

## Elkin Mathews,<sup>1</sup> Poets' Publisher

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THE NAME Elkin Mathews represents a link between two families living in Gravesend, in the county of Kent. It is probable that the Mathews came originally from Wales, and there was a connection with Edwin Arnold of *The Light of Asia*. Elkins are mentioned in London records of the sixteenth century, and they became shipbuilders, with a trade in the Far East; then as time changed they also dealt in coal. There had been a Lord Mayor and Town Clerk of Gravesend among them.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas George Mathews (b. 1812), who married Francis Elkin, was to become a family problem. A silhouette shows him as a young gentleman in frock coat holding gloves and a top hat, but of course does not reveal his full face, probably that of a man who was never able to cope with life. According to family tradition, he declared he 'could not bear the smell of tar' and left Gravesend with its shipyards and quays, to live at The Poplars, Codford St Mary, in Wiltshire. His son, Charles Elkin Mathews, maintained that his father was 'essentially a bookman' and he was reputed to have been solitary, rather irascible. Mrs Mathews, who was not very practical, read much Shakespeare, and later became interested in mysticism. Her family in Gravesend helped to educate the nine children. A letter from one of the boys, who died young of tuberculosis, suggests that there was a good deal of affection between them, and even gaiety at times.<sup>3</sup> Thus if they were never at poverty level, none of them had a very well-to-do childhood and youth.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Elkin Mathews, 1851-1921, was too busy, as publisher and rare book-seller, to write his memoirs. Yet he kept sufficient material for a study of his life and times which brings together much which is new and interesting about writers of the 'nineties and after. Ezra Pound, one of the many young poets first published by Elkin Mathews, wrote in 1921, 'These beginnings count far more than the middle steps of the journey'.

<sup>2</sup> See Cruden's *History of Gravesend*, 1843.

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished letter in the Elkin Mathews papers in the University of Reading. Henceforth referred to as E.M. papers.

A *Bibliographical Notebook*<sup>1</sup> which Charles Elkin Mathews began in Wiltshire when he was about twenty-three, first quotes *Fructus inter Folis* (later to be used in his colophon) and then, as an ironical contrast to his own tolerant outlook, 'Heresy is ye differing from me'. At that time he was writing poetry, about Nature and the pleasures of reading. The *Notebook* contains much information about private libraries and Mathews was in touch with a number of antiquaries. According to an article in *St. James' Budget*, 1894, he had begun work with Charles John Stewart, in King William Street, Strand, dubbed by the late Henry Stevens of Vermont as 'the last of the learned old book-sellers'. Then Mathews went to Peach's library in Bath for some time and later returned to Sotherans, Piccadilly.

Somewhere along the line he was in communication with Tennyson, supplying him with a rare book. The poet wrote to him in the third person, 'The best editions of the best books he would fain have, not mere literary curiosities'.<sup>2</sup> (Hardy commented on this in his *Notebooks*, many years later.) Mathews was also in touch with John Newman and William Gladstone. During his period at Bath he wrote notes for learned publications on early editions, or changes in vocabulary; sometimes he recorded interesting Devon and Somerset folklore.

His eldest brother, Thomas George, worked in the Railway Clearing House in London. As their father had died, his mother and sisters came to live in Woodburn, a house owned by Thomas George in Green Lanes, Stoke Newington.

For some time Elkin Mathews had been acquiring books with the idea of starting up on his own. One of his Elkin uncles lent him some money and in 1884/5 he opened a bookshop in Cathedral Yard, Exeter. As Sir Thomas Bodley, founder of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, was born in Exeter in the sixteenth century, Elkin Mathews became interested in his life, and used his arms on the cover of what was perhaps his first catalogue in April 1885. He sent a draft of this, which survives, to his brother, with the remark, 'You will see I am prepared to turn my most cherished possessions into cash, necessity must now over-rule sentiment'.

<sup>1</sup> In E.M. papers.

<sup>2</sup> Hodgson's Sale Catalogue, April 1922.

It soon became clear that there was not enough trade in Exeter for this bookshop. Over twenty years later Elkin Mathews declared, 'I had settled down in the native city of Sir Thomas Bodley but it was no good for Ambition's ladder, I had already formed the fixed idea of joining the publishing ranks and my aim was to become the Edward Moxon of my time'.<sup>1</sup> It seems he had already brought out a small booklet or two.

It was probably through George Mathews that Charles first met John Lane, then a clerk in the Clearing House, who also came from the West Country. They shared an enthusiasm for books and Lane may even then have been interested in the idea of publishing. At any rate, by the spring of 1887 he had agreed to look round for premises in London.

Elkin Mathews kept most of Lane's letters written to him between the spring and autumn of 1887. On 16 May 1887 Lane wrote from London:

My dear Mathews, A tip to begin — buy all the copies of Marlowe's plays, Mermaid Series, that you can meet, having 431 pp., as the first issue has been withdrawn in consequence of some blasphemous lines in a note of the appendix. They are certain to go up. I got one by a lucky stroke on Friday.<sup>2</sup>

He was going to gather together as many rare books as possible during the next six or twelve months:

I believe that a catalogue of first editions of such books would create a sensation but the oddity about the matter is that [John Lewis] May on Saturday suggested the idea as a *new* and *good* one but I was careful not to father it, in fact I discouraged the venture.

So far no premises had been found but an acquaintance suggested that Oxford Street, near the Circus, would be a good area.

On 15 June Lane wrote that a friend to whom they had offered a book did not want it and had called to tell him of his engagement:

He is going to marry the sister of the heir presumptive of the Dukedom of Hamilton. She is charming, she is rich and she is lovely!! So he says! I am to go to the wedding. . .

<sup>1</sup> Longhand draft of article for M.A.P., 1909.

<sup>2</sup> All letters quoted are from the E.M. papers., by courtesy of the late Sir Allen Lane.

There was great news to relate. Lane went to a private view of another friend, Dunthorne, the London and Liverpool print-seller, and asked him if he knew of premises suitable for a high-class bookseller in his neighbourhood. 'Yes, my own "little box" two doors from here.' Dunthorne was moving to larger quarters nearby. The premises, a shop and W.C. only, were small, about the size of the Exeter place, and situated in Vigo Street, near Regent Street, adjoining the Royal Geographical Society, and close to Burlington House: 'Indeed it is surrounded by seats of learning.' The rent was a third of what they had thought of paying, i.e. £80 a year: 'It seems to me that if we had searched London all over that we could not have found any place half so suitable for a start, as the risk is nothing and the position a fine one.' A friend from the British Museum, who had shown a great interest in 'my, *our* venture' was coming to look at it shortly: 'Let me have an early line please with your views on the subject.'

Now that the move to London was a possibility rather than a project and Lane was proposing himself as a partner, Elkin Mathews probably hesitated. There was that loan from his uncle to be returned, the remainder of the lease to be assigned or taken in, and the question of having enough stock with which to start. He went up to London and saw the premises. Part of the house, 6A, was used by an engraver; there were solicitors, bootmakers, a cheesemonger, some silversmiths and a 'quadrille band office' in the same street. Across the way from Dunthorne's 'Cabinet' were Mesdames Bellini, fanmakers. Elkin Mathews also noted the post office: very handy for a postal trade. Yet he still felt uncertain and by July Lane was again urging him to get in touch with Dunthorne as soon as possible. He would come down to Exeter and talk it over.

On 21 June Lane wrote to say that he had obtained £125 for his collection of books but had kept a number of duplicates. When the Royal Geographical Society had eventually accepted Mathews as tenant for 6B Vigo Street, at £86 per annum, Lane declared he was willing to take responsibility for half the rental of the Exeter shop until the end of the term, and also to share the expense of moving and the cost of any new books or publications. He was anxious that the wording of the lease should enable them to sell

curios, drawings and prints, but he didn't want these precise words used for fear that Dunthorne might object. The latter had said that they would do well if they only kept good and rare things: 'He tells me Browning attends his private views and in fact, nearly all the great men of letters do so!'

Lane had already been buying books wherever he could find them, in the auction rooms, from small shops in the Hampstead Road or privately. Mathews was continually asked for advice as to prices and editions. 'Your replies,' Lane mentions at one point, 'are teeming with information.' What should he give for Shelley's *Queen Mab*, 1821, whole morocco untrimmed edges? On another occasion he wrote that he had

picked up first edition of Tennyson's *Ode to the Duke of Wellington* for five shillings, clean copy in original wrappers. We must get a few more Tennysons — we are weak in him. We must try for a *Princess*; look out for one. We have nothing in Shelley or Keats in firsts.

Last night he had offered £1 for a copy of *Fanny Hill*, but the man wanted thirty shillings. Was it worth it?

On 14 August, Elkin Mathews wrote to Lane about the proposed deed of partnership:

I have an invincible dislike of accounts, and a partnership seems to involve never ending book-keeping. I suppose it will be inevitable.<sup>1</sup>

There was the difficult question of assessing the books already in stock. He had been in business three years, which should be taken into account. Then there was the repayment to his uncle:

Doubtless if I were to remain down here to the end of my term I should be able to do this, as I have now established some position here; but you must see [that] directly partnership is completed my action is hampered and I am powerless. I have of course, sufficient at my bankers, I think even after I have settled various accounts, but then your own cash balance would not I am afraid, be sufficient to float us. Unless I look to matters of this kind I don't see how the partnership will benefit me. . .<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Draft of letter to John Lane.

<sup>2</sup> Draft of letter to Professor Brushfield, 7 February 1895.

Later Elkin Mathews was to maintain that Lane put £50 into the business and was to pay interest on the difference in capital. Each made out a schedule of books; Mathews was already committed to the arrangement. He wrote to Lane:

I should think when the time comes it would not be amiss to employ *temporarily* the young man you mention. But at first I should say we should get an intelligent boy at about seven shillings a week. I am sure we must be prudent at first.<sup>1</sup>

Two pages of a draft agreement are all that remain. Elkin Mathews was to be paid a salary of ten pounds per month for managing and conducting the business, before any division of profits, John Lane was to be considered a sleeping partner and would not be bound to take any personal share in the business but should be entitled to free access to all accounts, letters, etc., relative to the partnership. He might assist at his pleasure.

In a letter to his friend Professor Brushfield, the Devon scholar and antiquarian, written in 1895, Elkin Mathews suggests that some such form of agreement was made:

Had I remained in Exeter I should have called my place in the Close after Bodley; I did indeed draw up a catalogue before I left the city and named it The Bodley Catalogue, and Lane knew of this scheme.

In an interview in *The Publisher and Bookseller*, 21 February 1906, Elkin Mathews said, 'I took him into partnership when I commenced again as publisher in these offices [i.e. Vigo Street], that was in 1887 and he continued with me until he set up for himself'.

Lane has related how on that first visit to Vigo Street, he pointed out to Mathews that as Dunthorne had the Rembrandt Head as an emblem, they should use that of Bodley. 'The same idea was in my mind,' answered his partner.<sup>2</sup> In an undated letter of 1887, Lane wrote to Mathews, who was still in Exeter:

I don't like the idea of a carved head of Bodley, it only needs something painted or inlaid. £5 is out of the question. Of course we shall require *a swinging sign later*, one that can be seen from Bond Street and Regent Street. Please send me the Bodley portrait as soon as you can.

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *Life of Sir Thomas Bodley*, privately printed, 1894.

<sup>2</sup> Elkin Mathews said, 'I took him into partnership when I commenced again as publisher in these offices [Vigo Street], that was in 1887 and he continued with me until he set up for himself'. (Interview in *The Publisher and Bookseller*, 21 February 1906.

In the meantime, there was the decoration to see about, a search for a suitable warehouse, the ordering of bookcases and other fittings. When these eventually arrived Lane found 'they have such a wonderful polish on them that I thought they were of walnut'. The letter hole had been cut in the door and the first to come through was from the Bodleian, a good omen.

Because of his work at the Railway Clearing House, Lane was not anxious for his connection with the venture to become known. He met an acquaintance at the auction rooms, who thought that Mathews must be going into partnership:

'I said, tho' I nearly choked, "Not that I know of." Well, I fear that in six months he will have had enough of it; the rooms will do for him. Which to me sounded like so much "bosh".'

Then again,

A thought has struck me about dressing the window. You know that Dunthorne has picture shows, private shows, well, of course we shall know of these events before they come off, so that we can make a show of art books for the first week say, works by Ruskin — you must order a dozen copies of his new book. I can place at least six. In the season the fellows of the Society of Antiquaries meet once a week at 7.30 I think, and I fancy they pass our door; we must keep open that night and dress the window for them. Let me know your opinions on these suggestions of mine. You are silent on the *Fanny Hill* question.

As Elkin Mathews travelled up to London that autumn, he probably used the hours in the train to add up recent expenses or to list customers to be informed, knowing that the following months were all important.

It was not until 17 December 1887 that the *Athenaeum* carried the advertisement:

Just ready. Post free to Collectors.

ELKIN MATHEWS' CATALOGUE. (Number 1.)

New series of Scarce and Interesting Books, First Editions

On sale at The Bodley Head, Vigo Street, W.1.

Removed from The Close, Exeter.

For the first couple of years it was necessary to concentrate on the bookshop. Mathews kept in touch with his previous customers with antiquarian interests, many of them friendly. The firm also handled the output of The Daniel Press in Oxford, publishing the

poems of Robert Bridges and others. Mathews shared an interest in book-plates with Lord de Tabley, John Leicester Warren, and reissued his study of the subject. Another client was Lord Coleridge, and Mathews wrote, 'many a time on his way home from the law courts did he drop in and have a chat'.<sup>1</sup>

John Lane came across the work of a young poet in Liverpool, who was in an accountant's office and coming down to London for examinations. In an article drafted in 1909, Elkin Mathews described the author of the first book his firm published:

I think I met Mr. Richard Le Gallienne first in 1888; 'Narcissus' as he was soon to be called, had just quitted the banks of the Mersey for those of the Thames. He had already privately printed in Liverpool some 'vain and amatorious verses'. Neither Byron or Shelley looked the poet more than he did; with his poetical sentiment for beautiful things in life and art, he quickly caught the public's fancy. *Volumes in Folio* was the title of the little volume he brought me and which was finely printed at the Chiswick Press. I advertised it in the *Athenaeum* as a new volume of *Vers de libricité* and I remember my old friend, Dr. Alexander B. Grosart writing to me more in sorrow than in anger, to express his surprise at finding me publishing wanton verses. The good doctor was happy again when I pointed out that in his haste he had misread *libricité* for *lubricity*.<sup>2</sup>

Le Gallienne had heard Oscar Wilde lecture in Liverpool and sent him a copy of his early poems and received a flattering invitation to meet the older man. At thirty-four Wilde had a reputation as lecturer and controversialist. Editor of *Woman's World* at the time, he was in a position to help Le Gallienne. John Lane was also an acquaintance. 'Although mss. were not very plentiful at first, I soon got as many as I could deal with, indeed I never found it necessary to advertise for them', added Mathews.

John Lane was busy on a bibliography to accompany Richard Le Gallienne's *George Meredith: some characteristics* (1890) who was also preparing another volume of poems. The firm published *A Sicilian Idyll, a pastoral play*, by John Todhunter, and several luxury editions, such as *The Earth Fiend. A Ballad Made and etched by William Strang*, well-known for his illustrations. *Poor People's Christmas* by Roden Noel, appeared in the autumn of 1891 and was well received.

<sup>1</sup> Draft article for M.A.P., 1909.

<sup>2</sup> 'Ce que tue les livres par plaisanterie.' *Littérature*. Tom. 4.



Soon after Le Gallienne's first volume, came *Robert Browning, Essay and Thoughts* by John Nettleship, both artist and writer, which was the expansion of a book written earlier:

Another friendship I made in the late eighties was with the late Gleeson White, who published an anonymous volume with me, entitled *Letters to Living Artists*, which exhibited his usual artistic acuteness. About this time he and William Sharp nominated me for the New Vagabond Club.<sup>1</sup>

Mathews was to be seen sometimes at the Crown in Charing Cross Road where the younger artists and writers often congregated, and later he often went to the Irish Literary Society<sup>2</sup> and when possible managed a theatre or had dinner with friends.

Several people were anxious to learn publishing with him. One gentleman wrote to assure him he would get on very well with his assistant, 'who may be said socially to belong to a lower class'. He was no snob and would be delighted 'to learn the postal or any other guide by heart should you deem it necessary'.<sup>3</sup>

Ernest Radford, then in his early forties, had published translations from Heine and some poems. When Mathews brought out *Chambers Twain in 1890*, they had become very friendly. That year Radford proposed, as he came of a business family, that he might be some use to Elkin Mathews as a partner.

I have a soul above journalism but I am not superior to honest business. Of your young business I know nothing and therefore hardly know what I suggest. Your saying the other morning that you had too many irons in the fire put it into my head.

If this proposal was impossible, 'please send me a kindly intimation that I don't know what I'm talking about'.<sup>4</sup>

Mathews, who understood Radford's precarious position as Secretary of the Arts and Crafts Society, kept a draft of his reply, which suggests that he had the arrangements with Lane in mind.

I thank you for your friendly proposal — and for so frankly stating it. I can assure you with all sincerity that the idea is not at all displeasing

<sup>1</sup> In E.M. papers.

<sup>2</sup> Todhunter and Nettleship were friends of John Butler Yeats and his family.

<sup>3</sup> In E.M. papers.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

to me, but however I may feel in the matter I am not [deleted, quite free] at present in a position to entertain any overtures for partnership.<sup>1</sup>

When writing to Elkin Mathews on 13 January 1891, about his wife's book *A Light Load* which was soon to be published, Ernest Radford asked that an invitation to the Rhymers Club meeting at his house the following week, should be passed on to Cosmo Monkhouse, author of *Corn and Poppies*, which Elkin Mathews published. Perhaps more from courtesy than design, Radford added, 'I believe you do not rhyme but I should be glad if you will join us'.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed Mathews had very little time for anything but the growing business and had never had pretensions as a writer. Yet this was an opportunity of getting to know a group of interesting poets. He evidently enjoyed the atmosphere of these meetings, sometimes at the Cheshire Cheese in Fleet Street, or at a member's house. The following year the papers announced the first book of the Rhymers Club:

Twelve poets of greater or lesser fame will contribute, amongst them W. B. Yeats, Arthur Symons, Ernest Rhys, Dr. Rodhunter, and Richard Le Gallienne, whose *Book Bills of Narcissus* has been the most successful poetic volume of the season. There is no link binding these poets together apparently, save that they all suffer from the same mental diseases of writing in rhyme. Each will be responsible for his own contributions, so far at least, as a poet can be responsible for anything.

Most of the reviews were satisfactory and Lionel Johnson's 'By the Statue of King Charles the First at Charing Cross', was recognized as outstanding. Andrew Lang's somewhat mixed comments in the *Daily News* were taken up by protagonists in the *Daily Chronicle*. Plans were soon being made by the Rhymers for a second book.

John Lane was now known to a great many people in literature and journalism and no longer concealed his connection with the business in Vigo Street, where a number of further publications were discussed. It had probably been agreed that Mathews should draw a modest sum from the proceeds and anything over should

<sup>1</sup> In E.M. papers.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

go back into stock and the expansion of the publishing side. Towards the end of 1891 it seemed as if it would be possible for Lane to give up his job at the Railway Clearing House. The premises were so small and clerical work had to be done in the basement, so Elkin Mathews seems to have had some misgivings when the time came to have *Elkin Mathews and John Lane* painted over the doorway. Lane was very useful at free range but what would it be like when he and his friends were constantly about the place?

On 3 January 1892 Le Gallienne wrote to John Lane from his parents' house in Liverpool:

At that solemn moment when the clock seems to take a long breath before it strikes the midnight on New Year's Eve, we were kneeling in a church close by here, and as the last stroke fled away, I said in my heart, 'At this moment the spirit of John Lane entered into the Bodley Head'.<sup>1</sup>

There were plans to bring out a great many books. Oscar Wilde was anxious they should do a volume of his poems. William Watson had his first book of prose, *Excursions in Criticism* almost ready and wanted a second edition of *The Prince's Quest*. Mary Coleridge's poems were to be printed and Alice Meynell's book of essays, *The Rhythm of Life* was to be followed by new verse later. Richard Le Gallienne now had a review column and did much to boost the firm. He was preparing an edition of Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris*. They would give fresh life to *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* with Herbert Horne as editor, with contributions by Christina Rossetti, John Ruskin and Burne Jones, besides a number of up and coming writers.

Walter Crane had already worked for the firm and Charles Ricketts, who designed the much discussed novel by Wilde, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, was now going to do some for them. There was talk of commissioning a young man, Aubrey Beardsley, who had illustrated an important volume for Dents, to do a cover for the first book by Kenneth Grahame called *Pagan Paners*. William Rothenstein, then a youthful artist, had shown Professor Yorke Powell some caricatures of Verlaine and others done in

<sup>1</sup> R. W. Egan & G. Smerdon, *The Quest of the Golden Boy*, 1960.

Paris and Powell suggested to Lane that the firm should bring out a series of Oxford portraits. Whistler insisted they should be lithographs and Rothenstein studied the process: he wrote later

Work premeditated is like a drop of water, seemingly clear; once undertaken it is like the same drop seen through a magnifying glass, no longer pure but swarming with life. So, all at once, my work was fertile with surprises and troubles. But with the hopefulness of youth, I foresaw them not, but plunged gaily into my task.<sup>1</sup>

Then he relates how, much against Lane's wishes, he included a few portraits of undergraduates so as to make a record of contemporary Oxford. The first sitter was Sir Henry Acland, friend of Ruskin but he and his daughter disliked the portrait and Mathews had to tell Rothenstein that the first issue of *Oxford Characters* had largely failed for this reason. Later Rothenstein made a more satisfactory drawing. Then Walter Pater, who thought he had been made to look like a Barbary ape, said that his sister might object. The printer wrote to Rothenstein that they had just had a visit from Mr Lane and Pater had 'used great stress as to what he would do if it were published. It is very small for these people to go on so, I think'.<sup>2</sup> Yet by the time the series was concluded, Pater had died and his friends were glad that the portrait should be included.

Rothenstein also relates in *Men and Memories* how Elkin Mathews tried to get Lionel Johnson to sit for him for a frontispiece to his first volume of verse. Johnson replied that they should wait until he was Poet Laureate and Rothenstein President of the Academy!

While Johnson was working on *The Art of Thomas Hardy* (1894) he wrote to Mathews to apologise for being so long over it but during the past months he had been so ill that he could only work for half an hour at a time:

Forgive this scrawl: I can hardly hold a pen; I am quite sure, I am in for curvature of the spine or cholera. I hope the book won't be posthumous.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sir William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories*, I, 140.

<sup>2</sup> Sir William Rothenstein, *op. cit.*, I, 156-7.

<sup>3</sup> E.M. papers. Letter dated 31 August 1892.

Mathews saw a good deal of Johnson:

I published both of his poetical volumes. I used frequently to visit him at his snug chambers in Grey's Inn and elsewhere. His well-filled bookshelves were very fascinating and it was a treat to get him on to Richard Crashaw or some other old Catholic poet. One day I discovered the only Crashaw he lacked was the rare Paris (1652) volume *Carmen Deo Nostro Te Decet Hymnus, collected and augmented by R.C.* I had recently acquired a copy, and thinking it over I determined to make it over to him. It was slightly imperfect and yet at the sale of his library it was bought in for the family for £4 or £5.

His mother, shortly before her death, kindly sent it to me as a memento of her son — it is one of my most cherished possessions. I purchased several of Johnson's books at the sale, autographed and annotated. I have before me Father Lewis de Granada's *Memorial of a Christian Life*, Rouen, 1599, on the sides of the vellum binding he had written invocations to saints. I have seen many of his books with these touching memoranda.<sup>1</sup>

Elkin Mathews goes on to mention the 'fine book of Essays in praise of Culture, *In the Key of Blue* by John Addington Symonds, the distinguished historian of the Italian Renaissance', who wrote on several occasions to ask for advice on various points:

It had a beautiful cover (Hyacinths and Laurel) designed by C. S. Ricketts. I published two more editions and then when the plates were burnt at Ballantyne's fire, I let it go out of print. Although the editions were not large and subsequently the sales limited, it gave me particular pleasure to produce the books, the author's geniality and courtesy was so charming that a visit was always a pleasant event.<sup>2</sup>

As Elkin Mathews could not pay very much, he was always having trouble with assistants. On one occasion Julian Marshall wrote him the following letter:

I have thought a good deal over the case you laid before me yesterday and seeing its difficulty, I have asked the opinion of several friends of mine upon it. Their opinion is almost unanimously with mine, after reflection — that you may give the boy a character for honesty. One friend, an old employer of labour, says, 'Yes; he would employ him himself were it not for the other faults on account of which he is discharging him; then he may surely recommend him to another master, except for those faults, which are trivial'. I agree, judgement accordingly. No order as to costs. Postscript. It means give a poor devil a chance.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Draft article for M.A.P., 1909.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> E.M. papers. Dated 1 March 1891.

Did Mathews take the advice literally and keep on the young man as a case of 'the devil you know . . .'? In view of future events, it was not surprising that his family noticed that he always found lads rather a nuisance.

In the morning's post there might be a letter from a writer asking for help:

I am just *stone broke* and every day brings all sorts of horrid bills, taxes and insurance papers until I have to look to all the Corners of the Earth hoping to find someone who owes me something, so I'm landing on you hoping you are flush just now.<sup>1</sup>

A number of authors were to stress that Mathews had been very helpful to them when in difficulties. Then Lord de Tabley wrote from Bournemouth that he did not care for suggested changes in the production of his next book. Lane and Ricketts had been interfering: in fact, he felt like withdrawing altogether.

Occasionally Mathews had to smooth things over for his partner, as when Lane evidently forgot to return a letter of Meredith's to a lender. John Davidson was not very pleased with the prospectus for *Fleet Street Eclogues*, and kept pressing for early publication, and at one point the MSS got mislaid. When it appeared, he was annoyed with some of the notices, although a number were very favourable. It was pleasant, of course, to have a note from a secretary, to express Mr Gladstone's thanks for the books and to say that he 'had already been struck with Mr. Le Gallienne's talents; and Lord de Tabley's high reputation is, he hopes, now quite established'.

At Vigo Street, space was always a problem and all transport from the salesroom or warehouse was by messenger or horse van. Lane seems mostly to have been concerned with buying books or talking to prospective authors. A number of customers were always in and out of the bookshop, and, many being gentlemen or ladies of leisure, they took up a good deal of time. It was now recognized, as press-cuttings indicated to Mathews and Lane, that the firm were bringing together much of the early 'nineties. The *Pall Mall Gazette* declared:

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. Dated 3 January 1893.

A ray of hopefulness is stealing again into English poetry after the twilight grays of Clough and Arnold and Tennyson. Even unbelief wears braver colours. Despite the jeremiads, which are the dirges of the older gods, English is still a nest of singing birds.

Some were not so sure they were going to like it. When *Silhouettes* was published, written by Arthur Symons, then in his twenties, and known chiefly as a critic interested in developments in France, one reviewer declared that the author was

none of your Nature's poets who deals with bosky dells and sports with Amaryllis in the shade. He is the Laureate of the demirep, and carols of 'The charm of rouge on fragile cheeks', a charm which it takes an exponent of the new poetry to discover.<sup>1</sup>

In some cases the firm was taking over remainders and combining sheets with new work by the author, which was often both economical and successful. As the *Illustrated London* noted in 1893,

The house is rapidly expanding the scope of its operations. This may be attributed in no small degree to their system of working entirely on the net cash principle, and strictly confining each publication to a limited number, a great advantage to the bookseller, who thus frees himself from the complicated troubles of the discount system. The firm have already a large and valuable connection among authors and lovers of elegant literature. They are purchasers of rare books and libraries, provided the works are valuable and in good condition. The marked success of this interesting business is due, doubtless, to the personal zeal and enthusiasm of the partners, who bestow the closest attention upon all its details, artistic as well as commercial.

During the following year the firm brought out a number of books, among them Oscar Wilde's *Poems*, *Silverpoints* by John Gray, *In the Key of Blue*, essays by John Addington Symonds, and *The Eloping Angels* by William Watson.

The origin and reception of *The Yellow Book*, which first appeared in the spring of 1894, has been studied in detail elsewhere. That it was one of the reasons for the break between Elkin Mathews and his partner is made clear by the draft of a letter which Elkin Mathews wrote to Dr Brushfield on 7 February 1895:

<sup>1</sup> *Figaro Strand*, 26 January 1893.

Lane misrepresents and falsifies matters as is his custom whenever it suits him to do so.

First of all, had I remained in Exeter I should have called my place in the Close after Bodley — I did indeed draw up a catalogue before I left the city and named it the 'Bodley Catalogue', and Lane knew of this scheme. Lane got to know too that I was on the lookout for London premises, and gave me no peace, until I discovered that through taking some of his books I had practically made him my partner. I only discovered this some years ago when I sought to get rid of him . . . When he did come in I found him quite unacquainted with business matters — he frankly told me that he did not know a daybook from a ledger — but that as he was now a member of the Hogarth Club and the 'Old Volumes', his proper place was outside looking for authors, etc. . . . Then if any particular author appeared to show a marked partiality for me it was the signal for friction; he prevented me from accepting the books of two or three authors whose work published elsewhere met with marked success; so that altogether I decided he was an impossible man to get on with, a man who was simply working for his own hand.

But the climax came when the editors of *The Yellow Book* gave a dinner to the contributors and Lane alone represented the firm. I only heard about this dinner by accident. Lane never volunteered any information about it until I taxed him. I learnt afterwards that many enquired where I was, and that when Lane was asked to speak for the publishers, he with the boldest affrontery, said that he deeply regretted the *unavoidable* absence of his partner, and that he was not present to join in the general enthusiasm and so on.

As a matter of fact, I could have attended the dinner with the greatest ease in the world, I had *absolute* leisure that evening, and there was not the slightest colour [cause?] for him to make such a statement.

He had evidently represented to the editors that he alone was the partner interested in the working of the *Yellow Book*, and they did not take the trouble to act otherwise. I hear that when Lane expressed his regret at my 'unavoidable' absence, one prominent author shouted out 'That [is] a lie.'<sup>1</sup>

*The Globe* carried this note on 18 August 1894:

'Parnassus', says the *Athenaeum* with unwonted levity, 'has two peaks, and therefore the Bodley Head has two partners: but it is reported that this state of things is not likely to continue'. If the seceding member of the firm were to start a rival publishing business this would indeed be a joyous time for yellow poetasters.

<sup>1</sup> In E.M. papers.



As Elkin Mathews told Dr Brushfield,

Then it came to settling up matters, I of course wanted to keep the original premises, and to cut the gordian knot, said to him, 'You take the sign', thinking he would scarcely call his place over the way 'The Bodley Head, The Albany' — little dreaming that he had up his sleeve permission from the Albany authorities to change one of the windows looking out upon Vigo Street into a doorway.<sup>1</sup>

On 8 August 1894, Ernest Radford protested:

If he chooses to run an independent business in Vigo Street next door to you, you cannot prevent him but that you should allow him to remove the sign of 'The Bodley Head' from your place is to me incredible. I must hear it directly from you before I believe it for a moment.

As Mathews continued to Dr Brushfield:

Then when too late I realised the mistake I had made. But as the *Bodley Head* is fast becoming identified with fiction of a very modern character — made up of emotion and no morals, probably I shall in time get reconciled to it.<sup>2</sup>

To dissolve the partnership was not easy. Authors published by the firm were asked to say whether they would remain with Elkin Mathews or deal in future with the new one which Lane was about to start under his own name. Eventually two lists were drawn up which show that Le Gallienne, Davidson and Watson and a great many others went with Lane. Wedmore, Binyon and Roden Noel were among those who remained with Elkin Mathews. Members of the Rhymers Club stayed loyal to their initial publisher and appear to have met until April or May 1895. Then such a series of shocks occurred in the artistic and indeed social life of London, that the Club does not seem to have survived them.

Lane did not care for Oscar Wilde, who had not been a contributor to *The Yellow Book*. Yet, to his consternation, Elkin Mathews found himself summoned to court to testify at the first of the trials, when Wilde sued the Marquis of Queensberry for libel. A young assistant called Edward Shelley, an educated boy with ambitions to become a writer, had become involved with Wilde. There had been a row with Lane, more fully aware than

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

his partner of what was going on, and Shelley had been dismissed. The point has yet to be proved that this was the same boy to whom Elkin Mathews had given a 'second chance'.

The publisher was called again for the second trial in the spring of 1895. On the last day, Wilde carried to court a copy of a French novel, which the public took to be the now infamous *Yellow Book*. That evening, while Wilde was being arrested, the windows of Lane's new bookshop were smashed. Later he was to say that the whole affair nearly ruined him.

Elkin Mathews had many friends and supporters, among them W. B. Yeats and his brother. It was not long before he had started the very successful *Shilling Garland* books of poetry, edited by Laurence Binyon and the *Vigo Cabinet Series*, in which Synge's first play was to appear later. He published W. B. Yeats's *The Wind among the Reeds*, ballads by John Masefield, and *Broadsheets* with Jack B. Yeats and others. He brought out the first of Ronald Firbank's work and *Poems* by W. H. Davies: Arthur Symonds suggested James Joyce's *Chamber Music*, published in 1907. Then Ezra Pound became one of his many authors, *Personae* appearing in 1909 and other volumes later.

In 1912 Mathews moved to larger premises in Cork Street, which during the next nine years became the meeting place of antiquarians and book collectors, and authors with work to offer. During the war Mathews continued to bring out well-produced volumes. In 1916 he faced another crisis over the printers' refusal to set Pound's *Lustra* without deletions.

All his life Elkin Mathews collected — books rare or just of interest to him; manuscripts, china and paintings. Many treasures filled the comfortable house at Chorley Wood where he lived with his wife and daughter. He had married Edith Calvert (connected with Edward Calvert, the painter, and Lord Baltimore's family) who was an illustrator of travel and children's books. Now and then his family protested mildly at further acquisitions as volumes overflowed every available space and *The Gentleman's Magazine* had to be kept in the old harnessroom.

At one time Elkin Mathews acquired a gold noble from a fisherman who had found it on the coast. He went into the history of the coin with characteristic thoroughness. His diaries contain

notes such as, 'Gave 10/6 for Rye smuggler's wine flask'. Another time he wrote an amusing description of a local sale to his daughter, 'I bid for some things and was caught once or twice . . . At the very end of the sale I bought for a shilling a gold pin'.

At the weekends he explored their own neighbourhood or would set out from a holiday cottage in Norfolk to see another ancient church. When staying at Tunbridge Wells another year, there was a friendly bookseller to visit. Another time near Lewes, they went to see a Saxon sundial. Arthur Symons sometimes came to Cork Street and they might lunch together at the Café Royal. Once when staying at Rye, Elkin Mathews and his daughter did a twelve mile walk to see him at Wittersham, and there is a note in the diary, 'Called with A.S. on Mr. Neve, village grocer and book-lover'.

Although not much of a gardener — this was Mrs Mathews' sphere — he took a great pride in his orchard and each year put down details of the crop. There was no talk of retirement and on the whole he was robust but there had been a heavy cold, perhaps 'flu, a previous winter. 'Went back to the office too early' he recorded. Then in the autumn of 1921 he 'picked the last windfall of Blenheims'. These had scarcely been stored when he was ill again. Among those who read of his death in December that year was Alfred Perceval Graves, who told Mrs Mathews 'He won the greatest personal esteem for his manly sympathy with young authors and his honorable, not to say handsome treatment of all who did business with him, quite apart from his charming social qualities'.