

Du Maurier George

English Society



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Содержание

GEORGE DU MAURIER	5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	7

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GEORGE DU MAURIER

I was thinking, with a pang, just before I put my pen to the paper, that the death of George du Maurier must be a fact of stale interest to the reader already, and that it would be staler yet by the time my words reached him. So swiftly does the revolving world carry our sorrow into the sun, our mirth into the shade, that it is as if the speed of the planet had caught something of the impatience of age, and it were hurried round upon its axis with the quickened pulses of senility. But perhaps this is a delusion of ours who dwell in the vicissitude of events, and there are still spots on the earth's whirling surface, lurking-places of quiet, where it seems not to move, and there is time to remember and to regret; where it is no astonishing thing that a king should be a whole month dead, and yet not forgotten. At any rate, it is in the hope, if not quite the faith, of this that I venture some belated lines concerning a man whom we have lost just when he seemed beginning to reveal himself.

I

It was my good fortune to have the courage to write to Du Maurier when *Trilby* was only half printed, and to tell him how much I liked the gay, sad story. In every way it was well that I did not wait for the end, for the last third of it seemed to me so altogether forced in its conclusions that I could not have offered my praises with a whole heart, nor he accepted them with any, if the disgust with its preposterous popularity, which he so frankly, so humorously expressed, had then begun in him. But the liking which its readers felt had not yet become loathsome to the author, and he wrote me back a charming note, promising me the mystery, and enough of it, which I had hoped for, because of my pleasure in the true-dreaming in *Peter Ibbetson*; and speaking briefly, most modestly and fitly, of his commencing novelist at sixty, and his relative misgivings and surprises.

It was indeed one of the most extraordinary things in the history of literature, and without a parallel, at least to my ignorance. He might have commenced and failed; that would have been infinitely less amazing than his most amazing success; but it was very amazing that he should have commenced at all. It is useless to say that he had commenced long before, and in the literary property of his work he had always been an author. This theory will not justify itself to any critical judgment; one might as well say, if some great novelist distinguished for his sense of color took to painting, that he had always been an artist. The wonder of Du Maurier's essay, the astounding spectacle of his success, cannot be diminished by any such explanation of it. He commenced novelist in *Peter Ibbetson*, and so far as literature was concerned he succeeded in even greater fulness than he has succeeded since. He had perfect reason to be surprised; he had attempted an experiment, and he had performed a miracle.

As for the nature, or the quality, of his miracle, that is another question. I myself think that in all essentials it was fine. The result was not less gold because there was some dross of the transmuted metals hanging about the precious ingot, and the evidences of the process were present, though the secret was as occult as ever. He won the heart, he kindled the fancy, he bewitched the reason; and no one can say just how he did it. His literary attitude was not altogether new; he perfected an attitude recognizable first in Fielding, next in Sterne, then in Heine, afterwards in Thackeray: the attitude which I once called confidential, and shook three realms beyond seas, and their colonial dependencies here, with the word. It is an attitude which I find swaggering in Fielding, insincere in Sterne, mocking in Heine, and inartistic in Thackeray; but Du Maurier made it lovable. His whole

story was a confidence; whatever illusion there was resided in that fact; you had to grant it in the beginning, and he made you grant it gladly. A trick? Yes; but none of your vulgar ones; a species of legerdemain, exquisite as that of the Eastern juggler who plants his ladder on the ground, climbs it, and pulls it up after him into the empty air. It wants seriousness, it wants the last respect for the reader's intelligence, it wants critical justification; it wants whatever is the very greatest thing in the very greatest novelists; the thing that convinces in Hawthorne, George Eliot, Tourguénief, Tolstoy. But short of this supreme truth, it has every grace, every beauty, every charm. It touches, it appeals, it consoles; and it flatters, too; if it turns the head, if it intoxicates, well, it is better to own the fact that it leaves one in not quite the condition for judging it. I made my tacit protest against it after following Trilby, poor soul, to her apotheosis at the hands of the world and the church; but I fell a prey to it again in the first chapters of *The Martian*, and I expect to continue in that sweet bondage to the end.

II

If I venture to say that sentimentality is the dominant of the Du Maurier music, it is because his art has made sentimentality beautiful; I had almost said real, and I am ready to say different from what it was before. It is a very manly sentimentality; we need not be ashamed of sharing it; one should rather be ashamed of disowning its emotions. It is in its sweetness, as well as its manliness, that I find the chief analogy between Du Maurier's literature and his art. In all the long course of his dealing with the life of English society, I can think of but two or three instances of ungentleness. The humor which shone upon every rank, and every variety of character, never abashed the lowly, never insulted women, never betrayed the trust which reposed in its traditions of decency and generosity. If we think of any other caricaturist's art, how bitter it is apt to be, how brutal, how base! The cruelties that often pass for wit, even in the best of our own society satires, never tempted him to their ignoble exploitation; and as for the filthy drolleries of French wit, forever amusing itself with one commandment, how far they all are from him! His pictures are full of the dearest children, lovely young girls, honest young fellows; snobs who are as compassionate as they are despicable, bores who have their reason for being, hypocrites who are not beyond redemption. It is in his tolerance, his final pity of all life, that Du Maurier takes his place with the great talents; and it is in his sympathy for weakness, for the abased and outcast, that he classes himself with the foremost novelists of the age, not one of whom is recreant to the high office of teaching by parable that we may not profitably despise one another. Not even Svengali was beyond the pale of his mercy, and how well within it some other sorts of sinners were, the grief of very respectable people testified.

I will own myself that I like heroes and heroines to be born in wedlock when they conveniently can, and to keep true to it; but if an author wishes to suppose them otherwise I cannot proscribe them except for subsequent misbehavior in his hands. The trouble with Trilby was not that she was what she was imagined, but that finally the world could not imaginably act with regard to her as the author feigned. Such as she are to be forgiven, when they sin no more; not exalted and bowed down to by all manner of elect personages. But I fancy Du Maurier did not mean her to be an example. She had to be done something with, and after all she had suffered, it was not in the heart of poetic justice to deny her a little morituary triumph.

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