

Two Collectors

George Gissing

Table of Contents

<u>Two Collectors</u>	1
<u>George Gissing</u>	2

Two Collectors

George Gissing

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

The delight of his youth had become the burden of his old age. Forty years ago Wormald desired nothing better than to spend a whole day in book-hunting. Regardless of fatigue and of shoe-leather, he tramped the London pavement, rifling fourpenny-boxes, and handling enviously the volumes he could not afford. To-day, he still collected, but not for himself; he was 'collector' in the trade sense of the word, at a large bookseller's. Every morning he set forth with his list of works to be procured from the publisher or sought at second-hand shops. The pavement was harder now than of old. About noon his legs grew shaky, and often enough he breathed a malison on the heavy volumes that strained his stooping back.

Could he but creep into some quiet corner, and there lie unmolested, with never a book in sight!

Forty years ago he pictured for himself quite another close of life. He bore a brain; the world must yield before him; poverty could not repress his noble rage. Nor was specific hope denied. There came the moneyed friend, who read and admired his poems — yea, who bore the expense of printing them. A glorious day! His little blue volume was the latest birth of time; for this had the great world toiled and travailed through ages numberless; with this began a new era! Reviewers gave it but a chilly welcome, the little blue volume. The public sought it not. No matter! What was the reception of 'Endymion'? What of 'The Revolt of Islam'?

In those days he had a fine head of hair, a beaming eye, ripe lips that smiled seductively or with disdain. If hunger pinched him, he did not much care. It was natural to him to walk with gallant mien — erectos ad sidera tollere vultus. Now, the poor old hat served to disguise his baldness; his eyes were rheumy, dim; he plodded looking on the ground. The world had been too strong for him. No second volume had ever come forth with his name on the title-page, and of the little blue book not even he possessed a copy. All he once owned had gone to wreck — scattered like the memories of his life in waste places, in remote deeps.

One morning as he stood in the shop making up his collecting-book, writing to dictation, an incredible thing happened.

"'Songs of Youth.' By Alfred Wormald. Robinson, 1852.'

His hand paused; he looked up at the dictator.

'What? I didn't quite hear ——'

'Some bygone namesake of yours, Mr. Wormald. "Songs of Youth" ——'

The details were repeated, and Wormald mechanically jotted them down. There followed a dozen other books, and the list was finished; then the collector again spoke.

'Can you tell me whose order that is, sir?' His voice shook a little. 'The "Songs of Youth" ——'

'Why — you don't mean to say ——?'

'Yes, I wrote it; I published it ——'

'Ah! Odd thing! Let me see; it's Mr. Freshwater, of Chiswick. You probably have a copy to dispose of?'

Wormald shook his head, muttered a few indistinct remarks, and set out for the day's work. But not in his wonted frame of mind. Instead of making doggedly towards the first point indicated by his list, he began to stray about the street, abstracted, heedless of duty. Gradually he was grasping the fact that some mortal desired to obtain his little blue volume. Such a thing had never happened in his eight years' collectorship; nay, such a thing had never occurred to him as possible. What could it mean? Who was Mr. Freshwater, of Chiswick?

At length, having wandered quite out of his way, he checked himself, and stood staring at tile nearest shop. 'Can't you understand? It is the very truth. Mr. Freshwater, of Chiswick, wants your book, has given a special order for it, is eager to obtain it. A student of literature, no doubt; perhaps himself a poet. Some one has spoken to him of "Songs of Youth." Some one has read passages to him. He was moved with enthusiasm, with wonder that he had never heard the name of Alfred Wormald. He wrote at once to his bookseller ——'

The old man straightened himself, seemed to shake off a score of years. Having a few coppers in his pocket,

Two Collectors

he made for a public-house, and drank a glass of spirits. Now he was ready!

That day he sought in vain. Robinson, a publisher extant in 1852, had long since vanished into space — forgotten as the booksellers of old Rome. 'Songs of Youth' could not be heard of. On the morrow Wormald pursued his task, struggling against a profound discouragement. On the third day it was decided to advertise in the Publishers' Circular, but not until the advertisement had been repeated did it elicit a response. Then came a postcard from a bookseller of Birmingham, who could supply one copy of 'Songs of Youth,' minus fly-leaf, and in poor condition generally, price one shilling. Wormald was told of this, and his heart leapt. The time of suspense, the long tramps to every shop and stall of which he knew, had visibly enfeebled him he suffered now from a ceaseless trembling of one hand, and from strange sensations in the leg on the other side.

The volume, as he ascertained (it was become something of a joke in the shop), had been despatched to Mr. Freshwater on Friday. On Saturday afternoon, having made himself as presentable as he could, the old man journeyed to Chiswick. The directory had informed him of Mr. Freshwater's address; of course, he would not allow his employers to suspect the purpose in his mind.

A large house; a flue old garden, just now in summer loveliness. Wormald shook in every limb as he approached the front door. Mr. Freshwater might not be at home: in that case it would be best to go away without leaving a name, and to write a letter. Would not the letter have been a wiser course, to begin with? Well, he was here now, and would take his chance. Yes, Mr. Freshwater was within. What name? With dry, half-paralysed tongue, he gasped 'Alfred Wormald,' then hurriedly repeated it, with the prefix 'Mister.'

And he was led through the hall into the library — a beautiful, luxurious room, the kind of room which, forty years ago, would have given his pulses a divine thrill. Mr. Freshwater stood there by his writing-table; he was a smooth-shaven, shrewd-faced man of middle-age, tending to corpulency, and he regarded the visitor with a polite surprise.

'Sir — I am Alfred Wormald.'

'Oh! — ah! — I'm afraid I don't recall your name.'

The old man tottered slightly; his eyes wandered.

'You have received from your booksellers, sir, a copy of "Songs of Youth" ——'

His tongue failed; he had so strange a look that Mr. Freshwater began to feel uneasy.

"Songs of Youth" — have I? I suppose my librarian ordered it. A volume of poems, I suppose? How — what do you wish to see me about?'

The other, commanding himself, fixed upon Mr. Freshwater a look not without dignity.

'You collect poetical works, sir?'

'Why, yes, I do. But I must refer you to my librarian about that. Not all poetical works. I am at present getting together those published in the Victorian time by houses which have ceased to exist. Presumably, you are in the trade? Have you a catalogue? By all means send it. I shall next be turning my attention to early Victorian periodicals. But by all means send in your catalogue. You had no other business with me?'

'Thank you, sir, that was all.'

And Wormald withdrew.

'Queer old chap,' Mr. Freshwater murmured to himself. 'Broken-down bookseller, evidently. There ought to be a home for them.'

He resumed his seat and the examination of the latest volume of 'Book Prices Current.'