

*Pursuing the Great Bad Novelist*

ON a cold spring day in 2002, I found a damp and crumpled piece of paper on a beach near Reykjavik, Iceland. Unwadding it, I discovered it was a single page torn from a book. It was brownish, about five inches by seven, with typeset Icelandic words on both sides, and page numbers: 17 and 18. I had been studying the language for almost a year and had attained a level of competency that enabled me to read books (slowly, painstakingly, with a dictionary at hand), but the paper was too wet and matted with seaweed to decipher.

I decided to keep it. Nearby, I came upon another small clump of pages that appeared to be from the same book: pages 19–22 and 27–30. I collected these, too.

When I got back to my apartment, I spread the pages out to dry on the shelf beneath the window, and a decaying, fishy smell filled the room. In one sense, I had picked up some trash from the beach. But I couldn't help taking a more romantic view of the situation. Somehow these pages had ended up in the ocean, where by rights they ought to have disintegrated in the water or been bleached by the sun, yet they came back to land whole. A mystery. Maybe that's why I found the story they told so compelling, even though I recognized, from the moment I began reading, that I had found something amazingly, almost unbelievably, bad:

"Oh, I hope that isn't true. You have been—been so good to me," she said, and her beautiful eyes showed sincere affection.

"You have been like a good daughter to me," he said and smiled a dull smile. "You have been very good to me."

She let her eyes rest on the embers in the fireplace for a moment, and then looked back at him.

"Why are you so proud?" she asked quietly and sensitively.

The earl laughed a cold laugh.

"Come, Veronica. You know my pride is nothing compared to your own. Oh, don't be so contrary! It's the family shortcoming. I've paid attention to you. It's a fault, isn't it, Bolton?—The fault follows you. I have no son." A weakness came into his voice for a moment, but then it became hard and unfeeling again. "I don't care about my cousin Talbot. Wayneford—it was my mother's property—— I want to have a good and competent house manager. Dear Veronica, I am naturally too sensitive. You don't need to make up your mind right now. You can think about it until the morning."

She made a movement with her hand so similar to the one the earl had done before she entered that Mr. Bolton was quite amazed.

"Thank you both, I can decide now," she spoke smiling and directed her words at Mr. Bolton. "I knew poverty. I sat beside my father's deathbed. Poverty is horrible." Her eyes became wet with tears and her lips trembled. "I know the power of wealth. So I never have to marry."

"What do you decide then?" asked the earl sharply.

"I decide," she said, and stood up straight and proud, "to accept these conditions."

"Excellent," said the earl and appeared more jovial. "Now you can leave us, Veronica."

The earl was near the door and opened it for her. She nodded and left. The aged and grumpy lawyer thought that when she left the hall some of the daylight left with her.

His Highness took a seat in his old chair again.

"I knew I could rely on her," he said, and the old hateful sneer settled on his lips. "Compose the will, Bolton, I'll sign it tomorrow."

—pages 17–18 [author's translation]

The whole story unfolded before me, even though I had only ten pages.

After agreeing to honor Lord Lynborough's conditions (whatever they were), Veronica goes out riding across the moors, contemplating the difference between her bleak apartment in Camden Town and her uncle's beautiful Devonshire estate. Suddenly, she nearly tramples a puppy with her horse, but

it is snatched to safety just in time by a mysterious man who happened to be lolling about in the heather through which she is galloping.

Then there are four missing pages (23 through 26), which the ocean kept from me.

When the story resumes, Lynborough has appeared on the scene in his carriage, and Veronica is trying to persuade him to give the heroic puppy-rescuer a job on his estate. The earl asks the man for his name. He is Ralph Farrington, of Australia. The earl tells him to report to the gamekeeper for work. The chapter concludes with the departure of the earl and a bit of foreshadowing about what is to befall young Veronica: "She did not know that the stage was set and the tragedy of her life was about to begin."

Tragedy? Pshaw. Though I couldn't read beyond page 30, it was obvious what would happen: a happy future awaited Veronica and Ralph as mistress and master of Wayneford, while the earl, who sneered and glared, would be punished for his sinister nature and other crimes as yet unnamed. This was melodrama. As with most Hollywood movies, the outcome was never in doubt. It wasn't a question of "how will it end?" but "what will blow up along the way?"

At the time that I found the pages, I had been in Reykjavik for eight months on a Fulbright scholarship, studying Icelandic language and literature. I had come with the intention of applying to PhD programs in Scandinavian literature the following year; I already had a master's degree in medieval philology with an emphasis in Old Norse. (People often react with amused surprise when I tell them this. Philo—*what?* In Old Norse? I can never truly explain.) When I began graduate school, I planned to study Middle English literature, having long been attracted to chivalric romances and Arthurian mythology. But instead of devoting my attention to tales about knights errant, I had, at my professor's behest, spent months poring over dialect atlases of fourteenth-century England in an attempt to determine the geographic provenance of a manuscript containing a religious allegory about bees. I thought about quitting entirely, then decided to just change my emphasis. At least in Norse literature there are dwarves, and no bees. I loved the Icelandic sagas: stories not of knights but of farmers who ride around braining each other with axes. Even so, I was not a dedicated scholar.

When my classes at the University of Iceland ended in May, I had spent the last of my scholarship money but decided to stay in Reykjavik anyway. I

wanted to experience the Icelandic summer, and I had no pressing reason (no job, no specific obligations) to return to the States. I passed the mornings writing fiction and the afternoons reading popular Icelandic novels, newspapers, or even gossip magazines with a dictionary in hand. I had decided that if I was going to make a contribution to the world of literature, it would not be as a scholar. I would write my own books instead.

This proved more difficult than I anticipated—which is to say, the novel I began writing that summer in Reykjavík was *bad*. Almost nothing happened in it. The protagonist (a young man much like me in all respects except gender) went around experiencing angst. I knew it was no good, but I didn't know what to do about it. I couldn't let go of the concept (something about global politics as experienced by an expatriate American in the post-9/11 environment). I cringe when I think of it now. At the end of the summer I would toss the entire novel into the garbage, but at the time I fiddled with it endlessly.

When I got bored, I wrote about Veronica and Ralph instead. If I couldn't finish reading their story, I could invent it. Perhaps it was something like this: Ralph is working as a groundskeeper at Wayneford. One day, he sees smoke rising from the house and realizes it's on fire. He runs into the flaming building to see if anyone needs rescuing. Veronica's mentally retarded cousin Talbot is in there, hiding beneath the harpsichord. Ralph tries to grab him and pull him to safety, but Talbot is strong and stubborn. Ralph must grab a vase from the mantel and crack Talbot on the head to render him unconscious before dragging him to safety. When Ralph emerges, Veronica is there and swoons with relief as she recognizes the depth of her feelings for him. Meanwhile, Lynborough perishes in the conflagration. Veronica inherits the estate and marries Ralph, and they go on honeymoon to Torquay—which, unfortunately, has just been beset by pirates.

When the summer finally ended, I returned home. By then it was clear that I couldn't (emotionally) commit to pursuing a career in academe, but I also couldn't (financially) continue to live solely as a reader and writer of bad novels. I didn't have a wealthy uncle from whom to inherit an estate to finance my career as an aspiring writer. I needed a job.

My old college roommate worked at a large Silicon Valley technology company (best left nameless) that was searching for a new administrative assistant. The office was quiet, with comfortable chairs and free coffee. The responsibilities were minimal. This seemed compatible with my interest in

reading and writing, both of which could be accomplished surreptitiously in the office, so I applied.

At that desk, I began work on a new novel featuring a young man (much like me in all respects except gender) who found some mysterious pages from an unknown novel on a beach and became obsessed with them. I called it *The Water's Edge*. I had no idea how it would end. The protagonist experienced angst about his inability to figure out what the pages meant. There was very little in the way of plot.

Still, I had Ralph and Veronica. Why I continued thinking about them, a year after I first discovered those bits of a bad novel, is difficult to explain. Certainly it was not because I admired what I had read. The characters were caricatures; the plot, such as I knew it, was ludicrously improbable. I was not a reader of romances (unless you count the chivalric medieval variety). I suppose I wanted to keep reading in that book because I wanted confirmation that I had correctly inferred what would happen to Veronica and Ralph, but I also wanted to be amazed to learn how they would achieve this. I wanted both the expected outcome and surprise: I wanted *melodrama*.

Admittedly, in other circumstances the story alone would not have warranted my fascination. Had I found the book on a shelf, I probably wouldn't have opened it; if I had, I soon would have set it down again. But because I found it on a beach, I *had* to read it. The discovery of the pages was melodrama itself. Like a man lying about the moors to prevent the unconscionable trampling of innocent, free-roaming puppies, these pages were lying on the sand that day for a reason; though they could not know it, they were destined to be there, waiting for the girl—me—to wander into sight.

I decided to search for the book. Possibly, I thought, I might track it down. I had only ten pages, but I knew the principal characters' names and the Devonshire setting; on the basis of these facts, I suspected the novel was a translation from an English one, and I suspected that it was old—perhaps Victorian—on the basis of the pages themselves. In the course of my studies, I had read enough books of hundred-year-old scholarship to know this almost by feel, but the signature mark “2” stamped at the bottom of page 17 was concrete evidence that this was not a recent publication. In bygone days, printers used signature marks to indicate the gathering of leaves in which a page was to be bound, but this hasn't been common practice for decades.

And so I began searching. Admittedly, this was partly an evasion strategy to get out of working on my second bad novel, which was stagnating and show-

ing no more promise than the first. The search was also a distraction from my mundane job. But I convinced myself that if I could figure out what the pages on the beach were all about, I would have something to write about. I would have material for my novel.

But, first, I had to find the book. I looked in character encyclopedias; I searched the proper names as subjects in library catalogs; I looked for books on Devon; I Googled passages from the Icelandic text; I posted messages on romance novel forums on the Internet; I talked to a town librarian; I talked to a Stanford University librarian; I e-mailed the Library of Congress. Every librarian I spoke with was sympathetic, but nobody could provide definitive advice. Nobody responded to my online postings. Finally, I decided to e-mail the National Library of Iceland, in case my assumption that it was an English novel was mistaken. I attached a picture of one of the pages I had found and asked if they had suggestions for locating the book.

I received a terse response from an Icelandic librarian a few days later. She provided no suggestions or explanations. She simply wrote, "The page is from this book," and pasted in index details from the library catalog. The book was indeed a translation from English, published in Icelandic under the title *Veronika* (which, I assume, was the critical clue that enabled her to match the page to its source). It had also been published in another Icelandic edition under the title *Úrskudur ur hjartans*—a direct translation of the English title: *The Verdict of the Heart*. The author was one Charles Garvice.

Knowing all of this proved insufficient. I still had to locate a copy. I tried first with used book dealers on the Internet. Though many of them had other books by Garvice—a shocking number of books, in fact—nobody had this one. I did a global library catalog search and discovered two copies: one at the University of Minnesota and another at the British Library. Neither was a circulating copy, so I would have to make a trip. Off-season fares to London were scarcely more than fares to Minneapolis, and, in another fortunate plot twist, a friend of mine from graduate school had moved to London and was living a half mile from the British Library. He would be happy to give me a patch of floor space to sleep on if I came to visit—so London it was. I would fly eight thousand miles to read a bad book.

When I asked for a week off work on short notice for a trip to London, my boss (a Brit himself) wanted to know why; when I told him that I was going to the British Library, he had to know what for; when I explained that I was trying to track down an obscure book, he wanted to know what book it was. There was no way around it: I had to tell him.

"It's this . . . romance novel," I said.

A few days later at lunch, when I mentioned to some other co-workers that I would be taking a vacation, my boss added, with a bemused grin, "She's going to the library." The others (software engineers who probably read pot-boiler fantasy novels and Star Trek fan fiction if they read for pleasure at all) shook their heads at the absurdity of it. They had no literary pretensions, so were not inclined to be dismissive of the fact that I was traveling overseas to read a romance novel. What amazed them was the fact that I was planning my vacation around any book at all.

I went for the simple reason that I wanted to know what would happen next. But not just to Veronica and Ralph. I told myself that finding out what happened in the book would tell me what should happen next in the novel I was writing—but that too was absurd. Though I wouldn't have put it this way at the time, I really wanted to know what would happen next to me.

Something had to happen. I was in my midtwenties; I had finished as much schooling as I cared to, and I no longer had a distant graduation date to serve as goal; I had settled down in a long-term relationship; I had taken a job that I continued to think of as a temporary step, but toward what I could not say—certainly I had no immediate plans to leave it, because I didn't know what I would leave it for. I was not unhappy, but I had no sense of momentum, no sense of forward propulsion. I had no significant life goal in mind. Tracking down the book about Veronica and Ralph may have been an arbitrary goal, but it was a goal nonetheless. It gave me a sense of plot—a path to follow, one thing leading to the next, proceeding to some climax and (I could only hope) resolution. The pursuit made me feel that I was making some sort of progress in my life. And my goal was no more silly, for crying out loud, than the goals of an Arthurian knight—to track down some mysterious knave in green tights, or to find out "what women want." Quests are usually about the desire to seek; the things sought are mere pretext.

Alfred Hitchcock (a melodramatist of sorts himself) had a word for the object of a hero's quest. It could be a briefcase, some jewels, a puppy—anything that would motivate action. What it was didn't matter. He called it a MacGuffin. *The Verdict of the Heart* was mine.

On the day I arrived in London, I went straight to the library, roller bag in tow. I hadn't anticipated that getting a reader's pass would be difficult. I thought it was something like a public library card, available to all comers—until I looked

at the application form. They wanted me to list my publications and current academic affiliations, but of course I had none. As I sat waiting for my number to be called, I saw a man dressed in Muslim clerical garb withdraw angrily from the counter, his application refused. I grew concerned. I understood why the British Library would be protective of its collection, and why the materials must be intended mostly for purposes of serious scholarship, but all the same, I couldn't help but wish for a more welcoming atmosphere. The situation was pointedly clear: dilettantes and delinquents might tour the gift shop, but in the reading rooms they would be unwelcome. I began to prepare my appeal to pity. If deemed unworthy based on my credentials, I would explain that I had come all the way from California because *I had to read this book*—I would tell them about what had happened on the beach in Iceland and how I had used half of my annual vacation days for this trip—and how this was one of only two copies of the book that I could locate in the whole world. I was aware of how silly all of this sounded.

Fortunately, the situation did not come to that. On the form, when I explained the purpose of my research, I did not write “unaccountable desperation.” Instead, I said that I was writing a book—which was sort of true, if you counted the rotten, half-done, plotless novel. When the woman who processed my application asked if I had any evidence of prior publication to corroborate the fact that I was a “writer,” I replied in the most confident tone I could muster: “Not yet.” She said that I could be granted only a one-month pass, under the circumstances. If I were published, she explained, I could be granted a three-year pass.

“One week would do it,” I said. She took an unflattering mug shot, printed out my reader's pass, and sent me off to the reading room.

The afternoon was nearly gone. I put in my order right away, but the book would not be available until the following morning. I had an hour to kill before I could meet my friend at his flat and sleep off my jet lag, so I wandered the library until I came across a small art exhibition in a back corridor. I can't remember the name of the artist or the content of the images in great detail—all I can recall are washes of blue and fragments of verse interspersed with the images—but I remember the title of the exhibit: *The Water's Edge*. Coincidence or sign? I didn't know. At that moment, I was just annoyed that my title was “taken.” I despaired of ever having an original thought to convey. I just wanted to lose myself in the story of Veronica and Ralph.

The next morning, I held the book in my hands at last. Even as a physical object, it was flimsy. Unlike the Icelandic edition, which had been printed on paper substantial enough to withstand the tides, this was a cheap, mass-market paperback; each brittle page was reinforced with a sheet of translucent, gauze-like adhesive. I looked at the picture of the rosy-lipped young woman on the cover and wondered what the real scholars (most of whom hunched over thick tomes, and many of whom were *really wearing tweed*) would think of me as I sat among them with this tawdry little book.

*The Verdict of the Heart* was everything I expected it to be. There were unambiguous villains. Ralph and Veronica were good. Ralph did indeed rescue someone from a house fire, and justice prevailed in the end. I was wrong about Lord Lynborough, though: he was gruff but fair. Cousin Talbot (not retarded) turned out to be the bad guy. Alas, one of my favorite lines—the one about how the tragedy of Veronica's life was set to begin the day Ralph rescued the puppy—was missing from the original. (The Icelandic translator must have taken a little liberty there.) But the important thing is that it all ended happily for Veronica and Ralph.

I kept flipping back to the cover. Above the illustration was a bit of marketing copy that boldly claimed this to be the work of the world's bestselling author. I had realized the writer was prolific when I saw the long list of titles beneath his name in the library catalog, but it had never occurred to me that he could have been so popular. I wondered: how could Charles Garvice have been the bestselling author in the world less than one hundred years ago if I had never heard his name before the Icelandic librarian's e-mail? Could the claim be as empty as those about “Dr. J. Collis Browne's Chlorodyne,” advertised on the back cover, which promised to cure coughs, colds, bronchitis, asthma, diarrhea, dysentery, spasm, palpitations, hysteria, neuralgia, rheumatism, gout, and toothache?

When I returned to California, the marketing copy on the cover was what stuck with me. Of course, I was satisfied by my ability to correctly predict the outcome of a formulaic romance novel—I have seldom felt quite as tickled with delight as I did during those two days in the library—but the buzz was short-lived. The mystery of Charles Garvice supplanted the mystery of Veronica and Ralph in my imagination.

In spite of my curiosity, I did not pursue the question at first. Instead, I wrote a few more chapters of *The Water's Edge*, which were just as pointless as

the ones that preceded them. A month or so later, I tossed this second novel into the garbage and decided to do more research. The Internet was no help this time. I was driven back into the bowels of the library to track down other obscure books and microfilms of magazines, most of which had been out of print for decades.

Charles Garvice was the bestselling English author of the early twentieth century. His fame spread beyond Britain to North America and Australia. His works were translated into numerous languages, including French, German, Spanish, Dutch, and of course Icelandic. He published more than one hundred novels, selling over seven million copies worldwide by 1914. His name became a metonym for the volumes he produced: throughout England, "Garvices" were traded like gossip. He made enough money to buy back the copyright to all of his own early serialized stories by acquiring the periodicals—not just the copies in which his work appeared, but whole publishing enterprises—and then reissuing the stories in new book versions, bringing in more money with every edition. According to Garvice's sometime agent, Eveleigh Nash, his books became "as numerous in the shops and on the railway bookstalls as the leaves of Vallombrosa." Considering sales like these, you could argue that Garvice was one of the greatest bad novelists ever.

It is hard to imagine how a writer could be so prolific and widely read less than a hundred years ago and so utterly forgotten today. Regardless of whether he was good, he was immensely popular. Where did all those readers—and all those books—go?

"I might say that I began, wedged into the angle of a playground wall at a certain preparatory school at Bexley Heath, with Dickens' *David Copperfield* on my knees," Garvice told a journalist from *Bookman* magazine when asked about his early life. According to the few limited accounts of his childhood, Garvice was born in or around Stepney, England, in about 1850, just when *David Copperfield* was first appearing in serial installments. Professionally, Garvice would have a lot in common with Dickens: both got their start as journalists and learned the craft of fiction by writing for periodicals; both enjoyed popular success in their lifetimes and were consequently accused of mercenary motives; both had a certain penchant for the melodramatic and a tendency to use more words than necessary. (They were paid by the word.)

But Garvice was no Dickens. He didn't offer challenging insights or social critique; he just pandered to the popular taste for exciting stories with happy

endings. He never felt that there was anything inherently filthy about lucre. In later life, he proudly told his friend Douglas Sladen that when he sold his first story, at the age of nineteen, he realized "a mine of wealth lay glittering at my feet."

Fortune did not follow immediately upon this youthful realization. His first novel, *Maurice Durant*, was not a success when it was published in 1875. It had been reasonably successful as a serial, but when it was published in volume form, sales were weak. Garvice blamed the failure not on the book's lack of literary merit but on the way it was marketed. The book did not sell because it was too long and too expensive for popular sales, he reasoned. He learned quite early in his career that writing was a business like any other.

Garvice spent the next twenty-three years cranking out serials for the periodicals of American publisher George Munro, who later repackaged and resold them as novels with titles like *A Modern Juliet*, *Woven on Fate's Loom*, and *Just a Girl*. The latter, which came out in 1898, was Garvice's greatest popular success to date in America, selling more than 100,000 copies. The accompanying publicity was enough to attract the notice of the British public. *Just a Girl* was Garvice's first bestseller in his native country—an achievement matched by every subsequent novel he published. In 1913, his annual sales for all titles combined stood at 1.75 million copies, worldwide. He continued more or less apace for the rest of his life.

The critics were merciless. His work was routinely dismissed by highbrow publications such as the *Athenaeum*, which snidely acknowledged Garvice's success: "The very thickness with which the colours are laid on will make the novels popular in circles which know nothing of artistry."

The question that concerned the critics was not whether Garvice's work was high art—it patently was not—but whether he was a calculating businessman who condescended to write for the newly literate feminine masses or a simpleton who believed in the sort of twaddle he peddled. A fool or a cormorant. Either way, he was damned.

I began to collect Garvice novels—*On Love's Altar*, *His Love So True*, *A Relenting Fate*. I could never get through any of them, other than *The Verdict of the Heart*. Little beyond the particulars of the heroines' hair color differentiates one from another, and without seaweed stuck to the pages, the stories were stripped of mystery. They bored me.

I did manage to get through Garvice's one nonfiction book, *A Farm in Creamland*, which he referred to in its introduction as a "useful" book about agriculture. He conceived it as a guide for would-be gentleman farmers, so that

they might learn from his experiences after he moved his family in 1904 from London to Devon to enjoy a pastoral life.

"I shall ramble at my own sweet will," Garvice wrote in the preface, "incidentally recounting certain happenings, pathetically or comically humorous, in the locality in which this farm is situated." Ramble he did—about his farm and his children and his chickens and pigs. "Certain happenings" included the day in 1905 when Garvice took the bus to the neighboring town of Ridgeford for a haircut and was asked by a fellow passenger for his opinion on the new artificial manure, which he happily and expansively provided.

The book is not useful at all, unless you are interested in understanding the man who peddled romantic tripe to the masses. Garvice was a fool for Devon and the charms of country living. His farm was *not* the glittering mine of wealth that his novels were; it was losing money. He kept at it, he said, because he wanted to work the land in "the genuine, dirty, Devonshire fashion." He wanted what the characters in his novels could have: a Wayneford of his own. This idea lends credence to the notion that his novels were not born entirely of condescension. In writing, perhaps he was not simply pandering to popular taste but indulging his own desire to live happily ever after. He seemed to believe in the possibility of living the dream that his books described.

Garvice did not stop writing during the years on the farm, but his literary output decreased. After publishing twelve novels in 1902 and five in 1903, he averaged only three a year between 1904 and 1907. But he could not give it up entirely. His writing was financing the romance of farming.

By that point in his career, he knew his material well; he had been putting out the same stories over and over since the 1870s. Whenever a new novel was in order, he lit his pipe, called in his secretary Miss Johnston, and began to dictate. Miss Johnston was a "clever and highly cultured young woman" who had once worked for Ford Madox Ford. Garvice had poached her away from Ford to have someone to help him elevate his style a bit, figuring she might have picked up a thing or two from her former employer. He could joke about his lowbrow reputation with fellow "cash authors" at his club in London, but perhaps he really was sensitive to the charges of the critical establishment. Not that their relentless criticism had any impact on his commercial success.

Not even the Great War could diminish his sales. In fact, women began sending their Garvices to soldiers in the trenches, and the world's best-selling novelist found a new category of readers. *The English Review* (a highbrow

journal that, incidentally, was founded by Ford) took note. As Thomas Moulton reported, Garvice's books enjoyed a favor in the trenches surpassed by none and equaled only by that accorded Jack London. However, Moulton could not resist adding that "it requires the extraordinarily attenuated state of things . . . for the average healthy male to even think of turning to [Garvice], let alone reading him and asking for more."

The critics do have a point. I look at the awkward punctuation in *The Verdict of the Heart*—the excessive and awkward use of dashes—and I see a man pausing to puff on his pipe. I see why his prose ends up sounding so bad, the cleverness and cultivation of his secretary notwithstanding. I understand why he engendered so much antipathy from his contemporaries on the literary scene, who may well have nurtured similar fantasies about fame and sales and what they could do with these, and who must have been frustrated that such awful writing was so richly rewarded. And I recognize that most people would find it difficult to have sympathy for a man whose fortune in modern currency would make him a millionaire—a man who wanted to use this fortune in pursuit of something resembling a feudal lordship over the colorful and charming local peasants. And yet, I feel bad for him. He endured more public ridicule than any decent human being deserves.

What Moulton and the other critics failed to acknowledge, but what Garvice knew and honored, are the ways so many of us live in emotionally attenuated states, during times of peace as well as war. Stories like the ones Garvice wrote may be low art, or they may not be art at all. They may offer consolation or distraction rather than provocation and insight. But many people find provocation enough in real life, and so they read for something else. One cannot have contempt for Garvice without also having some level of contempt for common humanity, for those readers—not all of whom can be dismissed as simpletons—who may not consciously believe in what they are reading, but who read anyway because they know: a story can be a salve.

Charles Garvice suffered a cerebral hemorrhage on 21 February 1920. He lay in a coma until his death, eight days later.

The *London Times* offered the following anecdote in Garvice's obituary:

It cannot be said that his work was of a high order; but criticism is disregarded by his own frank attitude towards the possibility of the permanence of his literary reputation. His answer to a captious friend

who seemed solicitous to disabuse him on this score was merely to point with a gesture to the crowds on the seaside beach reading. "All my books," he said: "they are all reading my latest." It was a true estimate.

The "captious friend" had a point. Garvice *has* been forgotten, notwithstanding the occasional editions of his work that have been reissued, like the 1980 Bantam edition of *Only a Girl's Love*—a mass-market paperback that was sold as part of "Barbara Cartland's Library of Love"—or the 2007 trade paperback edition of *At Love's Cost* published by Dodo Press, which seems to specialize in out-of-copyright canonical "classics." Those critics who found his work so risible that they would rather rend the pages from the spine and toss them into the drink than sit on the beach reading them have had their way in the end.

The formula that Garvice so successfully exploited—virtuous heroines overcoming numerous obstacles to attain happiness—is a predictable one, which any author might employ. His readers are now dead, and their Garvices—if they exist at all—molder in the attics of the Western world while books much like them, by authors who have learned the same lessons and applied the same patterns to their fiction, are being read on the beach today.

Poor Garvice, I sometimes think. But there was nothing poor about him. He knew what he was doing. He understood the value of a well-placed puppy; he could tell a story that millions of people were delighted to read. As a bad novelist myself—with deficiencies in exactly the areas where Garvice had strengths—I can see the virtue in this.

I'll never know who decided to toss that copy of *Veronika* into the ocean. An Icelandic fisherman? An unlikely beach reader in Reykjavík? I like to think of a rebellious granddaughter—a student of literature perhaps—who found the book in an attic. Did she tear the pages from the spine herself to express her scorn, or did the ocean dissolve the glue? Did she stand on the beach and release the paper to the wind? She must have been so filled with contempt for the silly stuff, so appalled that people can nurture such absurd hopes and expect to find them fulfilled in the pages of a book. She could not have imagined another reader would find what she cast out and be moved to go to the far side of the earth just to see what would happen next.

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