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**NETTA SYRETT'S SISTER AND "UNCLE":
A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON THE NINETIES**

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The flamboyant poseurs on the British literary scene in the 1890s present special problems for their biographers. Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, and Aubrey Beardsley are among those who hid their vulnerabilities and inhibitions behind a decadent, dandified pose and who thus have made an accurate biography difficult to formulate. As biographers busily dig beneath the cultivated surface images to reveal the individuals beneath, we gain a clearer, sharper perspective on these people as well as on this vibrant, seminal period. Such increased study naturally brings to light misconceptions and factual mistakes made by previous biographers and critics. The productive writer Netta Syrett, who was published by John Lane and a member of the *Yellow Book* coterie, is the victim of two such misconceptions that need correction.

One factual error exists in *The Dictionary of British Book Illustrators and Caricaturists 1800-1914* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1978). This entry on page 474 reads: "SYRETT, Nellie or Netta. Illustrator. Artist drawing in the black and white style of L. Housman (q.v.). She contributed to *The Yellow Book* and *The Quarto*, 1896. Exhib: SWA." The information suggests that Nellie and Netta are names used by the same person. In truth, the entry describes Helen Syrett, Netta's sister, who was an artist trained at the Slade. Her family called her Nellie, and she used that name professionally. Her husband, Joseph Peter Thorp ("T" of *Punch*), wrote a warm tribute to her in the "Envoi" to his reminiscences *Friends and Adventures*. Netta is another person, who was not an illustrator.

In *John Lane and the Nineties* (London, 1936), J. Lewis May catalogues the talented authors whose writings John Lane published at the Bodley Head and entertained in his home, among them Netta Syrett. She is designated "Grant Allen's niece" in a quotation from E. H. New's diary. In a letter to May, dated 23 October 1936, Netta Syrett corrects this misconception regarding her kinship to the well-known novelist [this letter now reposes in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, UCLA. Gracious permission to quote from it is acknowledged]. Syrett writes: "I am interested to find myself 'the niece of Grant Allen'! A very distant connexion is all I can claim by way of

relationship—but it doesn't matter! I knew him, & his wife very well and often stayed with them when I was a girl." *John Lane and the Nineties* is "a delightful book." She tells May that he has "captured the atmosphere of the nineties admirably." Coming from an active participant in the exciting intellectual and social world surrounding Lane, such comments are high commendation.

May's book continues to be an important and influential work on the nineties, but the error regarding Syrett remains uncorrected. In fact, Katherine Lyon Mix, in *A Study in Yellow* (Lawrence, KA, 1962), confidently asserts that "Grant Allen was her [Syrett's] uncle" (p. 237). Syrett in her reminiscences, [*The Sheltering Tree* (London, 1939)] tells of her delightful visits to the Allens, but she does not clarify the relationship. She says: "Our respective families were connected by marriage" (p. 42). Only in this heretofore unpublished letter to May do we learn that that kinship was not close. Through Grant Allen she met George Meredith and heard intimate talk of Allen's friends Stevenson and Swinburne. Allen provided an intellectual stimulus to the young woman by exposing her to such writers and to ideas about sexual freedom and evolution. He was an influential figure in her youth, but he was not her uncle.