

# A Confidential Postscript

By Brander Matthews

It was pithily said by one of old that a bore is a man who insists upon talking about himself when you want to talk about yourself.

There is some truth in the saying, no doubt; but surely it should not apply to the relation of an author to his readers. So long, at least, as they are holding his book in their hands, it is a fair inference that they do not wish to talk about themselves just that moment; indeed, it is not a violent hypothesis to suggest that perhaps they are then willing enough to have him talk about himself. For the egotistic garrulity of the author there is, in fact, no more fit occasion than in the final pages of his book. At that stage of the game he may fairly enough count on the good humor of his readers, since those who might be dissatisfied with him would all have yielded to discouragement long before the postscript was reached.

The customary preface is not so pleasant a place for a confidential chat as the unconventional postscript. The real value and the true purpose of the preface is to serve as a telephone for the writer of the book and to bear his message to the professional book-reviewers. On the other hand, only truly devoted readers will track the author to his lair in a distant postscript. While it might be presumptuous for him to talk about himself before the unknown and anonymous book-reviewers, he cannot but be rejoiced at the chance of a gossip with his old friends, the gentle readers.

Perhaps the present author cannot drop into conversation more easily than by here venturing upon the expression of a purely personal feeling—his own enjoyment in the weaving of the unsubstantial webs of improbable adventure that fill the preceding pages. With an ironic satisfaction was it that a writer who is not unaccustomed to be called a mere realist here attempted fantasy, even though the results of his effort may reveal invention only and not imagination. It may even be that it was memory (mother of the muses) rather than invention (daughter of necessity) which inspired the 'Primer of Imaginary Geography.' I have an uneasy wonder whether I should ever have gone on this voyage of discovery with Mynheer Vanderdecken, past the Bohemia which is a desert country by the sea, if I had not in my youth been allowed to visit 'A Virtuoso's Collection'; and yet, to the best of my recollection, it was no recalling of Hawthorne's tale, but a casual glance at the *Carte du Pays de Tendre* in a volume of Molière, which first set me upon collecting the material for an imaginary geography.

In the second of these little fantasies the midnight wanderer saw certain combats famous in all literature and certain dances. Where it was possible use was made of the actual words of the great authors who had described these combats and these dances, the descriptions being condensed sometimes and sometimes their rhythm being a little modified so that they should not be out of keeping with the more pedestrian prose by which they were accompanied. Thus, as it happens, the dances of little Pearl and of Topsy could be set forth, fortunately, almost in the very phrases of Hawthorne and of Mrs. Stowe, while I was forced to describe as best I could myself the gyrations of the wife who lived in 'A Doll's House' and of her remote predecessor as a "new woman," the daughter of Herodias. The same method was followed in the writing of the third of these tales, although the authors then drawn upon were most of them less well known; and the only quotation of any length was the one from Irving describing the mysterious deeds of the headless horseman.

Now it chanced that the 'Dream-Gown of the Japanese Ambassador,' instead of appearing complete in one number of a magazine, as the two earlier tales had done, was published in various daily newspapers in three installments. In the first of these divisions the returned traveller fell asleep and saw himself in the crystal ball; in the second he went through the rest of his borrowed adventures; and in the third his friend awakened him and unravelled the mystery. When the second part appeared a clergyman who had read the 'Sketch-Book' (even though he had never heard of the 'Forty-Seven Ronins,' or the 'Shah-Nameh,' or the 'Custom of the Country') took his pen and sat down and wrote swiftly to a newspaper, declaring that this installment of my tale had been "cribbed bodily, and almost *verbatim et literatim*, in one-third of its entire length, from the familiar 'Legend of Sleepy Hollow.'" He asked sarcastically if the copyright notice printed at the head of my story was meant to apply also to the passages plagiarized from Irving. He declared also that "it is unfortunate for literary persons of the stamp of the author of 'Vignettes of Manhattan' that there still exist readers who do not forget what they have read that is worth remembering. Such readers are not to be imposed on by the most skilful bunglers (*sic*) who endeavor to pass off as their own the work of greater men."

The writer of this letter had given his address, Christ Church Rectory, — ,N. J. (I suppress the name of the village for the sake of his parishioners as I suppress the name of the man for the sake of his family). Therefore I wrote to him at once, telling him that if he had read the third and final instalment of my story with the same attention he had given to the second part he would understand why I was expecting to receive from him an apology for the letter he had sent to the newspaper. In time there reached me this inadequate and disingenuous response, hardly worthy to be called even an apology for an apology:

"In reply to your courteous communication, let me say that had I seen the close of your short story, I should have grasped the situation more fully, and should doubtless have refrained from giving it any special attention.

"When one considers, however, the manner in which your copy was published by the paper, deferring the explanation until the appearance of the third instalment, it must be acknowledged that there was opportunity for surprise and criticism. The fault should have been found with the way in which the article was published, rather than with the story itself, that appearing at its conclusion a self-confessed mosaic of quotations. Needless to add that its author's aim to amuse, entertain, and instruct has been manifestly subserved.

"Yours most sincerely,  
— —"

Of another tale ('Sixteen Years without a Birthday') I have nothing to say—except to record a friend's remark after he had finished it, that he had "read something very like it not long before in a newspaper;" so perhaps I may be permitted to declare that I had not read something very like it anywhere, but had, to the best of my belief, "made it all up out of my own head." Nor need I say anything about the 'Rival Ghosts'—except to note that it is here reprinted from an earlier collection of stories which has now for years been out of print.

The last tale of all, the 'Twinkling of an Eye,' received the second prize for the best detective story, offered by a newspaper syndicate—the first prize being taken by a story written by Miss Mary E. Wilkins and Mr. J. E. Chamberlain. The use of the camera as a detective agency had been suggested to me by a brief newspaper paragraph glanced at casually several years before. And I confess that it was with not a little amusement that I employed this device, since I had then recently seen my 'Vignettes of Manhattan' criticized as being "photographic in method." There

again I had no reason to doubt the originality of my plot; and here once more was my confidence shattered, and I was forced to confess that fiction can never hope to keep ahead of fact.

After the 'Twinkling of an Eye' was published in the newspapers which had joined in offering the prizes, it was printed again in one of the smaller magazines. There it was read by a gentleman connected with a hardware house in Grand Rapids, who wrote to me, informing me that the story I had laboriously pieced together had—in some of its details, at least—been anticipated by real life more than a year before I sat down to write out my narrative. This gentleman has now kindly given me permission to quote from his letter those passages which may be of interest to readers of the 'Twinkling of an Eye':

It appears that the cash-drawer of the hardware store, in which small change was habitually left over night for use in the morning before the banks open, was robbed three nights running, although only a few dollars were taken at a time. "The large vault, in which are kept the firm's papers, had not been tampered with, and the work was evidently that of some petty thief. The night-watchman was a trusted employee, and my father did not wish to accuse him unjustly. And, besides, he did not wish to warn the thief. So nothing was said to the watchman. The nights on which the till had been tapped were Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Father goes down to the store every Sunday morning for about half an hour to open the mail, and it was then that he discovered the Saturday night theft. Directly after Sunday dinner, father went down to see an electrical friend of his, who executed a plan which my father had devised. The cash-drawer was situated in one corner of the office (quite a large one), in which both the wholesale and retail business is transacted. He placed a large detective camera in the corner opposite the till, and beside it, and a little behind, a quantity of flash-light powder in a receptacle. This powder was connected by electric wires with the till in such a manner that when the drawer was opened the circuit would be completed and the powder ignited. Everything worked to perfection. The office is always left dark at night, so the shutter of the camera could be left open without spoiling the film. The camera was in place Sunday evening, but the thief stayed away. It was set again on Monday night, and that time we got him. A small wire was attached to a weight near the camera extending to the till. As the thief started to open the drawer the weight made a slight noise. He glanced in the direction of the noise, started, pulled the weight a little farther, and we had his picture. Detectives had already been working on the case, and the thief was identified and arrested on the strength of the portrait. When he was informed that we had his picture, he made a full confession. He said that when the flash-light went off he nearly fainted from fright."

After this experience I am tempted to give up all hope that I can ever invent anything which is not a fact, even before I make it up. I am now prepared, therefore, to discover that I did really have an interview with Count Cagliostro, and also that I was actually an unwilling witness at the wedding of the rival ghosts.