"I Never Done a Burgess!"

Three Unpublished Letters from Booth Tarkington Touched Off by His Use of a Name

JOSEPH M. BACKUS

THE FOLLOWING THREE LETTERS were written by Booth Tarkington to Gelett Burgess after Burgess complained that Tarkington had used his name for a fictional character.[1] On August 3, 1918, in *Collier's* (LXI, 8–9; 24–28), Tarkington had published a mild satire on young love called "Little Cousin Sarah," and the surname of the title character, an infant, was "Burgess." Her mother is also Sarah Burgess, a name that is temporarily borne by a third character when mistaken for the infant. The two real cousins Sarah appear only briefly and respectably. But, like Burgess' own sister Ella, the mother "had married late in life"; like his other sister, Anne, she "was blessed with but one child"; and such possible reflections on his family gave him cause to protest.

While his three letters to Tarkington are apparently not extant, it is clear that Burgess charged Tarkington with the libelous use of his surname and that he did so in jest, although he was well aware of the seriousness of libel. Seven years before, he himself had been sued for $100,000 by a notorious San Francisco gourmand who found his name among the many eccentric characters in Burgess' major novel, *The Heart Line*. In writing this book, Burgess had carefully made up fictional names for his villains: when he included his friend Porter Garnett as a dastardly man about town, he concealed Garnett's identity under the unidentifiable "Blanchard Cayley." But, when his fictional characters seemed nondefamatory representations of real persons, he took less care to disguise real names. "Philip Starr" for an inoffensive poet is not far removed

[1] For permission to publish these letters I would like to thank George P. Hammond, Director of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. All three letters are written in ink on Tarkington's printed stationery and are reproduced with their illustrations at the end of this article.

from "George Sterling," the name of the real poet that Burgess had in mind. Similarly, since he saw nothing wrong with being a "star eater," he altered the name of his prototype for this character hardly at all, by changing the actual "Daily" to "Dailey." This slight variation in spelling, which could have been due to error, made unquestionable the identification between fact and fiction, but the case against Burgess was finally dismissed as groundless.[2]

If Burgess had begun his letters to Tarkington with a bogus charge of libel, Tarkington preferred instead to discuss the connotative value of names, just as he had done in his own major novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, then being published as a book.[3] Near the end of this work, he has the "control" of a medium speak as if for the very Muse of Naming herself when she says: "Name ... Name hard to get – always hard for Lopa [the control]. She [the spirit on the Other Side] wants you to understand names are hard to make. She says you must think of something that makes a sound. ... She says a ring – oh, Lopa knows! She means a bell! That's it, a bell."

"Does she mean her name is Belle?" asks the character attending the seance.

"Not quite. Her name is longer."

"Perhaps ... she means that she was a belle."

"No. She says she thinks you know what she means. She says you must think of a colour. ... She says her colour is light – it's light colour and you can see through it."

"Amber?" asks the other character, and finally he thinks of Isabel Amberson – once the belle of the town, lightly colorful and quite transparent.

Tarkington thus reveals some of the ideas he himself must have had in naming this character originally, and his general treatment

[2] According to "Burgess Sued for $100,000 Libel," San Francisco *Examiner*, 19 December 1911, 1:3; in reference to *The Heart Line* (Indianapolis, 1907), 121. Other considerations of Burgess in naming his characters are found in his "Make a Name for Yourself," *The Saturday Review of Literature*, XXX (25 January 1947), 9–10; 41. This article is discussed in my "Gelett Burgess and Names for Characters," *Names*, IX (June, 1961), 95–107.

[3] This novel, which had been running in the *Metropolitan* (December, 1917–September, 1918) was published in New York in book form on October 24, three days after Tarkington's first letter to Burgess. Quotations here are from the 1922 edition, 510–511; 24–25.

of the name "Amberson" suggests others. Because of the rarity and elegance suggested by "Amber" and the dynastic quality of "son," the name is well suited to this family's magnificence. Then, as magnificence fades, the name, too, dies away. It is first weakened by the marriage of Major Amberson's daughter, Isabel, to Wilbur Minafer. Here again Tarkington indicates his awareness of the connotative value of names, by having a member of the Women's Tennyson Club exclaim, "Wilbur Minafer!" in such a way that the surname itself, says Tarkington, seems to explain Wilbur's "crime." "Wilbur *Minafer*!" the lady repeats. "It's the queerest thing I ever heard."

In contrast to Isabel's more attractive suitor, an impoverished poet, the stolid Minafer is said to be guilty of being no Apollo. "Minafer," then, is plausible as a parallel classical allusion to Minerva, goddess of wisdom, skill and invention. Through most of the book, the name is associated with Wilbur's son, George Amberson Minafer, a "gilded youth" who represents the corruption of all of Minerva's virtues, just as his name may represent a corruption of hers. Also appropriate for him are the suggestions in his name of "miniver," a white decorative fur, and of "Miniver Cheevy," the sadly inept child of scorn. A further suggestion of ineffectualness may be inherent in the voiceless fricative "f" where the reader expects the stronger voiced sound, "v." Toward the end of the book, as George Amberson Minafer loses both family fortune and prestige, he is known as G. A. Minafer, and finally as merely George Minafer. Thus the magnificent "Amberson" disappears entirely from his name.

The correspondence between Burgess and Tarkington took place when Tarkington, at forty-nine, was at the height of his career and Burgess, three years older, was at the nadir of his. At his pillared New England retreat in Kennebunkport, Tarkington would soon be receiving a Pulitzer Prize for *The Magnificent Ambersons* while Burgess would go on working frantically in a crowded New York apartment to produce almost nothing. It had been twenty-three years since he had published his most famous work, the quatrain whose first line – "I never saw a Purple Cow" – Tarkington echoes at the beginning of his first letter. Burgess was now spending much of his time trying to keep in touch through correspondence with such well-known literary figures as Tarkington, whom he had known

vaguely for ten years. As a means of gaining at least vicarious fame, he was especially quick to write to anyone connected with his own not uncommon name, which the genial Tarkington now assured him should be used by "some brilliant anti-Bolshevist writer ... in an economic allegory."

This idea must have been influenced by the literal meaning of "Burgess": a citizen of a borough. It had already been assigned to a character of this kind by George Bernard Shaw when he used it for the father of Candida in a play whose other names also have allegorical significance. Since Shaw is not easily identified with the Anti-Bolshevists, however, his "Mr. Burgess" must be taken as a term of opprobrium. This character, he says, has been made "coarse and sordid by the compulsory selfishness of petty commerce, and later on softened into sluggish bumptiousness by overfeeding and commercial success." But Tarkington remained on the side of the Burgesses, and his comment in his letter – like his euphonious "Lily Burgess," his "attached" name "Lawyer Burgess" and his use of the word "brilliant" – can be interpreted as reassurances to Gelett Burgess of the respectability of both his surname and himself.

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Seawood

Kennebunkport, Maine.

Oct 21, '18

Dear Gelett: –

I never done a Burgess! M. Nicholson *may* have, I don't say no – but you ought to be able to tell us apart. I've *never* used your name in a story of mine.

I know how it feels. Henry James Forman had a rotten pup named "Tarkington" in his one novel; and F. Pixley used "E. Booth Talkington" in "the Burgomaster." I wouldn't do such a think [sic] except to Pixley and Forman.[4]

[4] Like Tarkington, Meredith Nicholson (1866–1947), novelist and diplomat, was closely associated with Indiana. He wrote *The Hoosiers* (1900), *A Hoosier Chronicle* (1912) and, most recently at the time of this letter, *The Proof of the Pudding* (1916), another Indiana story. Henry James Forman (1879), Russian-born editor and author, gave the name "Edward Tarkington" to an ambitious

Besides I think the name "Burgess" for fiction belongs to those Authors who would use it attached, as "Lawyer Burgess." There *might* be a girl, if she were called "Lily Burgess" – or some brilliant anti-Bolshevist writer might use "Burgess" in an economic allegory. I hear Hewitt Howland (who never got his typewriter back) is going to marry Irvin Cobb's sister[5] – Yrs faithily

N. B. Tarkington

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After receiving Tarkington's denial, Burgess must have reminded him more specifically about the appearance of his surname in "Little Cousin Sarah." Having to admit the truth of such a charge, Tarkington now takes refuge in geographical distinctions, although the small town of his story could as well be Burgess' New England as his own Indiana.

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Seawood

Kennebunkport, Maine.

Nov. 8. '18

Dear Gelett: –

No, no! *That* isn't *your* Burgess family. That's the Burgess family out in Terre Haute, Ind. Whenever I use *them* I think of them that way [sketch of a hand pointing to a yowling face; see Letter II at end, p. 146]. (What you refer to is a mere coincidence.)

But of course, if I *ever* used *your* Burgess Family, I would think and write of them like this [sketch of a hand pointing to a tall idealized male figure in formal attire and frowzy headband labeled "wreath"].

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twenty-seven-year-old corporation lawyer in *The Captain of His Soul* (1914). The young man is clever, selfish and false; but he fills a very small role. *The Burgomaster*, a musical comedy produced in Chicago in 1900 by the dramatist Frank Pixley (1867–1919) and the composer Gustav Luders, began a collaboration that had reached its high point in 1903 with *The Prince of Pilsen*.

[5] Reference to the loss of the typewriter belonging to Hewitt Hanson Howland (1863–1944) may be Tarkington's allegorical way of alluding to his change in occupation from author to editor. From 1900 to 1925 he was editor of the Bobbs-Merrill Company of Indianapolis, which published Burgess' *Heart Line* and six of his other ten novels. He did in fact marry Manie Cobb, the humorist's sister.

Only I am too respectful, and have never used your Burgesses at all.

Anyhow, you ought to remember what used to happen to Geo. Ade in the winter time at Purdue University. When the pure snow covered the campus, students who had been drinking vile beer used to write "Ade" all round about the Co-eds' Dormitory in brownish orange. Geo. didn't like it, but "Ade" was never resisted by beery students in the night.[6]

Now, it may be that H. L. Wilson would put your name in a story, but that is as far as ever he could go.[7] And as for me, I never did, as I've explained. Let us be glad, too, that what happened to "Ade" can never happen to "Burgess" or "Tarkington." Winter is approaching, however, and I give you lief to try "Tarkington" if I cause any more suspicion that my Little Cousin Sarahs refer to *your* Burgesses.

You certainly are a wonder at presenting "purely circumstantial evidence"!

N. B. T.

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While Tarkington's third letter is undated, it evidently follows the end of World War I. Both writers, especially Tarkington, had been diligently publicizing the sale of Liberty Bonds and other causes related to the national effort. Now, in a spirit of happy relief, he mimics the formal language of armistice to bring to a close his mock battle with Burgess over the use of a name.

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[6] George Ade (1866–1944), another humorist, playwright and Hoosier, was graduated from Purdue in 1887, two years before Tarkington entered. But the name "Ade" is irresistible to beery snow-writing students anywhere at any time because of its easy looping letters, its brevity and, possibly, its ironic indication of less sophisticated drink.

[7] Harry Leon Wilson (1867–1939), author of *Ruggles of Red Gap* (1915), was Tarkington's collaborator in playwrighting for a dozen years; but their first play was their greatest success: *The Man from Home* (1907), which ran for five years. Like both Tarkington and Burgess, Wilson had been publishing novels and short stories in popular journals.

Seawood

Kennebunkport, Maine.

To the Burgess High Command:

The Tarkington High Command feels it obligatory to report that the Courier dispatched to the Tarkington Itself with the terms of Armistice has been detained by the swollen waters of the Mousam River and may be unable to proceed farther for many hours.[8] The Tarkington High Command must in duty to whom it represents press for a mitigation of the fearful conditions set forth in the Armistice.

The T. H. C. is satisfied that it will be unable to comply with the bitterest of the conditions namely [sic] that requiring right of search of all outbuildings [sketch of figure carrying an outhouse on his back, up the ridge of a hill]. The T. H. C. fears that when the Tarkington Itself comprehends the full meaning of the implication that It uses Its *mss* in the manner indicated, even when containing the Forbidden Name, It will become unmanageable and secrete in some inassessible spot the material demanded.

The T. H. C. takes it upon itself to suggest that this hard condition be not insisted upon, as there are some objects of sentimental as well as intrinsic value which cannot be surrendered with honor, and such are the monuments made sacred by associations with one's ancestors.

The terms of the Armistice, though severe, might otherwise be acceded to, but unless that in question be mitigated or annulled the T. H. C. fears its Courier may be longer detained by the floods on the Mousam River. The Burgess High Command is requested to bear in mind the possibility that the material mentioned in the condition under discussion is in all respects inflammable, and that it might be considered desirable even to destroy it rather than that it should fall into hostile or irreverent hands.

Self.

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[8] The twenty-three mile Mousam River flows into the Atlantic four miles below Kennebunk, where even out of flood time it is turbulent enough to furnish water power.

TARKINGTON REPRODUCTIONS

[Letter I]

SEAWOOD
KENNEBUNKPORT MAINE

Aug 21, 18

Dear Ellett:-

I never drew a Bunnies! M. Nicholson may have, I don't say no — but you ought to be able to tell us exactly. He never used your name in a story of mine.

I know how it feels. Henry James Farnum had a rotten pup named "Tarkington" in his one novel; and F. Pixley

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Besides I think the name
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use it attached, as "Laurence
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a girl, if she were called
"Lily Burgess" — or some
brilliant anti-Bolshevist
writer might use "Burgess"
in an economic allegory.
I hear Newell Dwight Hillis (who never gets
his typewritten books) is going to marry Yvonne
Wells's sister — Yes Dastily N. B. Tarkington

[Letter II]

SEAWOOD
KENNEBUNKPORT, MAINE.

Nov. 8. '18

Dear Gelett:—

No, no! That isn't your Burgess family. That's the Burgess family out in Terre Haute, Ind. Whenever I see them I think of them that

way.
(What you refer to is a mere coincidence.)

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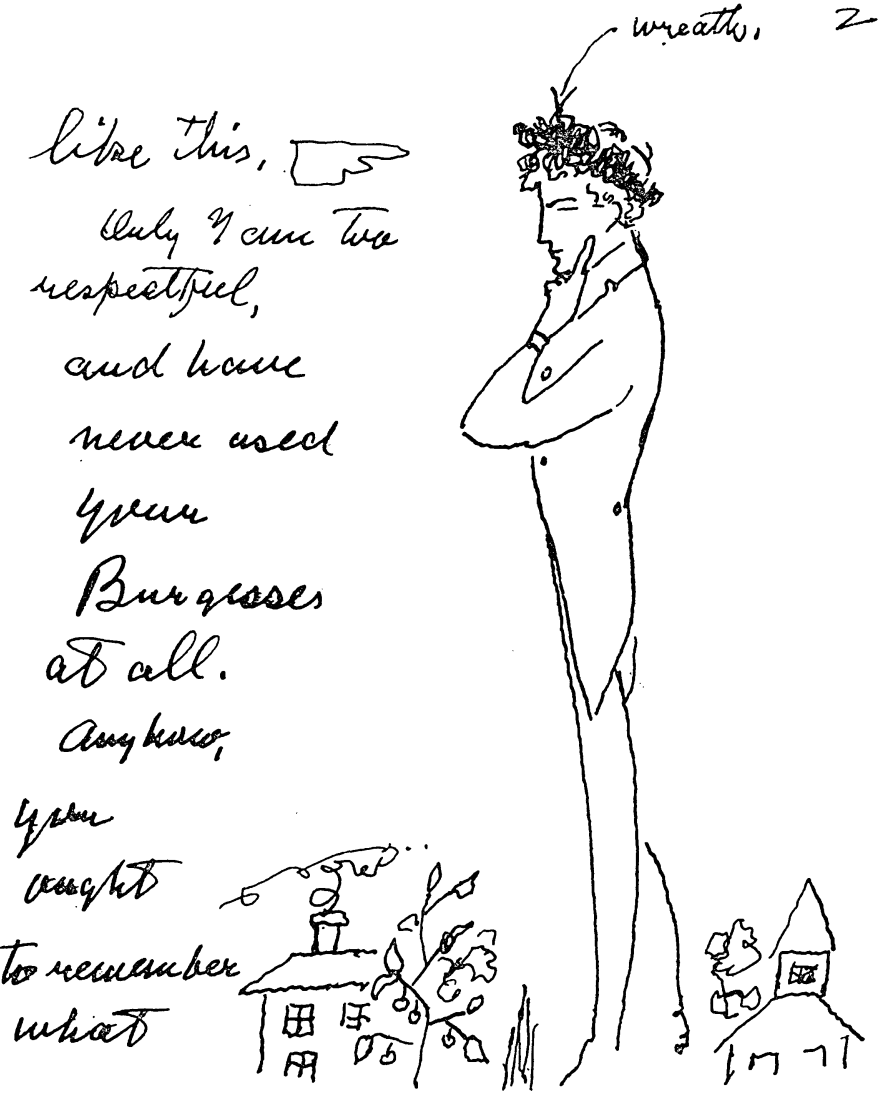
wreath. 2
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Anyhow,
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You certainly are a
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circumstantial evidence"! W.W.

[Letter III]

SEAWOOD
KENNEBUNKPORT, MAINE.

To the Burgess High Command:

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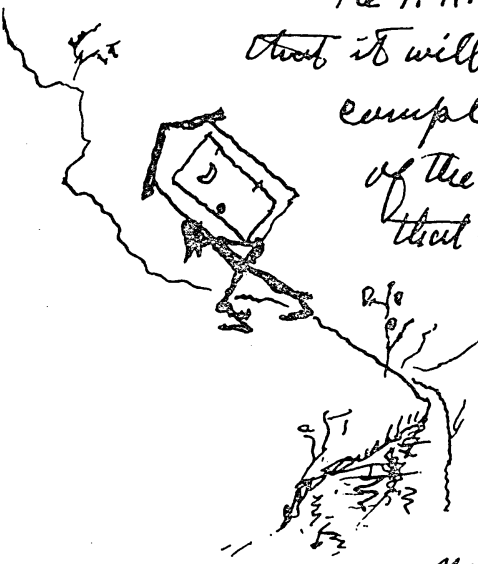

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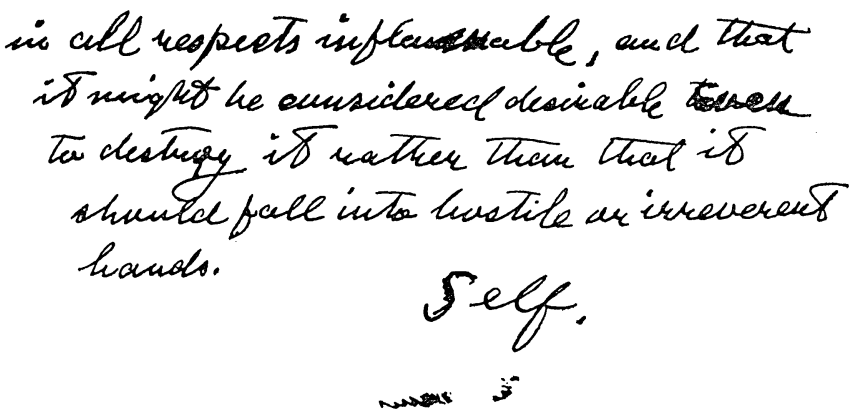
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Self.

[4]

University of Hawaii