alleged original contribution was recently sent to a magazine. It was a portion of Thomas Hood's famous "Faithless Sally Brown," containing the lines:

They went and told the sexton, and
The sexton tolled the bell.

This is only matched by the young fool who attempted to pass off Lovelace's

Yet this inconstancy is such
As you, too, should adore;

I could not love thee, dear, so much,
Loved I not honour more,

as his own; and when rebuked by the editor, to whom he had submitted the verses, he explained the situation by saying that the poem had been given to him by a "friend" in payment of a debt!

A well-known weekly lately published a short story, in the course of which occurred a lengthy passage which had been taken bodily from Ouida's *Moths*, and a youth in Kansas City once attempted to palm off Lowell's "What is so rare as a day in June" upon an editor who fortunately knew more than he did.

One editor in New York who himself writes verse when he finds the time felt

highly complimented not long ago when a contributor left with him several poems, among which he recognised two of his own that had been published anonymously ten years previously. He was inclined to forgive this particular offender, who showed such discrimination in selecting his wares.

Translations from the French and German are frequently offered to the magazines without the customary note that the manuscript is not original; but this is not always done with an intention to deceive.

A particularly interesting case of plagiarism once came to my notice. A manuscript entitled "At the Health Resort" was submitted to a New York editor, presumably by a man. The story was accepted and a cheque sent in payment, but at the last moment the editor decided to change the title to "Never Say No!"—a phrase which occurred many times in the dialogue. After the story appeared it was discovered that it had been printed in an English periodical about two years before under that very title. The plagiarist, who, it developed, was a woman, had, of course, altered the title in order to escape detection, and the change back to the original seemed a curious working of fate. It was learned through an endorsement on the cheque that she was employed in a publishing house in some clerical capacity, and when confronted with the evidence of her guilt and asked to return the money, she left town. Only the day before she had handed to the editorial department of the firm for whom she worked the manuscript of a poem which it was found had been written by Thomas Bailey Aldrich.

Sometimes an editor is amazed to receive a manuscript from one of his regular contributors which bears so close a resemblance to another story he has either chanced to read or has published in his own magazine that it fairly takes his breath away; but many cases of unconscious plagiarism occur. A writer of short stories who is well known throughout the country, and whom we will call Miss K., sent a manuscript not long since

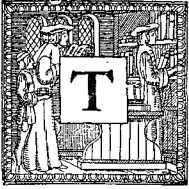
to a magazine that had once published a story with the identical plot. Save in the opening passages, the stories were exactly the same in treatment, but the editor felt confident of his contributor's lack of intentional wrong, since it was in his periodical that the original tale had appeared. It would hardly have been wise for Miss K. to send a stolen story of Mr. M.'s to the editor of the L. magazine, when the L. magazine was known to print all of Mr. M.'s work. So attention was called to the similarity in the two manuscripts, and Miss K. replied by saying that she did remember reading Mr. M.'s story, but only in the most hurried way, and she had completely forgotten it until the editor had sent her a copy of the number of his magazine containing it. The situation on which the whole plot depended was such an unusual one that it must have remained in her memory in some sub-conscious way, and long afterward she grew to feel that it was her own idea, and unhesitatingly embodied it in a story of her own. She was much humiliated, and, of course, withdrew the manuscript from the open market.

There is danger, too, of writers using the same material as a working basis in these days when so many authors find their chief plots in newspaper clippings. It is very evident that a writer in San Francisco and one in New York might seize upon the dramatic possibilities of a story from real life as reported in a daily paper, and around them weave practically the same story. Jack London and the late Frank Norris did this once upon a time, and later it was discovered that a totally unknown author from a remote part of the country had taken the same idea from a Chicago daily—the original source of all three stories; yet each writer was totally ignorant of the existence of the other tales until his attention was drawn to it.

It is the intentional magazine plagiarist who should be uncovered and brought to an account, and if a Black List Bureau could be seriously organised, a great deal of good might result.

Charles Hanson Towne.

THE FETICH OF THE HAPPY ENDING



THE writer of these lines belongs to a class which feels itself peculiarly called of Heaven to be councillor to magazine editors. For when the fates are kind she is a contributor to their publications. Yet for many years she has subdued her natural inclination to advise concerning editorial policies. "Still has she borne it with a patient shrug" when she has seen her own and other people's ideas parodied by illustrators. The unending mystery of certain acceptances has gone unchallenged by her, and she has silently bowed her head to the inexplicable decree of her own rejections. Once these rejections admitted no argument; the impersonal courtesy of the printed slip is unanswerable. Even the especially dictated note of regret that a contribution is "unavailable for our present needs" is final.

But lately the kind editor has sometimes unbent to explain as well as to regret, and the writer is constrained to believe that the reason she is not oftener one of the bright throng of the accepted is because she has periods of seeing the world as a somewhat grim place of toil and pain, in which men and women are born to sorrow as the sparks fly upward. To the popular magazine editor this view, so far from appealing to his orthodoxy, is anathema maranatha, if one may judge from his notes of rejection. (It is, by the way, worthy of consideration that all editors, if they commit themselves to any opinions at all, express a much warmer admiration for the work which something obliges them to reject than for that which the necessity of filling a certain number of magazine pages compels them to buy.)

"My dear Miss So-and-So," writes one, "we are trying to print a cheerful magazine!" "Your story is conceived with so much sincerity and written with so much delicacy and grace," says another as he self-sacrificingly surrenders what must have been a great opportunity, "that we regret exceedingly to decline it. But the sombre note makes it impossible for us to use it." Another writes: "It is

against our policy to print anything of a tragic nature unless there is a distinct note of uplift in the dénouement." (The language as well as the lofty thought are the editor's.) Another, after putting his publication on record as opposed to the grim in fiction, throws out a straw of hope as the waters of rejection threaten utterly to submerge the literary swimmer. "If you have anything cheerful on hand," he says, "we should like to see it for our October number." And so on and so on.

Now, the writer of these lines knows as well as the editors who reject or who accept her work know that she is not dowered with the "divine, dread gift of genius." She is merely a fairly diligent labourer who is obliged to work and who likes to observe the world and to weave tales based on her observations. As long as her efforts are rejected on the perfectly comprehensible grounds of lack of merit and interest there is nothing for her to do but to struggle for improvement. But when she is able to sell badly constructed, flimsy stories, as long as the varnish of cheerfulness is thick upon them, and cannot publish her better, more mature, more discerning work when it lacks that varnish (it is the popular editor's explanation, not her own, remember!), has she not some reason for breaking the proper, deferential silence of the mere writer and for making, not a protest, but an inquiry?

When ten editors of ten popular magazines tell you that they want happy endings, it does not mean that they are ten altruists, dedicated to the sacred cause of carrying light into gloomy places. It means that they are ten business men who think they can sell more copies of their magazines if marriage bells ring noisily, closed doors are unbarred, buried treasure unearthed, at the end of every tale, than if the wedding invitations are withdrawn, the doors irrevocably locked and the buried treasure discovered to be worthless.

Are they right? Have the great comedies or even the pleasant tales told by geniuses outlived the tragedies, outweighed them in the general regard? Is Lear or Falstaff a more popular figure?