

Bertram
ROTA



Celebrating One Hundred Years

1923-2023

December

This month's reminiscences were to be entitled "Opprobrium" and to consist mostly of various misfortunes and clashes with other members of the trade and the ABA (Antiquarian Booksellers Association), but I was firmly told that this was not in the festive spirit, and so they will be published as an additional chapter in the printed version of the year's recollections.

So, in a more light-hearted vein, I am delighted to reproduce one of a series of short stories which my grandfather used to write for his customers at Christmas. *Shady Customers* was privately printed in 1937 (our copy is inscribed to L.A.G. Strong). Another story, *Anything Can Happen at Christmas*, 1963, in which my father would have had a hand, tells of a collector called Bill Fyle, whose friends called him "Biblio". He receives an unexpected, long sought after gift of a supplement to a seven-volume catalogue of a fictitious collection of manuscripts which turns out to be missing a section of eight pages. The last parcel he opens however from another friend turns out to contain the absent fragment. What Bill Fyle otherwise received for Christmas, from what I have been told of him, seems suspiciously like a wish-list my grandfather would have written for himself: "a box of cigars. Probably Partagas [but] Jamaican, thanks to Castro ... A dozen bottles of Burgundy ... Last year ... a delectable Romanée-Conti ... [but this year] Moulin-à-Vent; good enough, but not Romanée-Conti."

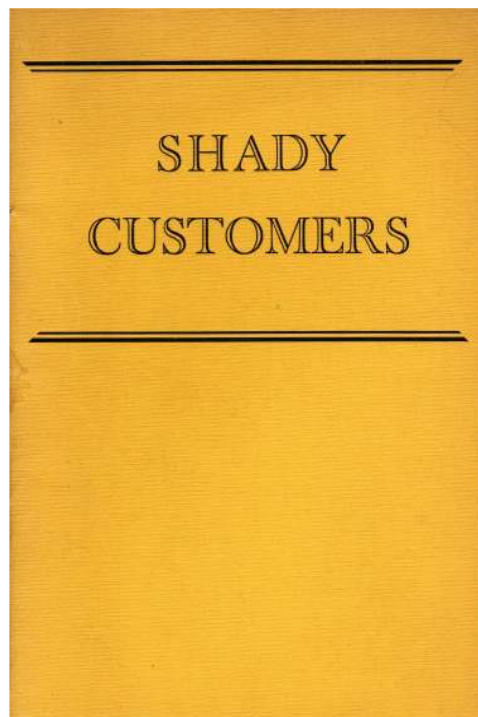
I had hoped also to reproduce a drawing by Dylan Thomas showing my grandfather handing out money for manuscripts at his offices but it is still in copyright.

Dorothea and I look forward to continuing the business founded one hundred years ago, fostered through both difficult and happy times, economic depressions and booms. We are not finished yet!

I thank everyone who has read these monthly reminiscences, especially those of you who have provided such warm and encouraging feedback.

With every best wish for the holidays and for a healthy, happy and prosperous new year.

Julian Rota



Shady Customers

being a report by Bertram Rota
of the proceedings at the annual
re-union of certain old friends
at Bodley House at midnight on
Christmas Eve, 1937

BODLEY HOUSE VIGO STREET LONDON W1



THE first stroke of midnight had barely sounded from the carillon in Old Bond Street when two figures turned from Regent Street into Vigo Street, as if hurrying to meet the still-echoing chime. In the dim light the peculiar nature of their dress might easily have passed unnoticed, though a shadowy female figure which stepped forward from a doorway as if to approach them paused and retreated again as the light of a street lamp disclosed for a moment the high collars and narrow trouser-legs fashionable forty years before.

On reaching the narrow end of the street, where once a row of white posts stood to prevent the passage of the hansom-cabs which brought them to this spot on their more affluent days, the two figures crossed to the lattice-windowed house whose wrought-iron railings and time-mellowed walls marked it out as a survival of a more leisured age. The taller man glanced up at the bronze plaque above the portico.

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"That's good," he said, "I was afraid old Bodley might have gone, though they saved the name."

"Yes," agreed the other, "but I always told Lane that *you* should have made him a sign, Aubrey."

"I made him a good many signs of one sort and another in those days," laughed Beardsley, as he reached for the latch.

Now at such an hour that door is always soundly locked, but the special dispensation which gives these Shades one hour of freedom after midnight each Christmas Eve provides too for all such small emergencies, and in no time the two were within and the lights were shining. Beardsley stood resting on his cane, his quick glance darting here and there, while Dowson sank on to the nearest chair.

"Well?" he asked.

"I was afraid," answered Aubrey, "after what has happened to Regent Street. . . . But it's all right, and infinitely better than that emptiness last year. Why, there is even the old table. Ernest, I believe I could draw again!"

"Never repeat your successes, my dear boy," a voice admonished,—a rich thick voice from behind them. Beardsley wheeled. "Oscar!" he cried, and Dowson sprang up to greet the newcomer. Together they relieved him of his cloak, gloves and cane, admired the orchid in his button-hole and brought him a chair.

"Repetition," declared Wilde, "is death. The secret of success is to be always doing something new, perfectly."

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"Your epigrams," observed Dowson with quiet venom, "are as perfect as usual."

"Usually perfect and perfectly usual," mused Beardsley. "There's an idea in that for a *Pall Mall* drawing."

Together the others reminded him that the only *Pall Mall* left was a street, and they fell to discussing the journals of their day and to admiring Aubrey's *Savoy* and *Yellow Book* posters which hung on the walls.

"The *Savoy*," Wilde observed, "died decently soon, but *The Yellow Book* lived into an inartistic decrepitude. It was never really representative anyway."

Beardsley hid a smile; obviously the fact that he had never been asked to contribute to Lane's yellow bombshell still rankled with Wilde.

A sound of footsteps and laughter interrupted them and through another door there bustled in a bluff thickset person who talked volubly over his shoulder to two companions.

"She's putting up enough money to keep the paper going for at least another six months," he told them. "Of course I shall be plagued with her at the office, but after all she's quite a figure of a woman—quite a figure. Hullo, Oscar: hullo, Aubrey. So you and Dowson got here first. Harland, Crackanthorpe and I couldn't resist walking round from the *Café Royal* by *Piccadilly*."

"*Piccadilly* without you, Harris," replied Wilde "is like champagne without ice. I am almost consoled for seeing it only this once each year."

"Bravo," cried Harris. "You keep your form

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wonderfully—and so do I. Well, what have we here this year?"

He led the group round the big room, examining closely the photographs which hung on the walls above the bookcases.

"Sturge Moore and 'Q,'" he said, "looking like a patriarch and a retired colonel. And Machen; dear old Machen. He began before us and he's still at it. No one knew better than he the hidden signs of the Kingdom. And see what's happened to Holbrook Jackson. He doesn't look half so terrifying now."

"There never was an ogre behind that moustache," replied Beardsley, "and after all he wrote the best book about us—even if he did some of you fellows more than justice."

"Speaking of justice," said Crackanthorpe, "here's poetic justice. Here's Wilde's *Poems* priced at nine guineas beside Dowson's *Pierrot of the Minute* at two pounds ten."

"Thirty-five shillings of which," interrupted Beardsley, "is for my drawings."

To hide his discomfiture Dowson turned again to the photographs.

"Arthur Morrison, of *Mean Street* and Willie Maugham, of Lambeth," he pointed out. "*Liza* and the Bishop's palace are Lambeth's only claim to fame."

"Here's W. W. Jacobs, too," said Harland, "and John Buchan, and Hardy, who always made me doubt a little if ours really was the only true approach to art."

"Dick Le Gallienne, appropriately enough, broods over us," remarked Dowson, pointing to

the familiar tousled head high up on the wall, "and G.B.S. seems still to be laughing at it all. The rest, I suppose are twentieth century, pure and simple."

"I see no reason," murmured Wilde, "why we should assume them to be either one or the other. There's not much simplicity in this face, which apparently belongs to someone called Claude Houghton, nor in James Hanley's over there."

"Walpole, Priestley, Coppard, Strong," read Dowson, completing the circle of the room. "I shall never believe that they are quite as we were."

Flattered by the thought, they all stood silent for a moment surveying their modern rivals, who, it must be admitted, looked no less satisfied with their predecessors' conclusion.

By this time the rooms were filled with other figures. No one saw them come, but suddenly, in a corner which had been vacant, there would be an eager group, arguing, expostulating or laughing. A smaller room with lattice windows opened off the main room, and from it came raised voices.

"My contract calls for quarterly statements of account," an angry voice declared. "The December quarter is here and I haven't had the March figures yet. *Why not?*" Thumps of a fist on a table emphasized the question.

"I didn't like to embarrass you by showing you a loss," came the suave reply, "but production was unexpectedly expensive. The white and gold covers you insisted on cost me a fortune, and

half the sheets were damaged by damp in the cellars. If you like I'll have the accounts made up and send you a bill for the deficit."

Sardonic laughter greeted this retort, but lowered voices and more amiable tones showed that peace was restored.

By a tall window which overlooked an old-world garden, ghostly in the moonlight, stood a monocoloured figure. A startling white lock of hair, curling upward from his brow, fascinated the eye.

"The gentle art," he was saying, "seems to be languishing. A bludgeon is now the favourite weapon of offence. I still prefer the rapier."

"You plied it nimbly," boomed Harris. "Which was the hatter's shop you were waiting in, bareheaded, while the shop-keeper went to his storeroom?"

He turned to the others. "While Whistler was alone there," he told them, "an irate customer rushed in and mistook him for the attendant. He raged that the hat which had been sent to him didn't fit him at all. I heard afterwards that Jimmie looked him up and down quietly and then said, 'No; I must admit that it doesn't fit you. But then neither do your boots, and I simply loathe the cut of your trousers!'"

The ensuing laughter was interrupted by a yell from Crackanthorpe, who had been prying in corners and had stumbled on a little antique cupboard filled with bottles.

"No absinthe, alas," he called, "but sherry enough; and, by the saints, our old blend of 1887."

There were cries of unbelief and a rush to his side, but it was true enough, and willing hands soon passed well-filled glasses all round.

"Come on, Aubrey," demanded Frank Harris. "The toast is yours."

Beardsley raised his glass. "To the Shade of Bodley," he said, "and to all that went on and goes on under his sign."

"Bodley!" everyone echoed; and they drank.

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From the far side of Vigo Street a patrolling policeman caught a glimpse of light from Bodley House. It struck him as unusual enough at this hour to warrant examination, and he turned to cross the road. As he did so a clock chimed once. Instinctively the policeman reached for his watch. It was correct to a minute, but when he looked up the light from the latticed windows had gone. He shone his lamp and peered in. Dimly he could see rows of books, packed tight along the shelves. Nothing seemed amiss. He tried the curious old latch on the door. Locked. A trick of reflected light, he supposed, wandering on, though he could have sworn someone was there. But no one was. Only, amongst the whirr of passing taxis in Regent Street, there was a faint clitter-clatter, as of the hoofs of horses drawing the hansom-cabs of bygone days.

