

## *THE W. S. GILBERT OF HIS OWN LETTERS*

BY H. ROWLAND BROWN AND ROWLAND GREY

[Cornhill Magazine, 52.308 (New Series.), Feb. 1922, pp. 159-176.]

‘DEAR MISS——, I will send you some of my plays autographed, but unfortunately I have quarrelled with my (former) *Bab Ballad* publisher. However, I will get you some copies from a bookseller, and send them to you in due course. I haven’t any in my possession.—  
Yours very truly,

W. S. GILBERT.’

CAN you not imagine this letter appearing in a sale catalogue, labelled ‘W. S. Gilbert, very characteristic,’ to justify a fancy price? So, indeed, the pleased recipient did promptly picture its appearance some day when she could no longer treasure it, for we are all prone to generalise hastily concerning genius though not all are as quickly shown the error of the way.

The revelation of the real man happened years before the time when, with the emotion of the hero of ‘The Aspern Papers,’ she, with one other, was given gracious access to a wonderful box of letters, with the genuine W. S. Gilbert written clearly between their lines, whether expectedly lambent with a pretty wit, or all unexpectedly touched with a beautiful seriousness. This luckless person wrote a playlet for a charity, and became inordinately puffed up because her heroine was to be created by an attractive young actress. Alas, the interpreter fell ill at the supreme moment, and the wretched author had not merely to massacre her own innocent by taking the professional’s place, but to commit the murder under the eye of W. S. Gilbert. She went home in despair, merely wondering by what mordant word he would keep her failure evergreen. Next morning instead the postman brought balm in Gilead.

‘I am sorry you should have felt any apprehension at the prospect of my being present at the performance. I had heard so promising an account of your little play from Miss —— that I was really anxious to hear it. I was very sorry I could not get near enough the stage to enable me to do so. The people you have really to dread are the average public, who know nothing of the difficulties of dramatic composition, and judge only by the impressions left on their minds by the performance. Men like myself, who have been through the mill, and have devoted their lives to learning the art of dramatic composition, know too well the difficulties, risks, and disappointments incident even to the most unpretentious forms of stage play, not to make every sympathetic allowance for the novice in play-writing. It is when the beginner launches out into a five-act comedy that we are apt to be over-critical. ... As to my chance of being appreciated by posterity, I fancy posterity will know as little of me as I shall of posterity.’

Most delicately did he realise how useless was the tinsel clink of compliment to one in such a parlous plight. ‘Sorry I was placed where I could neither see nor hear,’ and this to one then almost a stranger.

To be suddenly confronted with nearly a hundred letters in the fine clear script, with free permission to make extracts, offered a task at once difficult and delightful. Above all, there was a temptation to be resisted — the temptation to explain at last some of the fine shades of their writer’s cryptic character by touching upon matters of which it is still too early to speak without reserve. The small sheets have the fragrance of rosemary rather than rue as they tell the story of an ideal friendship, unclouded to the last. Only ‘a thing of shreds and patches’ is possible, yet even patchwork can be charming if the colours be well assorted. It

will be the fault of clumsy selection if it be not proved that Gilbert, like Lamb and FitzGerald, was a born letter-writer. It seems to require genius to be at once brief and happy, and certainly not every genius replies as promptly as he did to the snow-storms of begging letters which came to one who, to the blank amazement of his suburban neighbours, was as rich as they were 'only from writing words to operas, as if the words mattered!'

'DEAR MISS——,' (with cheque),—'I can but do your bidding, and sign myself yours obediently,

W. S. GILBERT.'

For he was ever that rarity, a cheerful giver, and what this means to those doomed to collect 'voluntary' contributions, they alone know.

He evidently shared Lamb's pleasant faith that 'Presents endear Absents,' when he sent off a complete 'Punch' to an invalid, or the whole of 'Everyman's Library' to a literary wanderer constantly shifting quarters abroad.

In dealing with the letters, accurate chronology and classification are alike impossible. The only thing to do is to glance through each little packet and quote, for instance, from one vaguely marked 'miscellaneous.'

'Did you know ——? She was married yesterday to —— of the Eighteenth Hussars, with much pomp and ancientry. I can't understand why so much fuss is made over a partnership — or, rather I don't understand why the process should not be applied to all partnerships. It seems to me that the union (say) of Marshall and Snelgrove might and should, have been celebrated in the same fashion. Marshall waiting at the altar for Snelgrove to arrive (dressed in summer stock remnants), a choir to walk in front of Snelgrove, a Bishop and a Dean (and also a solicitor to ratify the deed of partnership), and a bevy of coryphée fitters-on to strew flowers in their path. It is a pretty idea, and invests a contract with a charm not to be found in a solicitor's or conveyancer's chambers.'

In sending a pressing invitation he adds:

'They are getting on rapidly with my electric lighting. Now mind, I am installing electric light simply that you may be able to do your hair in the most perfect possible manner. I have no other thought — no other design — so, if you decline to come and stay here, all my money and pains will be thrown away. I shall un-wire the house, pull down the engine house, sell the engine, and revert to paraffin oil; so, now you know,'

In the chilly spring of 1903 he breaks out:

'All our fruit and flowers are being ruined by this cussed weather, and my bones ache with rheumatism till I can almost hear them. I have used all the bad language I know (except one expletive which I am keeping for Coronation Day), and have sent to Whiteley's for a fresh batch' . ...

He does. not, however, explain why he failed to employ *The Sorcerer*.

'It is in all the special evening editions that you went to Drury Lane theatre last evening and caught a bad cold. That was very careless of you, and very unfair to your friends, who can't expect to be happy while you are suffering. I hope it won't be a very bad cold; indeed, I hope it will be a very good cold and go away at once.'

On another occasion he asks pathetically:

Why does the Almighty make delightful people and then make them go and live at Dunbar? It is as though I wrote a masterpiece of a play and then stipulated that it should only

be performed at the Theatre Royal, Spitzbergen. ... Gracious Heavens! what has Dunbar done that it should be so favoured? There is a proverb, "Do as you would be done bar," or something like that; but it doesn't seem to throw any light on the question.'

There is an ironical interest in contrasting the handful of letters commenting on the meagre official recognition meted out to our 'English Aristophanes' with the abundant honours he won for himself. He had given the language an often mis-used adjective, and enriched the thesaurus of English letters with words and a wealth of quotation before his death. More popular than half the poets dead, and all the poets living, his real claim to an offer of the vacant laureateship was recognised by the fit though few. 'His foe was folly, and his weapon wit,' and, like his famous ancestor, Sir Humphrey Gilbert of 'Squirrel' fame, whose height and proportions were exactly the same as his own, he gave us a Newfoundland where 'sorrows go and pleasure tarries.'

His fairy folk were honest as they were merry. The lamps of burlesque were low and of evil odour when he flashed into our ken with elf maidens significantly wearing the clean radiant electric light star-wise in their hair.

In January 1907 he writes:

'Now I've a little bit of news for you. It is a *profound secret*, and I haven't told it to anybody: my news is that ——— has commissioned Lord Knollys to find out whether I would accept a knighthood, and as I expressed my willingness to do so, it will, I suppose, be conferred next May, when the birthday honours are announced. It is a tin-pot, twopenny halfpenny sort of distinction, but as no dramatic author as such ever had it for dramatic authorship alone, I felt I ought not to refuse it. I suppose it is to be given to me as a sort of impalpable old-age pension in consideration of my being a broken-down old ruin. Possibly the King may forget all about it (which wouldn't cause me a moment's annoyance), but those who know about these things say it is sure to be.'

That Sir John Vanbrugh was knighted for his hideous architecture; not for his sparkling licentious stage work, is too often forgotten. On July 1, 1907, he wrote as Sir William:

'I went yesterday to the Investiture at Buckingham Palace, and was duly tapped on both shoulders by Edward VII, and then kissed hands. I found myself politely described in the official list as Mr. William Gilbert, *playwright*, suggesting that my work was analogical to that of a wheelwright, or a millwright, or a wainwright, or a shipwright, as regards the mechanical character of the process by which our respective results are achieved. There is an excellent word "dramatist," which seems to fit the situation, but it is not applied until we are dead, and then we become dramatists as oxen, sheep, and pigs are transfigured into beef, mutton, and pork after their demise. You never hear of a novel-wright, or a picture-wright, or a poem-wright; and why a playwright? When the *Gondoliers* was commanded at Windsor by her late Majesty, the piece was described as "by Sir Arthur Sullivan," the librettist being too insignificant an insect to be worth mentioning on a programme which contained the name of the wig-maker in bold type! And I had to pay £87 10s. as my share of sending the piece down to Windsor, besides forfeiting my share of the night's profits at the Savoy.'

In the same year he speaks with pleasure of an ovation he received at a dinner given in his honour by the Old Playgoers Club to commemorate a revival of the operas.

'Four hundred and fifty sat down and I was made much of. Any amount of melted butter was (figuratively) poured down my back. The evening concluded with a number of selections from the Savoy operas, sung by the old Savoyards, who were present in great numbers. It's well I don't believe all the good things that were said about me, or I should be

suffering from a swelled head and be too big for my boots. As it is, both head and feet are normal.'

'During the twenty years that I had the absolute control of the stage management of the Savoy operas, I never had a seriously angry word with any member of my company.'

This one sentence of his memorable speech that night may not be omitted.

The King, as we know, did not forget. In June 1908 Gilbert writes:

'We all went to the Derby, and I had a splinter of my usual good luck in drawing the second horse in the Club sweep — £75. I have drawn the winner no fewer than seven times at £300 a time, and this is the second time I have drawn the second horse. We went to Buckingham Palace a fortnight ago, and I never saw so many ugly and badly dressed women in so short a time.'

A few months earlier a representative banquet of congratulation upon his knighthood had been given him at the Savoy. His long and brilliant speech was received with an enthusiasm which he confesses delighted him. 'Even your stony heart would have been softened, and you would have said to yourself, "There must be something in the old booby after all," is his conclusion. It was homage to his art, not to himself that appealed to him.

When he was invited by the Garrick Club to give it the prestige of his membership, he told the true version of this misrepresented matter to this trusted friend.

'I've just been elected to the Garrick Club, for which I was blackballed thirty-seven years ago — through a case of mistaken identity, for I was quite unknown then, and the Committee thought they were pilling another man. When they discovered their mistake they asked me to put myself up again, but it occurred to me that as the mistake was theirs, it was theirs to rectify it. Moreover, I am not one of those who turn the second cheek to the smiter. So matters have remained until the other day, when the Committee did me the honour of selecting me for immediate election "on account of my public distinction"(!) As Heaven had signified its displeasure at the action of the Committee of thirty-seven years ago by sweeping them off the face of the earth, and as I had no quarrel with the present Committee, who are all my very good friends, I accepted the honour they had proposed to confer on me. And so "the stone that the builders rejected," etc.'

Three things are notable in the easy style of the Gilbert letters— a Sévigné-like readiness to 'let the pen trot,' a plentiful use of the much decried parenthesis, and a fondness for underlining, words. His tepid liking for Jane Austen may have been due to her animadversion upon the latter practice. He was pleasantly grateful for remembrance on birthdays on the part of those privileged to call him friend, not merely a glittering acquaintance dangerous to the pretentious and the boastful.'

'It is a great lark being sixty-six — you try it. It is so delightful to have attained a time of life when one can feel quite sure that there is not the remotest chance of one's being a snake on another man's hearth. One feels so safe and so involuntarily good. I am slowly getting stronger, but I am still rather Richardy (I hate the slang expression dicky) in the knees.' ... 'It is very pleasant to be sixty-seven, because one feels one is approaching one's prime of life. After seventy I don't want any congratulations, but condolences will be thankfully received.'

It is irresistible to go back a year or two.

'I am sure the clotted cream I received yesterday came from you, for who on earth but you would trouble about a poor devil in his 66th year! I am sure your kindness will be fully

rewarded hereafter, but I am equally sure that it was with no idea of that description that you sent it to me. Do you know how they are going to decide the Shakespeare-Bacon dispute? They are going to dig up Shakespeare and dig up Bacon; they are going to set their coffins side by side, and they are going to get Tree to recite *Hamlet* to them. And the one who turns in his coffin will be the author of the play.

‘Hearty good wishes for you and yours during Christmas and the coming year. I hope I may be alive next Christmas that I may receive my good wishes (and for other reasons too, to be quite candid). ... Have you heard this?’

“Willie tricked out in his frock and sashes,  
Fell in the fire, and was burnt to ashes.  
The fire burnt low, and the room grew chill,  
But nobody liked to poke poor Will.”

‘It seems to me that there is a pretty and tender sentiment underlying it.’

It is hard not to linger over all the Gilbertian birthdays. Of one he breaks out:

‘Personally I am sick of birthdays. You see, I have had so many of them and they begin to pall, but (such is the inconsistency of the animal man) I feel I could do with a few more.’

And again:

‘Such a letter tends to grease the wheels of the old machine as it goes lumbering downhill. I have had many letters of condolence, but none that have given me so much comfort as yours. Here’s an impromptu riddle. “What is that of which we have all had too many, but of which none of us can have enough?” Why, a birthday, of course, you silly; fancy you not guessing it.’ ...

Your delightful letter almost consoles me for being a crumbling old ruin. If I go on decaying much longer, excursion trains will be run in order that trippers may gaze upon me by moonlight (like Tintern Abbey), and I shall become a favourite resort for picnic parties and sentimental couples. But I shall not charge anything for admission, as I have a strong conviction that our monumental survivals ought to be accessible to everyone without payment.’

One pleasant trait he shared with Tennyson, to whom no veering literary fashions ever rendered him unfaithful, for he kept no secretary and replied to his own letters with unflinching if sometimes ironical courtesy. Three hundred and fifty came when he was knighted, and each was answered personally. He did not value his own autograph as do certain ‘celebrities’ of the moment, who in their fear of enriching their correspondents send them a chilly typewritten line signed by deputy, lest the precious thing should be sold to the highest bidder. The facsimile that appears on the following page gives a characteristic specimen of his handwriting.

It is amusing to know that W. S. Gilbert failed to obtain even an honourable mention in a once familiar trade Limerick competition; specimens in a letter seem to reflect upon the critical ability of the judges.

‘When I asked a young girl of Portrush  
“What book do you read?” she said “Hush!  
I have happened to chance  
On a novel from France,  
And I hope it will cause me to blush.”’

‘There was a far-famed individdle

Who had a bad pain in his middle,  
 But a gentle emetic  
 With Lamplough's Pyretic  
 Soon made him as fit as a fiddle.'

TRAIN. HUSTON TO HARROW.  
 TELEPHONE. 15 BUREAU.

Grim's Dyke,  
 Harrow Weald.

3 June 1908

Dear Newlands-Mown..  
 There is to be a  
 dress rehearsal of Trial  
 by play on Friday at  
 2.30 that photographs  
 may be taken, to call  
 at the performance. Will  
 you kindly lend me your  
 robes for this purpose?  
 Yours truly  
 W. G. W.

His absolute mastery of rhyme was better shown in another Limerick made in a moment at dinner, when some rash guest instanced Decima as a difficult name with which to deal.

'There was a young lady, Miss Decima,  
 Whose conduct was voted quite pessima;  
 But she mended at last,  
 On the eve of the fast  
 Of the Sunday called Septuagesima.'

Whether he concocted the 'good stories' he professes to have heard and ostensibly repeats in his letters, is a nice question. One of the late Bishop of London is not his own.

The Bishop went in a hansom from Victoria St. to Fulham Palace, and on arriving gave the exact fare, 2s. 6d, The cabman, who was very respectful, said: "I beg pardon, my Lord, but if St. Peter had been on earth, do you suppose he would only have given me half a crown?" The Bishop replied, "My good fellow, if St. Peter had been on earth he would have been at Lambeth, and you would only have had a shilling." Now, to show my perfect fairness

I'll tell you a Roman Catholic story about Father Healey.

'A young lady said to him, "Is it true, Father Healey, you have no misseltoe in Ireland?" "Alas, my dear," replied Healey, "it is only too true." "But," said the girl, "if young ladies can't kiss under the misseltoe, what in the world do they do?" "Why, they do it *under the rose*." Not bad for a mere parish priest.'

The few letters with foreign post-marks are in one sense disappointing, at least to those who expect genius to have the magic power of painting a picture in half a dozen words. Gilbert was not of those who re-construct an ancient city in a sentence, or show us a country in a vivid paragraph. His pleasure or displeasure when travelling seemed dependent upon his company. For upon his return from one of his last voyages upon the sea he loved, he writes:

'We had fine weather and smooth seas for our cruise (to Lisbon, Tangiers, the Canary Islands, Madeira, and Vigo), but I am glad to get home. Most of the 315 passengers were very trying — though there were a dozen or so of very pleasant people. I never saw such super-human hideousness as was presented by some of the party. It seemed to have been born into a world of Pantomime masks. The ship was much too crowded, but everything was very well done, comfortable cabins and good provender. I had three berths in my cabin, and think of applying for the Royal Bounty accordingly.'

Upon an earlier trip in the Mediterranean the same, social drawbacks are recorded. 'The ship was full of fussy old ladies and gouty old gentlemen. I called it "The Old Curiosity Shop," which annoyed the old guys, who wanted to know what I called myself!' If any of these injured persons read the birthday letters they will know now, and may be comforted. In 1910, before he made a solitary trip eastwards, he says: 'I start for Constantinople on Wednesday. ... I have been strongly advised to ally myself at once with the Young Turkish Party, but unfortunately I was not furnished with her address, so I scarcely know what to do.' When he sought and found complete restoration to health at Helouan in 1900, he had been too often to Egypt to care to say much about it. His description of the terrible railway accident in which he happily escaped injury shows a parallel with his favourite novelist, Dickens, who met with a similar misadventure. It is notable how rarely Gilbert makes quotations in the letters, yet, he once said that luggage even for one night would be incomplete without a volume of Dickens.

'I've ordered the little edition of 'Dickens' 35 volumes' [he writes]. 'The edition is not quite complete as the novels come out one by one as the copyright expires. It is a shameful thing that copyright *should* expire. It ought to be freehold, like land. Dickens' daughter can scarcely manage to live, while any number of publishers are making fortunes out of his work, for which, of course, they pay nothing.'

It was a pretty coincidence that one with such a pretty wit should have been born in the same month of the same year as Pickwick, and surely a merry star danced then.

## II

Yet it is naturally to that part of the correspondence pertaining to his work that dwellers in a house boasting possession of the desk upon which many of the later operas were written turn eagerly. One of the Gilbertian legends dying hardest is the belief that in the various difficulties inherent to production and revival, his hot temper was invariably at fault, and it is satisfactory to be able to answer his detractors with irrefragable evidence to the contrary. The first mention of a first night regards one of the many revivals of *Patience*, and one of the present chroniclers recalls how ill Gilbert was, and how he sat beside him in the green-room, listening to the distant roars of applause. Many present thought it would be his final appearance, little foreseeing that Sir Arthur Sullivan would be the first to sunder the

unique collaboration by death, Gilbert was surprised at the enthusiasm that night. 'I had no idea,' he writes modestly, 'there would be so many encores. I managed somehow to stagger on the stage, and I only hope no one thought I had been drinking. My knees shook under me all the time.'

Dates become interesting at this juncture, and it was in 1903, regarding that enchanting bit of frolic fun, *The Fairies' Dilemma*, he says:

'Shall I tell you a great secret? I'm writing a play that will be produced at the Garrick. ... It seems quite odd after so many years' idleness. But I must make an effort to keep the little home together. When you see the piece, I think you'll call it rather "young" for a wretched old josser in his sixty-eighth year.'

And 'young' the merry descendant of the old-time Easter extravaganza certainly was. In 1904 he continues:

'Now I've got to go to the Garrick Theatre for rehearsal. They are all very civil and kind, but it is different from the Savoy, where everything went by clock-work. There's a sad want of method at the Garrick and I've had to put my foot down!'

On May 6 he uttered a word not unseasonable to-day.

'I have every reason to be satisfied with the reception of the child of my own old age. I *was* there, but I wouldn't "bow on." The better class of dramatic authors have agreed not to do so, as there is invariably a body of roughs in the gallery who encourage an author to appear in order that they may insult him when he complies with their request. These butchers and bakers and candlestick-makers are the curse of the theatre. Utterly ignorant brutes, they take upon themselves to decide what is to be received and what is to be rejected, and consequently many authors only consider them in writing plays. This accounts for much of the bad work put before the public. If I were a manager I would close the gallery on first nights.'

Possibly his heart softened later towards this gallery before whose door the faithful Gilbertians waited for hours in every sort of weather. He was certainly pleased when, at the first revival of *The Pirates of Penzance* during which he had preferred to go alone to see *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*; he was informed by one of us how a conceited actor who had the audacity to try to gag was rewarded by strident voices from aloft adjuring him to 'stick to the text.' The *Pirates* were just twenty years old, but classics need no revision. June 12, 1906, was one of the many occasions upon which Gilbert honoured one of the writers by wearing his barrister's wig for a reason contained in the following note to him, found amid a large packet of briefly worded invitations to first nights and such rehearsals as one of *Iolanthe*, when he bade his, peers' chorus wear their coronets 'as if they were used to them.'

DEAR——, —May I ask for the loan of your forensic robes on Friday next, for the performance of *Trial by Jury*. That is to say, if you haven't any Court work that day. I don't fancy the C——'s wigs!

Of this special occasion he writes:

'I had to go to the — benefit yesterday, as I had to sit on the stage in the *Trial by Jury*. I had a tremendous reception. The whole thing is an absurdity. She is a very competent actress with a charming personality, but as she is receiving a salary, of £200 a week, and going to America at a salary of £1,000 per week, I don't see that she is a fitting object of charity. There were plenty of actors and actresses assisting to whom a £5 note would have been a godsend.'



It was a few months earlier that he noted an instance of the ingratitude of one of the many beginners be helped substantially, though even to his intimate friend he does not give the name:

‘People have been discovering that I am a dramatic author, it seems to have burst upon them as a refreshing novelty, and so two of my old plays have been revived (*The Palace of Truth* and *Comedy and Tragedy*). ... I have discovered the loveliest girl in the world — she is on the stage and quite inexperienced, with a good deal of dramatic aptitude. I’ve taken her in hand, and got her an engagement at £5 a week at the Criterion, and a further engagement at the Haymarket in the autumn. Not a bad beginning for a young girl who (until she met me) had not a friend in the dramatic profession. I am sorry to say she is an ungrateful little cat, and looks upon all I have done for her as quite in the natural order of things(!) We are just off in the big motor to stay with the ——’s. I hate staying with people I don’t love dearly, ... but perhaps I shall learn to love them as have learnt to love the income-tax.’

To turn over certain of the letters of 1906 is to make it plain which of his works was dearest to him, as it is dearest to all who are not too blind to recognise his claim to rank as a serious poet:

‘*The Yeomen of the Guard* is to be revived at the Savoy on the 8th of December with a cast of which every member is a stranger to me, but I have not been consulted in any one particular. It is the greatest indignity I have ever suffered. *I am miserable about it.*’

The injury bit deep, yet he writes again in November:

I am in great distress about *The Yeomen of the Guard*, for Mrs. Carte, to, my great surprise and disgust, has cast it without consulting me in any way. This is absolutely incomprehensible to me, as she has always paid the greatest attention and deference to my wishes. Nevertheless, I am going to stage-manage it, as I don’t want the piece to revert to me with a damaged reputation.’

Two who were present can endorse the reasonableness of the dissatisfaction contained in the following:

‘I delayed answering your letter till after the production of *The Yeomen of the Guard*, that I might tell you of it. Well, it went magnificently, and I was received with such a roar of enthusiasm — it is still ringing in my ears. The notices are all excellent, but I cannot say the performance was a good one. ... Mrs. Carte wrote to me six weeks since to say that she had arranged to produce the *Yeomen* at the Savoy, and that she had cast the piece. Now, in every play produced there and elsewhere I have invariably settled the cast with the management, and in my agreement it never occurred to me to stipulate for a privilege which has been accorded to me as a matter of course by every management I have had to do with for forty years, and by no one more readily than Mrs. Carte — and the upshot is that she has got together a cheap and inefficient company. ... The press has been exceedingly good-natured, but some of them find the dialogue stilted and pointless. I wonder what they would think of the music if it were sung by people who couldn’t sing, or played by an orchestra from the Salvation Army. This is a growl, but I know you will really sympathise.’

That Gilbert had a comforting sense of the beauty of his achievement here it is delightful to know, and he was spared by death the mortification of seeing a leading literary newspaper publish a fine portrait of him with an appropriate verse of his loveliest lyric, ‘Is Life a Boon?’ beneath it, and appended to the quotation a note stating that ‘these lines were written upon the death of Sir Arthur Sullivan.’ It is a wonder this well-informed writer did not discover they were set to exquisite music by W. S. Gilbert.

In January 1907 he writes again,

‘*The Yeomen of the Guard* has been successfully produced, and notwithstanding the inferior character of the company. *The fact is, the piece is manager-proof and actor-proof. They can damage it, but they can't kill it.*’

We all know it now, but some of us rejoice we knew it then.

Letters of this year touch upon the well-remembered incident of the performances of *The Mikado* being forbidden, for fear of wounding the susceptibilities of our Japanese allies. Smarting under a mistake he was the first to correct, he says:

‘I suppose you have read that the King (with his unfailing tact) has forbidden that *The Mikado* shall ever be played again. That means at least five thousand pounds out of my pocket. It is so easy to be tactful when the cost has to be borne by somebody else. The “Mikado” of the opera was an imaginary monarch of a remote period, and cannot by any exercise of ingenuity be taken to be a slap on an existing institution. He has no more actuality than a pantomime king, and it’s a poor compliment to the Japs to suppose they would be offended by it. ... But when tact gets the bit between its teeth there is no knowing where it will carry you. It is generally supposed that —— was invited to Berlin to act by the Kaiser, with the malignant motive of showing the Germans. what impostors we all are.’

It is satisfactory to know that a few days later Gilbert was much pleased to discover that he had been entirely misinformed.

‘I learn from a friend, who had it direct from the King, that *the Japs* made the objection to *The Mikado*, and that it was at their instance it was suppressed. A delicate and polite action on the part of a guest towards a host. The rights in the piece do not revert to me for three years; by that time we shall probably be at war with Japan about India, and they will offer me a high price to permit it to be played. ... I hear the King is very angry about it, as he was supposed to have done it off his own bat. They are going to do *Iolanthe* at the Savoy, and I hope it will be done better than the others. Mrs. Carte was at the Lord Chamberlain’s weeping for two hours on end because they would not let her do *The Mikado*. King Edward’s saving sense of humour should surely have secured him against such allegations as this.’

An allusion to *The Children’s Pinafore* at the same date has its interest.

‘I’ve just agreed to write *H.M.S. Pinafore* as a narrative for children, profusely illustrated. It will only take about a fortnight and they are to pay me £750 for it, which is pretty good. Also, the same publishers are to publish eight of the libretti in their original form, and will pay me £750 for that. The servants are greatly pleased, as now they feel sure they will get their wages next year. I don’t know if I look particularly starved, but it has occurred to four different public bodies to invite me to public dinners as the guest of the evening.’”

It was in 1908 that he writes of *Fallen Fairies* ‘There is just a chance (but it’s a profound secret) that I *may* write another libretto, this time with Edward German. But I rather distrust my brain power, for who ever did good creative work at my time of life?’ He refers to the matter again a few months later in a particularly amusing letter.

‘A desire to write to you has come over me, and I always yield to temptations. Even Providence yields to them. If I do a rash thing, I’m told I’m tempting Providence; and if Providence can’t resist *my* humble temptations, how can I be expected to resist His? So I don’t; in I always go head over heels. ... I have finished Act I of the new libretto (there will be two Acts), and read it yesterday to German. He professed to be delighted with it — perhaps he was. I had some difficulty in getting the rusty, creaky old machine to work again,

but after a few essays I found the harness sit well upon me. ... I read a good story about Jenny Lind. Many years ago, in 1852, she was singing in Heidelberg. She was enthusiastically welcomed by the students, who dragged her carriage from the station to the hotel, serenaded her after the performance, and the next day (when she was to leave for Berlin) dragged her carriage from the hotel to the station and sang an enthusiastic farewell to her. As soon as the train had started, the students rushed in a body up to her bedroom, tore the sheets from the bed, cut them up into strips, and each student stuck a strip in his buttonhole and wore it all day long. That afternoon a stout and very greasy old gentleman said to Douglas Jerrold (who tells the story), "I think these Heidelberg students are all mad!" "No," said Jerrold; "they are fine high-spirited young fellows, a bit eccentric, but not mad." "Well," said the greasy old gentleman, "I'll tell you what they did to me. As soon as I had left my hotel this morning a body of them rushed to my bedroom, dragged the sheets from my bed, tore them into strips, and every one is now wearing a strip in his buttonhole." The moral of this seems to be that when you go into, someone else's bedroom in an hotel, *be quite sure it's the bedroom you want. I always do.*'

December 1, 1909; saw the first night of *Fallen Fairies*, of which he wrote next day:

'The piece went magnificently last night. ... But the notices are rather disappointing. ... As a matter of fact I have never had notices that were not more or less grudging. The press are always howling for something better than musical comedy, and when they get it they won't have it.'

That this was absolutely true makes the pity of it no less. The frequent essentially 'Gilbertian' objection to his using his own immortal *Bab Ballads* as basis for his own operas has become proverbial as an instance of critical ineptitude.

The last year of his life was marked by the striking success of *The Hooligan*, with all the old originality and a new and impressive seriousness.

'Your kind letter cheered me when I was somewhat down in the mouth for no particular reason,' he writes. ... 'The old and crumbling ruin has been propped up, and underpinned, and will, I think, stand a few months yet. My creepy piece, *The Hooligan*, is succeeding tremendously; but it must come to the end (for the time being) in a fortnight, as Welch's engagement was only for four weeks.'

It was the last triumph he was to record with the secure sense of sympathy only the perfect friendship can inspire. His view of friendship is beautifully expressed in his own words to this trusted correspondent.

'It is an infinite boon to possess at the fag end of a long life a dear friend who can enter into and sympathise with one's pleasures, cares, and troubles. Men of my age are like trees in late Autumn. Their friends have died away as the leaves have fallen from the trees, but it is enough for me to feel assured that there is at least one friend who will stick to me to the very end.'

And the end was very near. In what gallant fashion he met death will not be soon forgotten.

Scarcely a week before he died a speaker was asked to choose a 'really English' subject for a lecture in aid of a Charity chancing to be held on Empire Day, and had chosen 'The genius of W. S. Gilbert.' Greatly desiring a signed photograph for the occasion she had preferred a diffident petition, to meet with the following reply:

'DEAR MISS — Surely it should not demand much courage to ask that which it affords me so much pleasure to give. I feel highly flattered, and as proud as a peacock.' ...

Gilbert was a born letter-writer. He was really fond of writing to those he felt congenial to him, and he was also a past master of business style. He conducted the whole of his affairs and of his very considerable landed estate without outside assistance. There are before us files of business correspondence which would do credit to a first-class trained commercial man. It is not with these, however, that we are concerned for the moment. For this side of his genius we prefer to think of him conversing on paper with his many friends, dealing also with the sometimes not inconsiderable morning budgets of begging letters and appeals. He always answered them himself, and his generosity among the less fortunate members of the artistic professions was proverbial.

One story in this connexion. A man who described himself as a broken-down actor had been fined at Lambeth for some trivial offence. The paragraph caught Gilbert's eye, and he not only paid the fine, but invited the subject of his charity into the country, and set him up in a small house. The experiment was not a success; the same temptations beset Bushey and the Borough.

He was always very regular in correspondence, and a certain part of the day was allotted to letter-writing only. He left extraordinarily few papers behind him, and the only diary known to have been in his possession at the time of his death, and written at Grim's Dyke, is a volume in the characteristic firm bold writing, recording in French no more than the social day.

'I am thus able to leave my diary about,' he said, 'as I know the servants like reading it.'

This diary lay on the writing-desk which had accompanied him on many cruises in his own yacht, and on which also most of the first of the Savoy operas had dawned upon the world.

This particular desk is still in the beautiful white library, which, with the ever-fresh flowers is the same as of old — perfect scents, and harmonies of colour and design. The master-presence has gone, but sometimes in the lengthening twilight you feel it is not far distant.