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A NOVELIST AND HIS PUBLIC

by John Pilkington, Jr.

AT THE HEIGHT of his fame as one of the most popular novelists America has ever produced, Francis Marion Crawford wrote a beginning writer that the one requisite for success was talent and added that "by *talent*, I mean a sensitive and tactful appreciation of the public taste at a given time."¹ The uniform success of his forty-odd volumes of fiction (he never wrote a novel that was not a popular success) serves to demonstrate that Crawford had talent, in his sense of the word, to a very remarkable degree; but his private correspondence also demonstrates his preoccupation with what today would be called public relations.

Almost no letters of this nature have ever been published. In 1934, when Mrs. Maud Howe Elliott wrote *My Cousin, F. Marion Crawford*, either no letters from Crawford to his admiring public were available or she felt that they were not appropriate to her book. Subsequently unpublished collections of Crawford's correspondence have been found, but these, like the Duchess of Sermoneta's letters, have generally been addressed to prominent persons. As a consequence, the care which Crawford took to maintain good public relations with his now forgotten but then devoted

¹Letter to John Phillips Street, a beginning writer, dated November 22, 1892, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. The entire passage reads: "Strike high, work hard, and if you have talent you will succeed. By *talent*, I mean a sensitive and tactful appreciation of the public taste at a given time—an appreciation more than half unconscious, perhaps, but of the highest value at the beginning and probably the only real indispensable element of success." Quotations from the letters of Francis Marion Crawford and of Louisa (Ward) Crawford Terry in the possession of the Houghton Library of Harvard University have been made by permission. Research for this article has been made possible partially through a grant from the faculty committee on research of the University of Mississippi.

admirers has never been evident. Three letters which indicate this facet of Crawford's personality have come into the possession of the writer of this article.

The first of these letters, addressed to a Miss Page, is of special interest to collectors of Crawford material because it bears the return address of Villa de Renzis, Sant' Agnello di Sorrento. After his marriage in Constantinople to Elizabeth Christophers Berdan on October 11, 1884, Crawford had brought his bride back to Rome for the winter social season. During the winter of 1884-1885 he completed *Zoroaster*, his first historical novel; but instead of returning to the United States, as he had planned, immediately after the publication of the novel in London (May 22, 1885) by Macmillan and simultaneously in the United States by the American branch of Macmillan, Crawford and his wife decided to spend the summer at the picturesque Cocumella Hotel in Sorrento. So pleasant were their surroundings in Sorrento and so great was the fascination of the sea-coast along the Bay of Naples, that the Crawfords decided to remain throughout the winter; and despite some opposition from his mother-in-law, Crawford began to search for a villa to rent, even to purchase. The place he selected was the "Villa de Renzis," a large three-storied house built upon a high cliff overhanging the Bay of Naples. The Renzi family, who owned the property, agreed to rent it for a year and to give Crawford the option of buying the villa.² The following year he began to negotiate for the purchase of the villa, but not until the summer of 1887 were the papers signed which gave him formal title to the Renzis estate.³ From this point on, the return address on Crawford's letters was "Villa Crawford," a residence that became known to hundreds of thousands of Crawford's admirers as the home of one of America's most distinguished men of letters. Not many of Crawford's letters during this approximately eighteen month period, while he was renting the Renzis villa, are extant.

When Crawford wrote the note to Miss Page, he had been writing novels for approximately four years. During this time he had published a half-dozen novels, all of which had enjoyed a considerable sale in America as well as in England. How much "fan mail" he received, it is difficult to say. Obviously, Miss Page

²See Maud Howe Elliott, *My Cousin, F. Marion Crawford* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), p. 200.

³Letter from Louisa (Ward) Crawford Terry to Margaret Chanler, July 13, 1887, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

was a "fan," but in the hundreds of letters which Crawford wrote before and after this one, her name is not mentioned; and almost nowhere does he mention "fan mail" as such. The deft yet impersonal manner in which Crawford replies, however, suggests that this letter is not the first of the kind he had written. It does suggest that his "sensitive appreciation of public taste" included a sensitive appreciation of public relations. The letter follows:

Villa de Renzis
Sant Agnello di Sorrento
March 16. 1886.

My dear Miss Page

In reply to your note of March 2d I am sorry to tell you that I have no photographs of myself, nor, to my knowledge, are there any of me to be had in America. I thank you very much for the interest you take in my books and, since you desire my autograph, I have much pleasure in signing myself

Your obedient servant
F. Marion Crawford

II

The second letter, published here for the first time, like the letter to Miss Page, indicates Crawford's concern with his public; but it also bears a rather interesting relation to Crawford's home. On July 2, 1887, arrangements for the purchase of the Renzis villa were completed.⁴ A few days later, Crawford's mother, Mrs. Louisa (Ward) Crawford Terry, in a letter to her sister, Mrs. Annie (Ward) Mailliard, captured Crawford's enthusiasm for his new acquisition. Mrs. Terry writes that Crawford exclaimed, "Do you realize, Mother dear, that your feet are treading the tiles of your son's own house, that that tree is mine, this garden, etc. etc." and then with a twinkle, "Why, Mother, that *noise* as the wave dashed up against the cliff is mine."⁵ To conclude her account of the celebration in the Crawford household, Mrs. Terry adds:

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Letter from Louisa (Ward) Crawford Terry to Annie (Ward) Mailliard, June 21, 1887, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. A version of this letter has also been published in Elliott's *My Cousin, F. Marion Crawford*, pp. 210-211.

And it is true, for the deed gives right to seven yards of water beyond the rocks. Well the 2nd of July was a very very joyous day, and after assisting at the tearing down of the marble slabs on which was inscribed "Villa Line" [P], and of the cast iron letters proclaiming to passers by that it was "Proprieta de Renzio", we dined and drank to the prosperity of "Villa Crawford" and of all who now or should dwell therein."⁶

Crawford's mother wrote better than she knew, for Villa Crawford was to become famous the world over. Not long after signing the formal papers, Crawford began to write on stationery that was engraved "Villa Crawford," and the letter to Carl Wilhelm Ernst on August 15, 1887, was one of the first of hundreds to bear this return address.

The letter follows:

Villa Crawford
Sant' Agnello di Sorrento
Italy
Aug 15. 1887.

Dear Mr. Ernst

I have long been meaning to write and thank you for your very kind and flattering notice of "Sarracinesca" in the Beacon. Although I do not deserve half the praise you give me, I am as much delighted as though I merited it all.

With regard to the notice of me in Messrs Appleton's publication, I can give you the following facts which are very much at your service.

Francis Marion Crawford: born at the Bagni di Lucca, Italy, Aug: 2d 1854.

1866 sent to America to Dr. Coit's school, Saint Paul's at Concord N. H.

1869-70 in Italy. 1870-74 in England, at a private tutor's and at Trinity College, Cambridge. Left Cambridge without taking degree.

1874-76 at Karlsruhe, Polytechnicum, and a short time at Heidelberg.

1876-78 at the University of Rome, studying Sanskrit

⁶Letter from Louisa (Ward) Crawford Terry to Annie (Ward) Mailliard, June 21, 1887, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

1879-80 In India. Allahabad. Edited a daily paper called the "Indian Herald."

1881-83 in America. Wrote criticisms upon works of philosophy, Eastern travel and philosophy. In 1882, May-June, wrote "Mr. Isaacs." published in December 82. Between June and December wrote "Dr. Claudius."

January-February 1883 wrote "A Roman Singer." published in Atlantic Monthly beginning (I think) in July.

May 1883. returned to Italy.

1884 many months in Turkey. Married to Miss Berdan, daughter of Gen. Berdan in October 1884. Since then resided in Italy.

Books written. Mr. Isaacs, Dr. Claudius, A Roman Singer, To Leeward, An American Politician, Zoroaster, Sarracinesca, A Tale of a Lonely Parish, Paul Patoff, With the Immortals, Marzio's Crucifix. The last three have not yet appeared in book form, as they are running through magazines.

These are the facts, such as they are, and you may pick out such as you find most interesting or useful, if any of them have either of these qualities.

I find much to read in the Beacon. The notes on language are particularly well done.

With renewed and hearty thanks for your kind notices of my books and with every wish for your success, believe me ever

Yours sincerely

F. Marion Crawford

C. W. Ernst Esq.

Carl Wilhelm Ernst, to whom this letter is addressed, wrote for the *Beacon: A Weekly Magazine of Social Progress*, published in Boston.⁷ In addition to reviewing books, Ernst probably wrote most of the "notes on language" which appeared in the *Beacon* and caught Crawford's attention. Ernst became somewhat of an expert on the history of word-coinage, publishing articles on the subject in such magazines as the *New England Magazine*⁸ and the

⁷The *Beacon* began publication on February 16, 1884, and continued through twenty-one volumes to 1904.

⁸Carl Wilhelm Ernst, "Words Coined in Boston," *New England Magazine*, n.s. XV (November, 1896), 337-344.

Scientific American.⁹ As Crawford indicates in his letter, Ernst was also writing for *Appleton's Literary Bulletin*, which was published from 1881 to 1890.¹⁰ A kind of trade magazine, *Appleton's Literary Bulletin* contained notes of the bookselling business, literary gossip, reviews of popular books, and sketches of popular authors. It was furnished free to libraries. Crawford was obviously eager to supply biographical information for Ernst to use in preparing a column for the *Literary Bulletin*. As Crawford says, he was already indebted to Ernst for a flattering notice about *Saracinesca* which had been published on April 16, 1887, after running since May, 1886, as a serial in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.¹¹

The biographical information that Crawford furnished Ernst was in the main accurate. The outline sketch of his education coincides with the known facts of his life and in one instance supplies information that is known from no other source. Crawford had been born, as he says, on August 2, 1854, at Bagni di Lucca, Italy; and after spending his early childhood years for the most part in

⁹Carl Wilhelm Ernst, "The Origin of the Word Scientific," *Scientific America*, XCVI (January 26, 1907), 91.

¹⁰Throughout a lifetime of activity, Ernst (1845-1919) seems always to have maintained an interest in literary affairs. In addition to the literary work mentioned here, Ernst published a volume entitled *Constitutional History of Boston* (1894) and served as an editorial writer for the *Providence Press*. He assisted in the compilation of the Oxford English Dictionary and between 1894 and 1902 was a regular donor to the library of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Ernst, however, was probably not a professional literary man. At different times he served as secretary to the mayor of Boston and as assistant postmaster in Boston. For a brief account of his life, see the obituary in the *New York Times*, April 13, 1919, p. 22, col. 4. For assistance in establishing the facts of Ernst's career, the writer is grateful to Mrs. Bernice W. Johnson and Mr. Thomas W. Tullos of the library of the University of Mississippi.

¹¹The first chapters had appeared in May, 1886, and the last installment had been printed in the issue for April, 1887. Crawford had been immensely pleased with the arrangements for the sale of the work. He wrote his mother on January 8, 1886 (letter in the Houghton Library of Harvard University), that "Saracinesca appears in Blackwood. I am to receive the large price of £1850, nearly 34,000 francs for the serial and only fifteen hundred, 1500 copies, all the rest belonging to me, in England, America and abroad. At a low figure I shall get £2500 in 18 months from this one book. Blackwood expresses a very high opinion of it, and backs his opinions with a round sum. You see I am gradually getting up the prices and after all there is no such test of mere popularity as that." On February 19, 1886, he again wrote his mother, "I received a brilliant offer from Macmillan for the American edition of *Saracinesca*—750 pounds in advance. I shall have received altogether for this book £2100 by May 1st 1887, all contracted for, and independently of the English one volume edition which will bring several hundred pounds more"—letter in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. The novel was published in book form, apparently simultaneously in England and America, on April 16, 1887. The very advantageous terms mentioned by Crawford of course help to explain his gratitude to Ernst.

Rome, he arrived at St. Paul's School in October, 1866. St. Paul's, then under the direction of the Reverend Henry Augustus Coit, attempted to be an American version of such English public schools as Eton, Rugby, and Harrow. With time off for visits to the home of his famous aunt, Julia Ward Howe, in Boston, Crawford remained at St. Paul's until the spring of 1869 when he returned to Italy. In 1870 his mother decided to send him to England to study under the guidance of the Reverend George Burn at Hatfield Broad Oak, Essex, a few miles north of London.¹² Crawford's purpose was to prepare himself for Cambridge; and, indeed, on October 8, 1873, he was admitted pensioner at Trinity College, Cambridge. After a year of not very serious study, Crawford left the university and again returned to Italy.

Once more the Crawford-Terry family decided to send Crawford to school. This time the institution selected was the Technische Hochschule at Karlsruhe, Germany. Crawford enrolled on October 22, 1874, and very shortly thereafter was participating in most of the student extra-curricular activities, including dueling.¹³ Just how long Crawford remained at Karlsruhe cannot be established. So late as April 9, 1876, he was still in Karlsruhe, but his whereabouts from this date until May, 1877, cannot be documented from contemporary evidence. Crawford's letter to Ernst represents the only available first-hand evidence that he went from Karlsruhe to Heidelberg for "a short time," although numerous writers in Crawford's day, possibly following Ernst, confidently noted that Crawford was educated at the University of Heidelberg.¹⁴

¹²Crawford's novel, *A Tale of a Lonely Parish* (2 vols.; New York and London: Macmillan, 1886), was based upon his experiences at Hatfield Broad Oak.

¹³Crawford's novel, *Greifenstein* (3 vols.; New York and London: Macmillan, 1889), was based upon the Karlsruhe experience; but of course at the time of the letter to Ernst, this volume had not yet been written.

¹⁴The statement that Crawford was educated in Heidelberg has become more or less a part of the "official" sketches of his life appearing in encyclopedias and newspaper accounts. See "Marion Crawford," *New York Times*, April 10, 1909, p. 9, cols. 1-2; [Fred Lewis Pattee], "Francis Marion Crawford," *Dictionary of American Biography*, IV, 519-520; and "Francis Marion Crawford," *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th ed.; Cambridge, 1910), VII, 386. No source is given for this idea. The *New York Times* account states that at Karlsruhe Crawford studied mathematics his first year and enrolled in the forest school in his second year; moreover, the Technische Hochschule, offering as it did principally scientific courses, was scarcely the kind of institution which would have been chosen by a student interested in languages. If he went to Heidelberg, he must have gone sometime between the fall of 1876 and the end of 1878. Against the evidence in Crawford's letter to Ernst must be put the comment of W. P. Fuchs, a professor at the

Crawford's comment in his letter to Ernst that during the years 1876-1878 he was studying Sanskrit at the University of Rome is true in the main, but it perhaps needs a little qualification. During the summer of 1877, for example, Crawford worked as a translator for a group of engineers; and while working for them, he took a walking trip from Rome to Subiaco and Olevano. It was on this excursion that he chanced to take along a Sanskrit grammar. By the time he returned to Rome at the end of the summer, he had become so fascinated by the subject that he enrolled in a Sanskrit course at the University of Sapienza and resolved to become a Sanskrit scholar.¹⁵ He continued his study of Sanskrit until the end of 1878 when he decided to accompany an Indian scholar to Bombay ostensibly to pursue the subject even further. The remark to Ernst that he edited the *Indian Herald* in Allahabad during 1879-1880 is entirely accurate, for Crawford soon after reaching Bombay abandoned his studies and turned editor.

Crawford's account of his activities in America, 1881-1883, may be made more precise, but very few of the facts he gives to Ernst need be corrected. Under the sponsorship of his uncle, Samuel Ward, Crawford wrote reviews of "works of philosophy, Eastern travel and philosophy" for such newspapers as the *New York Times* and *The World* (New York) and for such periodicals as *The Critic* and *The North American Review*.¹⁶ On at least one occasion other than his letter to Ernst, Crawford said that he began his first novel, *Mr. Isaacs*, on May 5, 1882,¹⁷ but there is good evidence to show that April 5 is much closer to the fact.¹⁸ There is no question but that he completed the novel on June 15, 1882.¹⁹ In July, 1882, he began *Doctor Claudius*, finishing it about Decem-

University of Heidelberg, who has furnished the writer with the following statement: "Die Universitätsmatrikel enthält seinen Namen nicht. Im Universitäts-adreszbuch ist sein Name ebenfalls nicht zu finden."

¹⁵See Mrs. Hugh Fraser, *A Diplomatist's Wife in Many Lands* (2 vols.; London: Hutchinson and Co., 1911), I, 127-128; and Elliott, *My Cousin, F. Marion Crawford*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁶For example, Crawford reviewed Arthur Lillie's *Buddha and Early Buddhism*, John Owen's *Evenings with the Skeptics*, T. W. Rhys Davids' *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, Edward A. Freeman's *Sketches from the Subject and Neighbor Lands of Venice*, Thomas W. Knox's *The Boy Travellers in the Far East*, Major George A. Jacob's *A Manual of Hindu Pantheism*, and A. Barth's *The Religions of India*.

¹⁷See Robert Bridges, "F. Marion Crawford: A Conversation," *McClure's Magazine*, IV (March, 1895), 320.

¹⁸See my article, "The Genesis of *Mr. Isaacs*," *University of Mississippi Studies in English*, II (1961), 31-32.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 36.

ber 5 while he was in St. John's, New Brunswick, to secure the English copyright for *Mr. Isaacs*.²⁰ On January 3, 1883, he began to write his third novel, *A Roman Singer*, completing it on February 21, 1883.²¹ Thus in a ten month period, Crawford had written three novels. As he wrote Ernst, he returned to Italy in May, 1883.

The chronology given by Crawford in the letter to Ernst continues to be accurate. In 1884, Crawford spent months in Constantinople paying court to Miss Elizabeth Christophers Berdan, the daughter of Hiram K. Berdan, a retired general and gun-inventor; and on October 11, 1884, Crawford and Miss Berdan were married in the French Catholic Church at Pera.²² Crawford's remark to the effect that since his marriage he had resided in Italy is likewise an established fact, and his list of novels written by 1887 is correct, although it is strange that he should misspell the title.

Crawford's letter to Carl Ernst provides abundant evidence of the novelist's effort to be scrupulously accurate in giving information to the press. Indeed, Crawford is usually so accurate that one suspects misquotation or some special circumstances wherever there is an error in fact. The letter, however, is no less significant as an example of Crawford's eagerness to furnish those who asked for biographical information with the right kind of material that could be easily worked into an article. In the case of the letter to Ernst, what Crawford provided was essentially an outline of a biographical sketch. All that remained for Ernst to accomplish was to turn the topical outline into complete sentences using the proper transitional phrases. Ernst was Crawford's immediate "public," but his real public was the audience beyond Ernst.

III

The third letter reprinted here was written to a distinguished scientist and educator. Professor Franklin William Hooper, a

²⁰Samuel Ward is explicit about this matter in his letter to Louisa (Ward) Crawford Terry, December 25, 1882, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University.

²¹See letter from Crawford to Samuel Ward, February 22, 1883, in the Houghton Library of Harvard University. *A Roman Singer* had been serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* beginning in the issue for July, 1883, and ending in June, 1884.

²²As part of its very full coverage of this important social event, the *New York Times* reported that for the Protestant ceremony, held in the salon of the Berdans' villa after the Roman Catholic service in the church, "the whole of the diplomatic body [at Constantinople] and the élite of society were present"—*New York Times*, October 13, 1884, p. 1, col. 4.

native of New Hampshire, had been appointed director of the Brooklyn Institute in 1889, a position he held until his death on August 1, 1914. A Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and an eminent lecturer on geology and biology, Hooper had organized the Brooklyn Museum of Arts and Sciences as well as the Brooklyn Children's Museum.²³ Each year the Institute sponsored a series of lectures and recitals by prominent artists. Crawford had already begun to negotiate with Major James Burton Pond for a lecture tour during the winter of 1897-1898. Very probably Crawford wished to discuss the matter privately with Pond before giving Professor Hooper a definite answer. It is also true that Crawford could have talked to Professor Hooper in person, because the novelist would have been in New York by the time his letter reached Professor Hooper. Crawford, however, knew that he was going to New York to prepare a dramatization of *Doctor Claudius* and to see it through rehearsals. Realizing the demands that would be made on his time, Crawford, therefore, chose to put Professor Hooper off with a very polite note, as follows:

Sant' Agnello di Sorrento
Italy

Oct. 13. 1896

Prof. Franklin W. Hooper
Brooklyn Institute.

My dear Sir

Many thanks for your very kind invitation, so warmly renewed, to speak at the Institute next winter. Your letter reached me the other day, and I am now on the point of sailing for New York. I hardly know how my winter will turn out, but if you will allow me, I will send a definite answer on or soon after the 15th of November.

With renewed and sincere thanks

Yours faithfully
F. Marion Crawford.

For the record, it should be said that Crawford did accept Professor Hooper's invitation and that he did lecture at the Brooklyn Institute early in 1898 on "Leo XIII. and the Vatican." Major

²³For an account of his life and career see the obituary article in the *New York Times*, August 2, 1914, Sec. II, p. 15.

Pond recalled that Crawford's lecture was a successful one in every respect.²⁴

The letter to Professor Hooper and the other two letters published here for the first time illustrate the carefulness with which Crawford conducted his relations with his private readers, the press, and the directors of artist series. Crawford had the knack of striking exactly the proper tone and maintaining the thin line between too much formality and too little graciousness. The nineteenth century would have said that he had taste; perhaps today one would say he had tact. In any event it was a sensitive appreciation of what was wanted and the skill to supply it on request. And for his biographer the letters of this kind which have survived provide important biographical details as well as an insight into the character and technique of one of America's most successful men of letters.

²⁴Pond quotes a letter from Lyman Abbott dealing with Crawford's address; see Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius* (New York: G. W. Dillingham Company, 1900), p. 457.