

"TWICE-TOLD TALES" OF THE MAGAZINES

BY GEORGE JEAN NATHAN



WHEN Charles Hanson Towne, the writer of verse, was editing *The Delineator* several years ago, he received through the mails one morning early in December a contribution in the shape of three lyrical stanzas. The manuscript carried with it the name of its sender, who said she was also the author, together with the latter's address, the price she wished for the poem and a brief note that mentioned the facts that she had spent considerable time on the effort, was duly proud of it and trusted the editor might view it with a proportionate degree of ecstatic admiration and financial approbation. The reader may imagine the editor's subsequent astonishment when, upon looking over the verses, he discovered that they were precisely the same as some he himself had written two years before and published under his name in another magazine. Calling his stenographer, the editor dictated the following letter to the woman:

I beg to acknowledge receipt of your verses entitled ——— and to inform you that I have found them admirable. I cannot praise them highly enough. Indeed, I liked them so well that I wrote them myself two years ago.

The letter was brought to a conclusion with a statement of the plain facts in the case and an explanation was requested. But to this day the contributor in question has maintained an abysmal silence. In this regard, however, she is unlike most of her brothers and sisters who, from time to time, send to the magazines, as original compositions, plagiarisms of one kind or another, succeed in having such contributions printed through a slip in the busy, crowded editorial rooms, and subsequently, upon disclosure, seek to defend themselves against the charge of the twice-told tale. The ingenuity and amazing bravado of some of the excuses offered by these persons shall form the

basis of the present article. Obviously, the present writer cannot say what proportion of truth is contained in the excuses, nor would he care to, indeed, if he could. For a simple, though probably violent opinion on the subject, he refers the reader to the nearest magazine editor.

About two months ago, one of the "popular fiction" magazines published in New York learned from a deluge of letters that poured into its offices several days after the date of publication that among its contents was a seemingly deliberate plagiarism of one of O. Henry's "modern Bagdad" stories. The scene had been transferred from Madison Square to the Thames Embankment and the names of the characters had been changed, to be sure, but there was the rest of the story almost exactly as Sidney Porter had written it! It had so happened that neither the editor nor the chief "reader" of the magazine had ever read the O. Henry tale, and consequently had not detected the similarity. Every one who understands the extremely large number of fiction manuscripts that arrive in a magazine office and every one who understands at the same time the limitations of human machinery in the matter of constant reading action will, in turn, be able to understand that such lapses may readily transpire. The editor, upon discovering the deception, demanded an explanation from the writer of the twice-penned tale. The man lived in Seattle, Washington. His reply to the editor follows:

I am insulted at the insinuations you have made in your letter regarding my story. You say it is exactly like a story of O. Henry's and I say in reply I have never heard of O. Henry or ever read any of his stuff. Similarity is often nothing more than a coincidence. There is a man in Seattle who is dead ringer for President Taft! Could you call him a plagiarist? And I am a dead ringer and often have been mistaken for "Gypsy Mike," a notorious

character hereabouts! Am I, therefore, a plagiarist? I do not think so. You'll have to blame Nature!

The editor of one of the foremost weekly publications received a letter several months ago from a reader, in which the latter pointed out a poem in a recent issue and at the same time pointed out the fact that it was a direct transcript of a poem by a well-known writer of verse that had been printed elsewhere two years previous. Investigation showed that the person was correct, and a letter was despatched post haste to the man who had submitted the accused contribution. His reply possessed several appealing qualities. In it he stated that he was a married man and that he lived with his wife and ten-year-old son in a small town in Southern California. "From time to time in my earlier years," he went on to say, "I wrote verse. I had hundreds of these poems in my possession when I married, and a couple of years ago I read some of them to my wife. She liked them so much that she obtained my permission to submit them to some of the magazines. Several were actually accepted. In the meantime, my little boy was (and he still is) practising the Spencerian style of penmanship. Every evening my wife goes over his lessons with him and, for practice exercise, makes him copy a paragraph out of a book, or something of the sort. In this way it must have come about that the poem in question was copied by my son and subsequently and accidentally found its way into my manuscript drawer. The rest you may appreciate. My wife accidentally took it out with the other manuscripts, believed it was one of the many original poems, had it typewritten and carelessly sent it to you as a contribution."

The present writer three years ago published an article entitled "Nothing Succeeds Like Failure" in one of the metropolitan journals. The article dealt with the very large amount of financial gain that was derived from theatrical productions that had failed and that were presented again to the world in various transmigratory forms. Nine months later, the same article—the same word for word with the exception of the title

and the brief introductory paragraph—appeared under another writer's name in a Western magazine. The editor's attention was called to the pilfering, and he in turn called the contributor to account. The reply of the latter was simple and undeniably to the point. He said that he had never seen the original article! And yet, such are the queer tricks old Dame Coincidence plays, the two articles were identical save for about seventy-five out of three thousand words.

Four years ago, the editor of one of the best known of the fiction magazines discovered on the day after issue that his publication contained a short story that was precisely similar, title and all, to a story that had been printed in the same magazine about five years before. He looked up the records and found that the tale had been more recently submitted by a woman in Virginia. In reply to his letter requesting an explanation, the woman forwarded the following note:

The joke is on you. Several months ago, at a meeting of our afternoon literary circle, it was said that a New York magazine editor could not be fooled with a manuscript that he had already used in his magazine. I took the opposite view and wagered I *could* fool an editor. You, dear sir, are the answer!

This may strike the reader as an exaggerated case, which forsooth it is; but it is none the less a true one. An illustration of similar calibre, although possessed of a different motive, is to be had in the instance of a magazine which, seven years ago, printed a long poem that it had published three years previously. The poem, in the second case, had been accepted from a man in Pennsylvania. When accused, the latter made reply that his poem was original, that he had written and submitted it years before without avail to several publications in New York, had upon receiving it back with the last "editor regrets" slip placed it in his desk and had submitted to the magazine in direct point after a respectable lapse of time. "Undoubtedly some scoundrel connected with one of the other magazines to which I had sent my excellent poem learned it by heart and repeated it casually to a friend, who, believing it to be original with the fellow

who had recited it, copied it and submitted it to you as a poem original with him. The world is full of such rascals!" The editor looked up the office records again to make certain of his ground and replied to the correspondent in this fashion:

The poem we printed first was the work of _____, who, as you will recognise at once, is one of the three best known writers of verse in this country. Will you, therefore, permit me to plagiarise a bit in turn? I, however, will be honest and tell you I am borrowing from your recent letter. My plagiarism, specifically and beautifully relevant, is: *Undoubtedly some scoundrel . . . copied it and submitted it . . . as a poem original with him. The world is full of such rascals!*

One of the most curious of the recorded cases of twice-told magazine tales is credited to a fiction magazine that suspended publication about five years ago. This magazine, a week after the issue of its August number, received a letter from a subscriber who pointed out to the editor that one of the fiction stories bore a remarkably close relationship to a story that had been published in England several years before. The editor looked up the two stories and saw that the subscriber was correct in his statement and that the only slight difference in the two stories was the use, in the second tale, of a silver candlestick in place of a small statue that figured largely in the evolution of the narrative. A letter was sent to the man who had been paid for the presumably purloined second story and a letter was received from him two days later by the editor. His explanation was startling. "I am a somnambulist. I have been a somnambulist since childhood. I cannot, it appears, be cured. While walking in my sleep I have been charged with doing many curious things. Now comes your accusation, seemingly well-founded and entirely just. This is the most curious of all. Did I copy that story in my sleep and did the candle I carried in my midnight wandering insinuate itself through my subconscious mind into the copied story in place of the statuette? Who can tell definitely? It would seem so. Do not censure me. Forgive and pity a man cursed with a

habit such as I. Forgive and forget!" This letter is quoted not word for word from the original, but in the form in which it was repeated to the present writer by one of the editors who received and read it.

About two months ago, one of the widely read magazines published in New York printed a short story that bore a very close analogy to a story by one of the most famous of present day writers. Although most of the names of the characters had been altered, the re-writer of the story had had the temerity even to use one of the original names. When charged delicately with having been too greatly influenced by the writer of the first story, the author of the tale in its second version bravely replied to the editor that, strangely enough, it did seem as if she had been too greatly influenced by the said writer; that, indeed, after she had read over her manuscript before submitting it to the magazine she had detected the unmistakable similarity and had been a wee bit doubtful as to whether or not she ought to send it in as an original piece of work; and that, finally, she had settled in her own mind that "it was just a peculiar coincidence." The editor, by his own confession, did not have the courage left to reply to this gorgeous document.

A case that several editors consider to be worthy of a high place in a chronicle of this specific character happened three years ago, the magazine directly concerned being of the fiction-special article class. This publication received through the mails a short story from a hitherto unknown writer in a middle-western State. The tale was read, deemed worthy of print, was accepted and a cheque in payment forwarded to its creator. Four months later the story was published in the magazine. Picture the surprise that awaited the editor when, on the day that his magazine appeared on the stands, another magazine issued at the same time from another publishing centre revealed the identical story, signed, however, with a different name. In answer to the demanded explanation, the writer of the story that appeared in the first magazine calmly replied that he was the author of both

manuscripts, that the idea of the story and its method of execution had been entirely original with him and that he had liked his product so well that he had submitted it under three different names to three magazines at the same time. One of these had rejected the story, but two, he was proud to say, had exercised better judgment. His justification for submitting the story and subsequently selling it to two magazines he announced as follows:

A woman buys the exclusive model for a hat from a milliner, pays a large price for it and the next day sees one just like hers on some shopgirl. A man buys an exclusive pattern from his tailor, has the suit made up and the next day sees the same thing (made up, of course, three times as cheaply) on the first barkeeper whom he encounters. The exclusive model and pattern carry celebrated French and English fashion-arbiters' names. The cheaper imitations carry imitations of these names. Forget the silly, snobbish ethics of trade and recall the propitious results! The shopgirl and the barkeeper are thus made able to feel "up to" the lady and gentleman and are given great satisfaction for little money. Now, my story! Do I not please twice as many people by publishing it simultaneously in two magazines? Like the imitation model and pattern, my second sale brought me only one-third

the sum of money that was paid me by the first magazine. Leaving editorial feelings on the question aside, I will refund the cheques to either or both magazines if any subscribers of each or both complain that they did not like my story. I am a fair dealer, but I believe in giving the public a chance!

The direct result of the increasing advent of twice-told tales in recent years has been the introduction into some quarters of the magazine editorial circle of the so-called "literary reference" slip. The "literary reference" is sent by the editor to unknown writers before their products are accepted for publication. The strange writer is requested therein to name any publications in which his previous work may have appeared, to specify several reputable persons who may vouch for him and to announce to the editor in a similarly catalogued manner his standing in the literary community. The forms of these "references" vary widely. In some instances, merely a brief letter requesting information is sent to the writer whose product has been read and deemed suitable for the purposes of the magazine. The "reference" movement has been born; it is still in swaddling clothes; but it seems to be growing quickly—and it seems to be here to stay.

MUSIC AND POLITICS

BY LEWIS M. ISAACS



PERFORMANCE of Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta *The Mikado* was stopped in London recently under orders from the British Foreign Office; which feared that it might give offence to Japanese officials then in Great Britain, with whom negotiations were pending for a treaty between the two countries. The ridicule which met this action quickly resulted in a withdrawal of the prohibition; and the episode became, in diplomatic parlance, "a closed incident." Nevertheless, it is a humorous illustra-

tion of the interplay of music and politics which forms an entertaining chapter in the biography of humanity. The conjunction is less of a *mésalliance* than might at first appear. The artist laying his emphasis on the ideal and the politician with his stress on the practical frequently touch hands. The emotional appeal, persuasive both in music and in politics, may account for the association and suggests an explanation of the apparent anomaly of the composite artist-politician such as Jean Baptiste Lully or Richard Wagner.

Patriotic songs have played their part in the building up of nations from the