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**TRILBYANA: THE
RISE AND
PROGRESS OF A
POPULAR NOVEL**

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Содержание

"Trilby: a Novel"	6
Mr. du Maurier as a Draughtsman	8
"Trilby" on the Stage	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

Jeannette L. Gilder

Trilbyana: The Rise and Progress of a Popular Novel

It is many a year since a book has attained the popularity of Mr. du Maurier's second novel, "Trilby" (printed as a serial in Harper's Monthly, from January to August, inclusive, and then issued in book-form, on Saturday, 8 September, 1894). Several others have sold as well – some even better; but neither "Looking Backward" nor "Ben Hur" (to name but these two) has captivated the public in the same manner or in the same degree as this romance, this fairy-tale of the three British artists, the blanchisseuse who posed for "the altogeth'er," the Parisian masters of painting, and the trans-Rhenish masters of music, in the Latin Quarter of the early fifties. It is a story written out of the author's very heart, and it finds its way straight to the hearts of his readers. This is the secret of its unique success. Its charm is emotional rather than intellectual. With all its art, it impresses one as essentially ingenuous. It is a book to be loved, not merely to be liked or admired.

On 16 June, 1894, The Critic printed, with comment, a letter in which Mr. Whistler protested to the editor of an English newspaper against the libellous likeness of himself to be found in the character of Joe Sibley, one of the minor personages in the story of "Trilby." In the fall there were so many sporadic calls for this number of the paper as soon to exhaust the supply carried over from the summer. There seemed to be a general desire on the part of our readers to bind up the Whistler letters, etc., with the text and pictures of "Trilby" as printed in Harper's Monthly, the American artist's protest having led to a slight revision of the story before its appearance in book-form. The hint was acted upon; and two pages of "Trilbyana" were printed in The Critic of Nov. 17.

Though an extra edition was struck off, the call for this number has at last exhausted the supply; and the present pamphlet, containing among its many items of interest a majority of those that have found a place in the columns of The Critic, may fairly claim to be issued in response to a popular call.

J.B. & J.L. Gilder.

"Trilby: a Novel"

By George du Maurier. With Illustrations by the Author. Harper & Brothers

When "Trilby" began to appear as a serial in *Harper's Monthly*, January 1894, Mr. Henry James prophesied that it would prove to be a glorification of "the long leg and the twentieth year." The prophecy was soon verified. At the outset, indeed, it seemed as if the glorification were to be, not so much of the long leg, as of the large and shapely foot. The whole story rested for a while on one of Trilby's feet. We say one, for it was only one of them – the left one – that Little Billee immortalized by drawing on the wall of the studio in the Place St. Anatole des Arts; but they were equally perfect. As the young woman who had the happiness of standing on this foot proclaims, kicking off one of the big slippers in which she is introduced to us, "It's the handsomest foot in all Paris: there's only one in all Paris to match it, and here it is" – and off goes the other slipper. The sketch of it that proves Little Billee already a master of his art is not shown till near the end of the book; and neither this nor Mr. du Maurier's own portrait of the *pieds nus* on page 21 fully realizes one's notion of the thing's unapproached perfection.

As we have said, the whole story rests for a while on one of these handsome feet; but the novelist manages at last to free his neck from the thralldom of the "slim, straight, rosy heel, clean-cut and smooth as the back of a razor," and proceeds to gratify our curiosity to know something about the strange being who poked about the studios in the Quartier Latin in the early fifties, bare-headed, and wearing a big, military coat with epaulets, which she could throw off when she posed for the *ensemble* as easily as she could kick off the loose slippers when only her foot was desired as a model. It will be seen that Trilby was not a woman of any social standing. Her father was an educated Irishman, her mother (his wife) a pretty barmaid. They both were dead, and she herself was a professional model.

Two things about her were equally marvellous: one was her foot, the other her voice – an organ of surprising power, range and sweetness. No less extraordinary, perhaps, was the trick that nature had played upon her, by coupling so glorious a voice with an ear that could not distinguish one note from another – could scarcely tell a bass from a treble, and permitted her to sing so badly that her hearers either stopped their ears, laughed in her face, or bolted from the room. The American song "Ben Bolt" was the one she liked the best to sing, and sang the worst. There was something else about her, almost as strange as her beautiful feet, her magnificent voice and her defective (or altogether lacking) ear for music; and that was the purity of her character. She had had affairs with half a dozen men in the studios, without really knowing that it wasn't the right thing to do. But her heart remained spotless (so Mr. du Maurier assures us); and it is a most unfortunate thing that Little Billee's mother comes tearing over to Paris, leaving the peaceful dales and dairies of Devonshire behind her, in her mad haste to break the engagement which Trilby has at last made with the young English painter, after having repeatedly refused to do so, notwithstanding her great love for him. Mrs. Bagot has no difficulty in convincing her that she is no worthy mate for Little Billee; and she accordingly runs away from Paris, heart-broken, and becomes a *blanchisseuse de fin*. Little Billee's heart is broken, too; or if not broken, benumbed; and henceforth, though he becomes a most successful artist, and the pet of all London, he takes his pleasures and successes sadly and listlessly, caring nothing for the wealth and fame that come to him.

In the meantime a great *prima-donna* appears upon the European stage, and all the world bows down before her. Happening to be in Paris, Little Billee is persuaded by his old chums, Taffy the Yorkshireman ex-soldier, and the "Laird of Cockpen" – painters both, – to go and hear the prodigy. Fancy their stupefaction at recognizing in the glorious singer the tuneless Trilby of five years gone!

No longer Trilby O'Ferrall, but La Svengali, wife of their old acquaintance Svengali the Jew, who had recognized the possibilities of her voice when he first heard it in their Paris studio, and had afterwards captured her and cultivated it and by his mesmeric arts trained her as a singer and even made her love him as a dog loves his master. A day or two later, meeting him at a hotel, Svengali spits in Little Billee's face, and gets his nose pulled for his pains by Taffy. And then the great *prima-donna* and her master go to London; and Trilby breaks down in trying to sing "Ben Bolt," and is hooted off the stage – Svengali's sudden death in a stage-box (unknown to anyone in the house) having broken the mesmeric influence that has made her a singer. She pines away, surrounded by her old friends the Englishmen, and an object of solicitude to all Christendom; and after her death Little Billee pines away, too, and no one is left but the big ex-officer Taffy – with the exception of Trilby, the most attractive character in the book. For Little Billee (whose sister he marries, after the death of Trilby, whom he, too, loved) is, truth to tell, somewhat of a prig, even after the sight of Trilby at the concert in Paris has roused him from the unemotional state to which her flight consigned him, years before; and Svengali is a beast, and Gecko is insignificant.

The text of the book is the counterpart of its illustrations, for Mr. du Maurier writes as he draws – with infinite precision and detail. Nothing is omitted that could possibly heighten an effect. Instead of flashing a scene or a sensation upon you, he describes it and redescribes it, heaping up the adjectives in masses. His art is a different art from Kipling's, for instance, which never wastes a syllable. But the point to be decided is not one of methods but of results; and as a whole "Trilby" is delightful. It is a slow and laborious process by which the author creates an impression and surrounds his characters with the atmosphere he wishes us to see them in; but he does finally create the impression and the atmosphere, and in so doing justifies his means. He has steeped his mind in Thackeray, and so has had a noble master. Like "Peter Ibbetson," his new story is unique. It is a book that could have been written only by an artist – and illustrated only by the author; it is a book, moreover, in which the man and the style are one.

In its present form the story contains certain passages not printed in the magazine – notably, a brief disquisition on sitting for the nude. On the other hand, certain passages have been altered in deference to the wishes of Mr. Whistler, who saw in Joe Sibley, as described and pictured by Mr. du Maurier, an unpleasant resemblance to himself. Not only has the text been altered, but our friend Sibley is now called Antony, and his hitherto unbearded face is adorned with a non-Whistlerian beard. (See "Trilby," opposite page 132.) One picture has been omitted altogether. It needed not the accidental advertising of Mr. Whistler's threatened libel suit to draw attention to the book. It is its own best advertisement, and has fairly earned the success implied in advance orders so numerous as to cause the postponement until to-day (8 Sept. 1894) of the original date of publication.

Mr. du Maurier as a Draughtsman

It is hardly necessary to say that Mr. du Maurier's work as a novelist is in no way matched by his work as a draughtsman, as exemplified, for instance, in the 120 drawings for "Trilby," exhibited in December, 1894, at the Avery gallery. Until he began to write he was known merely as the author of innumerable caricatures, which had a certain vogue because they were at the same time pictures of fashionable society; but even of these the legend was often the best part. He had mastered many types, but they were nothing more than that; and one had seen his millionaires and swells and singing people and artists until one had grown rather tired of them. Then, suddenly, it was found, with the first chapters of his first novel, that in writing he could give to all these well-known figures individuality, could make flesh and blood of them. The drawings themselves, at least those done as illustrations for his two romances, seem to have gained by that discovery. These do not appear to be the same French blouses and English guardsmen. Something has got into them, a touch of life, which they did not have before. Yet no one will say that the Little Billee of the drawings now exhibited at Avery's gallery is even a shadow of the Little Billee of the text. Of Trilby there is not so much as the famous foot. Any schoolboy, almost, might have made as clever a travesty of the Venus de Milo. The best presentment of the gigantic Taffy is that in which he poses as the Ilyssus. The Laird o' Cockpen is much better, being frequently very like Mr. George W. Cable, particularly where he listens to Trilby's confession – an accidental likeness, no doubt, but one that increases our respect for the Laird. The intentional likeness of Frederick Walker, who is said to be the real original of Little Billee, is vastly superior to the ideal one; and the many unnamed figures in the more crowded compositions that appear to have been sketched from the life or from a particularly vivid memory are among the most amusing and enjoyable things in the drawings.

But it must not be denied that there is here and there a bit of *chic* that approaches the ideal – something not easily to be discovered in the artist's former work. Svengali is throughout a creation of this sort. He is as grotesquely romantic, as Mephistophelian a figure in the illustration as in the printed page. The only failure is the head (on page 59 of the book) which is in more senses than one "as bad as they make them." He is excellent where he laughs over the two Englishmen cleaning themselves; he is delightful where he examines the roof of Trilby's mouth, "like the dome of the Panthéon," "room in it for 'toutes les gloires de la France.'" Where he stands in the midst of the crowded studio, "All as it Used to Be," he looks every inch the artist, more so than the "idle apprentice," lounging against the door-jamb. If there were such a man, one who had sunk his whole soul in his art, he might look like this, or like the same figure in the hussar uniform, a Semitic conqueror "out of the mysterious East." There is a touch of the spirit of the illustrators of the romantic period in the pictures of the Christmas festivities, especially in the two that illustrate the peculiar interchange of rôles between Little Billee and the festive Ribot, and in the sketch of Zouzou as the "Ducal French Fighting-Cock." The scenes of common life, too, are admirable, the free-and-easy, the "Happy Dinner," the bargaining of the Laird with Mme. Vinard – "Je prong!" – and the scene at the rehearsal where "The First Violin Loses his Temper." The art of the drawings is all in expression and action, and Du Maurier, in spite of all that is French in him, is thoroughly British in this, and a descendant in the right line of Hogarth, Cruikshank and Leech.

The "Trilby" drawings were bought *en bloc* by some one in England. They had been sent here to be engraved for *Harper's Monthly* and the book; the sale occurred before they were placed on exhibition in New York. A representative of *The Critic* asked Mr. Avery, who said that a number of people had expressed a desire to buy some of them, what he thought they would have brought, if sold over here. He replied that he could not tell with any degree of accuracy, but he thought they would have averaged at least \$50 apiece. As there are 120 drawings, this would have meant \$6,000 more for Mr. du Maurier. *En bloc*, no doubt, they brought a smaller sum.

A painting of "Trilby," by Mr. Constant Mayer, was shown at Knoedler's gallery, in December, along with half a dozen other and more satisfactory paintings by the same artist. The hypnotic condition of the subject was declared by Dr. Allan McLane Hamilton to be admirably suggested in this fancy portrait.

* * *

To the Editors of *The Critic*: —

Those who express surprise at the sudden literary development of du Maurier's genius do not apparently recognize the fact that the whole series of his drawings has included the literary element. His thoughts as expressed in art have always shown a close and philosophical observation of life, an understanding of the actions and motives of men. Every one of his illustrations tells not only an individual story, but a story of surroundings and times, of tendencies, fads and foibles. And the text is always as important as the picture; sometimes it is far more so. Who can have forgotten the history and culmination of the "old china" craze given by du Maurier in a four-inch-square illustration of the young husband and wife examining an old teapot, with the exquisite text, "Oh, Algernon, do you think we can ever live up to it?" Certainly the man who could invent the application of that phrase must have stores of wit and sense equal to the writing of many "Peter Ibbetsons" and "Trilbys." And those stores were bound to find their larger expression in literature.

New York, 22 Nov., 1894. Candace Wheeler.

* * *

The New York *Tribune* has printed the following protest against the insinuation that the author of the book was not its illustrator also: —

"It ought not to be necessary for any formal contradiction to be made of that absurd rumor which has just been set adrift concerning the illustrations to 'Trilby.' On the face of it, it is impossible for either Mrs. du Maurier or her daughter to have given the pictures the character they possess. They have du Maurier's style, du Maurier's technique, du Maurier's peculiar little touches of humor, not merely in the broad idea but in that minute turn of the pen which makes all the difference in the world between an empty profile and a funny one. It is true that there is a dissimilarity between Trilby in one illustration and Trilby in another, but it should be remembered that du Maurier's eyesight has been failing him, that he has been compelled to be prolific at a time when he has most needed to lie fallow as an artist; and, in brief, the shortcomings of the 'Trilby' designs, if serious shortcomings they have, are to be explained on the most natural and logical of grounds. The intrinsic character of the drawings proclaims their authorship. Only George du Maurier could have done them, and not any of the trifling assistance which he may have received from his family in matters of posing, costume, etc., could deprive him of his responsibility or his honor. The recent tendency to criticise these designs with some severity will soon be counteracted. As a matter of fact, they present some of the cleverest work du Maurier has ever done."

* * *

The New York *Sun* printed a letter, not long ago, in which the drawings were declared to be anachronistic. "Why," it was asked, "should Mr. du Maurier deny to his characters the crinolines, waterfalls, surtouts, cravats, chignons, peg-top trousers and hoop-skirts of the early sixties, and make them, despite Taffy's whiskers, of the *monde* of to-day? Is it that his artistic instincts have reverted

to that fine school of old masters who delighted to portray, saving Taffy's grace, Hector fighting in the armor of the Black Prince, or turned out Madonnas by the score in Margaret of Anjou skirts?"

* * *

In "Trilby" every stroke of pen or pencil seems to be significant. Is there special meaning in the fact that, in the dainty tail-piece, one glass in the spectacles appears to be heavily shaded, while the other is clear? Is Mr. du Maurier, like so many literary people, afflicted with partial loss of sight or other visual difficulty?

Amherst College Library. W. I. Fletcher.

[Unhappily he is, and has been for many years. It is only with the greatest difficulty that he is able to work with either pen or pencil.]

"Trilby" on the Stage

Mr. Paul M. Potter's dramatization of "Trilby" was produced by Mr. A. M. Palmer's company at the Boston Museum on Monday, 4 March, 1895, and achieved so great a success that several companies were immediately put upon the road to play it throughout the country. Its first production in New York, with the original cast, occurred at the Garden Theatre, on April 15. Hundreds of people were turned away from the door for want of room to accommodate them; and an offer was received from Mr. Beerbohm Tree, the eminent English actor, for the privilege of producing the play in England, where he himself wished to impersonate Svengali. It would be a pity if the Lyceum company did not secure the English rights; for Mr. Irving would make an inimitable Svengali, and Ellen Terry would be Trilby without trying.

As nobody has ever succeeded, or is likely to succeed, in really dramatizing a novel, it is not surprising that the stage version of "Trilby" should prove in some respects unsatisfactory. It might be thought that the book would lend itself readily to dramatic treatment; but a little consideration will show that it offers peculiar difficulties to the playwright, inasmuch as its chief charm is one of manner, which cannot be transferred to the stage, while its story, although it contains some striking situations, such as Trilby's collapse upon the death of Svengali, consists chiefly of a series of episodes, largely independent of each other and strung together very loosely. All things considered, Mr. Potter ought not, perhaps, to be held to too strict an account for the liberties he has taken with the text and some of the personages, but he has certainly lowered the tone of the work, and been guilty of various crudities of construction. There is some excuse for his employment of Svengali as the evil influence which wrecks the happiness of Little Billee and Trilby, but he leaves nothing of the author's original intention, and infinitely belittles the character of the girl, when he attributes her flight from her lover to mesmeric suggestion, instead of her own noble and unselfish devotion. In many other similar ways the spiritual side of the book suffers at his hands. His persistent references to Trilby's posing for the figure, his selection of that particular incident for her first introduction, and the joking references to it which he puts into the mouths of other personages, are in bad taste, while his travesty of the character of Dr. Bagot is entirely without justification. Mrs. Bagot he treats with more consideration, but he reduces her to the level of the dullest stage conventionality. Trilby herself preserves a good many of her characteristics, but is degraded even more than in the book by her subserviency to Svengali.

The play is in four acts, and the whole story up to the flight of Trilby is compressed into the first two. This feat is accomplished with no small ingenuity, but at great cost of probability. In this brief space Trilby is wooed and won, Svengali asserts his mesmeric power, the marriage of Little Billee is arranged and interrupted by the arrival of his mother, and an elopement is planned and frustrated. In the third act Trilby is to sing in the Cirque des Bashibazouck, and all the characters reassemble as if by magic in the foyer of that temple of art, which is abandoned of all other persons for their sole benefit. The proceedings which are supposed to occur in this retired spot are intrinsically absurd, but they are effective enough from a scenic and theatrical point of view, and were accepted by the audience, on the first night, as eminently natural and satisfactory. They culminate in the ghastly death of Svengali and the restoration of Trilby in a dazed and exhausted condition to the three faithful friends. In the fourth act there is another reunion of characters, and Trilby, who has agreed once more to marry Little Billee, and is supposed to be on the road to recovery, dies suddenly, upon the unexpected apparition of Svengali's photograph.

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