

# Victorian Secrets

## Further documents relating to *Vice Versa*'s reception and critical history 1882-1957

### 1. Letter of rejection dated 22 February 1882 from George Bentley, writing as the head of the publishing firm which his father had founded:

Dear Sir,

We are sorry, after a careful consideration, to be unable to make proposals to you for the publication of 'Vice-Versa'.

We have come somewhat reluctantly to this decision as there is considerable humour in the work, but the story itself is not one to find favour with grown-up people so much as with younger readers.

The story has been in our hands, perhaps rather longer than it should have been, but this has arisen from the wish not to decline the story too hurriedly.

Should you at a future time be writing either a more developed story in novel form, or short magazine papers, we shall always be ready to give them our attention.

We will return the MS. on receiving your instructions.

We remain, dear Sir,

Yours faithfully,

R. BENTLEY & SON.

The letter is preserved in British Library Additional MSS. 54262, and is also reproduced in Anstey's autobiography. The same version of *Vice Versa* was accepted five weeks later by Smith, Elder & Co.

### 2. Extract from a letter of congratulation, also preserved in British Library Additional MSS. 54262, which Horace Pym sent to Anstey on the occasion of *Vice Versa*'s publication and in which he speaks of the "unabated pleasure" that the novel has given him:

to my mind it is the most wonderfully sustained story getting over superhuman difficulties with the ease of real power.

I still maintain that the humour is very closely allied to great pathos and that the tears are only just hidden by the smiles.

I hope you will publish your full name in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition ...

Horace (Horatio Noble) Pym (1844-96), at that time building Foxwold Chase near Brasted in Kent, was a solicitor, bibliophile, and author.

### 3. Extracts from Margaret Oliphant's review essay 'Three Young Novelists', published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, September 1884:

['Three lively, vigorous, young male novelists, happily above all discussion of sex—educated persons, men of their generation, full of all the latest theories and ideas on the subjects of our present hopes and regards' are the focus of a twenty-page extended essay. Oliphant places Anstey in the company of F. Marion Crawford

and J. F. Fergus, and judges his second novel – *The Giant's Robe* – in the light of its bestselling predecessor.] ... Mr Anstey is a writer of an entirely different character from Mr Crawford. His *début* in literature; 'Vice-Versa' carried the popular applause with it in a sudden rush. Those who ventured to object were floored by the unanswerable hint that there are some people who do not know a joke when they see it. The wit of so droll a suggestion as the transformation of a middle-aged heavy father into the semblance of a schoolboy, was so exquisite that all England shrieked with laughter. [Such wit, however, is in Oliphant's view not enough.] ... The wit which consists in a ludicrous combination of incongruities, laughable perhaps on the outside and for the moment, but containing no higher element of humour; a hard and painful jest touching, without perceiving it, the skirts of that cold matter-of-fact tragedy which is the most horrible of all things, is not a form of human faculty which can sustain a lengthened effort. Father and son in this *jeu d'esprit* were types of the worst kind of their respective classes; and though we don't deny that the transformation of a respectable city man, of something more than middle age – a pompous personage, very confident of his own virtue and of the inferiority of everybody else – into the external appearance of a small schoolboy, and his exposure to all the accidents and incidents of a child's life, is very ludicrous, the pain which is in the suggestion, to our mind, far overbalances the short-lived mirth. We can imagine that a finer genius might find, in the adventures of a genial soul placed in such an extraordinary position, occasion for laughter in which there would be the sweetness of sympathy and true human nature. But the worried, astounded, indignant, middle-aged soul conceived by Mr Anstey has not a grain of sympathy in him; and the contortions of his rage present a cruel spectacle, which it is not much to our credit to be amused by—which is like the miserable pranks of a drunkard, gloated over by a malicious crowd, rather than any more human performance. The subject of this practical joke does not even work out his deliverance, as in a fairy tale, by any softening of his nature, or repent of his hardness when he feels its effects, but is just as pompous, heartless, and selfish at the end of his strange experiences as at the beginning. He is like a cat with a tin kettle tied to its tail, irresistibly comic to those who appreciate that kind of fun, but rousing other sentiments in those who don't; while the leer of the little boy, ludicrously enclosed in the big person of a man, and carrying with him the nasty little tastes of a bad child, is preternaturally disagreeable—a sight which we loathe to look at.

But this was not the opinion of the British public, which held both its sides with laughter at so funny a sight. [In doing that, Oliphant continues, it did all that Anstey had asked it to do.] ... He meant nothing but the laugh, and he had the laugh, and such a success as has fallen to no humorist in our recollection. Thackeray was a long time making his reputation, and even Dickens, who struck more quickly "the way that takes his town," began but modestly in comparison with the author of 'Vice-Versa,' whose work was in heaven knows how many editions before he had time to draw breath. But such a wonderful triumph is not entirely advantageous, and has its inevitable recoil: it makes the next step a much harder one—a step from which any neophyte may shrink.

This step, however, has been taken, and the result now lies before us. The practical joker has appeared before the world as a serious novelist. He has not attempted to continue the farcical method by which he earned his easy laurels, and it is a great deal more trying a matter to construct a feasible picture of human existence than to raise a laugh by a fortunate concurrence of incongruities. [There follows an examination of *The Giant's Robe* by which, in Oliphant's view, the point is proved. That Anstey's second novel does not revert to the formula of his first is its strength ('One thing Mr Anstey has not done, is to attempt to be funny, and carry out the tradition of his first essay in literature, for which we are grateful to him'), but by the same token it is also the book's weakness.] ... It is a (comparatively) easy thing to make the world grin at a practical joke. It is a very different thing to enlist its attention, to rouse its sympathy, to transport it into genial laughter and tears.

#### **4. Paragraph from James Payn's 'Our Note Book' column, published in *The Illustrated London News*, issue of Saturday, April 3, 1897:**

It is often complained of Mr. Anstey Guthrie that he has never given us a work equal to his "Vice Versâ." The literary world is like that of politics as regards ingratitude. Why should it expect to have two such books from the same person? The youth of the author is somewhat, of course, to blame for this. If a young man of five-and-twenty gives us a chef-d'œuvre, what ought he not to give us at five-and-thirty? It is like a rule-of-

three sum. In the case in question, however, the author's youth was of great assistance to him, for it enabled him to describe "the boy" as he has never been so well depicted before, while he had him still fresh in his memory. Tom Hughes's boys, it is true, were excellent in their way, but they were, to a certain extent, made to order, not only to adorn a tale but to point a moral. They are described *de haut en bas* from the standpoint of a man. This, however, is beside the question, for his boys were of a higher social class than those of Mr. Guthrie, in the one case belonging to public, in the other to private schools. Because the author of "Vice Versâ" made such a distinguished success, the public seem to have been disappointed with him for not having repeated it in his novels, which, although far above the average, have not the same separateness and distinction. He was more successful with his semi-humorous, semi-supernatural tales, such as "The Fallen Idol" and "The Tinted Venus"; but since they were similar in conception to his first work they suffered from comparison with it. There is no living writer, in fact, who has suffered so much from that most fatal form of comparison, rivalry with himself. Unjustly, in my opinion, as he has been treated of late years in the way of recognition, no one questions his excellence as a master of dialogue. His "Voces Populi," as a reproduction of social conversation, whether between Algy and Guendoline or 'Arry and 'Arriet, has never been surpassed.

James Payn (1830-98) had in early 1882 been instrumental in securing the acceptance and publication of *Vice Versâ* by the publishers Smith & Elder, and he then became Anstey's 'kind & generous friend ... to the end of his life'.

### **5. Extracts from E. V. Lucas's appreciation of 'F. Anstey', published in *The English Illustrated Magazine*, August 1903:**

To sum up justly in a solitary phrase a writer of many books would often be an impossible task. But now and then there comes one whose almost every work is governed by a single idea, enabling the critic to state at any rate his principal achievement fairly in a very few words. Mr. Anstey is such an author. If but one sentence were to be inscribed beneath his name it might run something like this: "The best novelist of the tight place." Here and there, of course, Mr. Anstey has left his special kingdom, on brief and interesting excursions; but judged broadly and by his most characteristic work we may apply the phrase without hesitation: "The best novelist of the tight place." In almost all his work we observe the fascination which the spectacle of a good man struggling with adversity – in other words, a middle-class Englishman in a hole – has for his amused eyes.

One would not say that Mr. Anstey invented the story of the tight place. He had his forerunners; but he has undoubtedly devoted more genius to this branch of literature than any other man, and he stands easily first. Mr. Bultitude in an Eton jacket striving to recover his identity as a London merchant; Leander Tweddle between the exactions of tinted Aphrodite and the charms of Miss Matilda Collum; Gustavus Pulvertoft in the power of a park hack; Algernon Weatherhead with the blood of Colonel Currie's Bingo on his head; Chunder Bindabun Bhosh amid the perplexities of an alien civilisation; Mr. Clarion Blair, the poet, in the servants' hall; the Consul Diulus eternally shadowed by his flute player: all are men in tight places, to the elaboration of whose discomfort so much thought and care and thoroughness have gone that as we read we suffer hardly less than they.

... Minds with fertility in devising awkward situations, such as Mr. Anstey delights in, cannot be very uncommon, since most of the myriad farces that are written contain tight places more or less in his manner; but it is very certain that the gift to transfer such dilemmas to paper is very rare indeed, or Mr. Anstey would not occupy the isolated position that he does. For the most part the other historians of the tight place produce books that read like paraphrased farces; whereas Mr. Anstey's books are literature, such is his narrative skill, his sense of form, and his nicety of phrase.

The only important exercise in Mr. Anstey's art that I can recall is Stevenson's "Wrong Box," but splendid as that is, it has none of the illusion of reality which Mr. Anstey can impart. "The Wrong Box" is an expression of the high spirits of a writer of other things; "Vice Versâ" is the serious work of a humorist born to write "Vice Versâ."

One would give but a poor opinion of Mr. Anstey's versatility by insisting exclusively on the tight place; for he has done many other things with the most satisfying dexterity. He stands alone, for example, in his "Voces Populi," which are full of the shrewdest observation and the happiest turns of speech: probably the completest satirical commentary since Thackeray upon the foibles of ordinary folk and beyond doubt containing the best examples of ingenious descriptive nomenclature since that giant ...

**6.. From Roger Lancelyn Green's essay 'A Neglected Novelist: "F. Anstey"', published in Volume 11 of the journal *English*, Summer 1957:**

Thomas Anstey Guthrie, who was born on 8 August 1856, is remembered today solely on account of his first book, *Vice Versâ*, which lives on among the classics of humour and holds an honourable place beside *The Wrong Box*, *The Diary of a Nobody*, and *Three Men in a Boat*. Many another author has lived, died, and gone down to posterity shackled to his 'best-seller' and crying out for fair judgment on his other works; but no one has been more shabbily treated than 'F. Anstey'.

When *Vice Versâ* appeared in 1882, it convulsed the reading public with laughter, and even such an unlikely critic as George Saintsbury is said to have rolled on the floor helplessly while Andrew Lang regaled him with the misadventures of Mr. Bultitude. That the book is more than a mere joyous romp has kept it alive and vivid these seventy-five years, and won for it continued and varied praises. On the one hand, the recent film version has shown its potentialities as a work of humour; on the other, we find as exacting a critic as Professor C. S. Lewis declaring that 'its popularity was surely due to something more than farce. It is the only truthful school story in existence. The machinery of the Garûda Stone really serves to bring out in their true colours (which would otherwise seem exaggerated) the sensations which every boy had on passing from the warmth and softness and dignity of his home life to the privations, the raw and sordid ugliness, of school.'

With his first book Anstey conquered and laid open to the world his own particular kingdom: the fantastic treated as the actual, set firmly and fairly in the realistic, and encountered quite seriously and with complete logic. His example was followed in many ways: most obviously, though in so novel a manner as to excite no suggestion of imitation, by E. Nesbit in her stories of magical happenings that befall ordinary children in a normal everyday setting. Her most perfect book of this kind, *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), ranks close in excellence to Anstey's, and appeals not only to the young readers for whom it was intended ...

Of the 'many ways' in which Anstey's example was followed, the essay finds room to mention – very tentatively – just one other: its possible usefulness to Robert Louis Stevenson, on the grounds that 'the Garûda Stone and its effects may at least have offered a precedent for Dr. Jekyll's miraculous drug'.



**For more information on the Victorian Secrets edition of *Vice Versâ*, please visit:**

**[www.victoriansecrets.co.uk](http://www.victoriansecrets.co.uk)**