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GUY BOOTHBY: THE 'Dr. NIKOLA' NOVELS (1895-1901)

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*Nel dolcissimo ricordo di Severino,
mio meraviglioso nonno.
Ciao tì, ciao mi!*

*A Rossella,
2010: from here to eternity...*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Bid *A Bid for Fortune; or, Dr. Nikola's Vendetta.*

Nikola *Doctor Nikola.*

Lust *The Lust of Hate.*

Experiment *Dr. Nikola's Experiment.*

Farewell *Farewell, Nikola.*

FOREWORD

'[...] the most imbecile production of any literary age gives us sometimes the very clue to comprehension we have sought long and vainly in contemporary masterpieces [...].'

(R. L. Stevenson, Familiar Studies of Men and Books (1882))

Between 12 August and 25 November 1900, La Domenica del Corriere, the supplement of Il Corriere della Sera, the most popular (then as now) among Italian dailies, serialized Doctor Nikola (translated as Il dottor Nikola), an 1896 English novel by a Guy Boothby. I came across this information as I was browsing a bibliography of the fictional (and poetical) works published by the Italian daily,¹ and I became curious about the character (I had just finished working on a contemporary novel featuring another title character with an East European name,² i.e. Bram Stoker's Dracula). I discovered that in 1890s Britain (and, evidently, not only there and then), Dr. Nikola was a villain almost as popular as Doyle's Professor Moriarty, and Boothby one of the most prolific and best-selling writers of his times. Strangely enough, I also found that both character and author are quite forgotten today, and resolved to learn more about them.

Guy Boothby was an Australian would-be dramatist who moved to England in his late twenties and turned successfully to popular fiction. His most famous character was Dr. Nikola, a criminal scientist of Italian origins that stars in five novels published between 1895 and 1901. We would know little of Boothby's life – scanty, often derivative, information can be found in some specialized

¹ Marianna DILUINCIS. *Romanzi, Racconti, Poesie e Drammi nelle Edizioni del Corriere della Sera, 1876-1918*. Molino del Piano: Pirani Bibliografica Editrice, Archivi della Memoria, 2004.

² The spelling 'Nikola' may indicate Russian or Slavonic origins. In Boothby's times the name was probably pronounced (and is quite likely to be pronounced today) after the manner of the English 'Nicholas,' with the stress falling on the first syllable.

biographical dictionaries – but for Paul Depasquale, a scholar, South Australian literature authority, and book antiquarian, who wrote several essays and a (sadly limited-edition) monograph on Boothby.³ Depasquale has been an invaluable source of information, which I have used throughout my work and especially in Chapter One, where I have attempted to sketch out a Boothby biography collecting all the scattered information that I could find. I have tried to delineate Boothby's literary background, a task that was greatly eased by Philip Waller's monumental study on literary life between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – 'the first and the only mass literary age.'⁴ I have consulted the first editions of the Dr. Nikola novels, and the magazines in which some of them were first serialized, and gathered evidence (albeit at times indirect) of Boothby's contemporary reception (both from the readers and critics).

Boothby's novels were produced for an unsophisticated audience (or for an audience that desired an unsophisticated product), and were made to be read quickly and superficially. Today they hardly make an interesting reading for their own sake. When I analysed their form, I had to agree with Depasquale that Boothby invariably repeats 'characters, settings, ideas, expressions and narrative tricks until they jar harshly upon [the] reader.'⁵ If the novels have still something to say, it is to the scholar of the fin de siècle period. They interest us because they are clean-cut (albeit univocal) 'human responses to specific human situations.'⁶ The fin de siècle was a period of restlessness, and Boothby proved

³ Paul DEPASQUALE. *Guy Boothby: His Life and Works*. Seacombe Gardens: Pioneer Books, 1982. Of the first (and, to my knowledge, only) edition, only 100 copies were printed.

⁴ Philip WALLER. *Writers, Readers, and Reputations. Literary Life in Britain 1870-1918*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP 2006, 1.

⁵ DEPASQUALE, 122. Actually, Depasquale's opinion is not limited to the Dr. Nikola novels but extends to Boothby's entire output.

⁶ Stephen ARATA. *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle. Identity and Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1996, 6. I have to acknowledge my debt also to Arata, whose book has provided me with many valuable insights into the *fin de siècle*.

himself rather skilful at exploiting its anxieties for commercial purposes. If we trust Stevenson's claim, Boothby's work may enable us to better understand the spirit of its age.

For reference purposes, I have adopted the Kessinger and Wildside editions that are listed in the Bibliography.

CHAPTER ONE

GUY BOOTHBY: LIFE AND WORKS

1.1. BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Guy Newell Boothby was born 'in the house of his grandfather, who was living then in what is now the Passionist Monastery, at Glen Osmond,'¹ a suburb of Adelaide, South Australia, on 13 October 1867.² His father, Thomas Wilde Boothby (1839-1885), was the ninth child of Benjamin Boothby (1803-1868) and Maria Bradbury Robinson (d. 1889). The former was born in Doncaster, South Yorkshire; in 1823 his family moved to Nottingham, Nottinghamshire, to pursue the manufacturing business. Benjamin 'was appointed second judge of the Supreme Court of South Australia on the recommendation of the Duke of Newcastle'³ in 1853, and the family accordingly moved to Adelaide, possibly settling in Glen Osmond. In Australia Thomas must have met Mary Agnes Hodding (1843-1907), the first child of Edward Hodding (c.1813-c.1848), a farmer of Odstock, Salisbury, Wiltshire, and Mary Squarey (b. c.1819) of Salisbury. Mary Agnes had gone to Melbourne with her mother, brother and sister in 1857, though it is not known whether their intention was to move there. It is a fact that she stayed in Australia longer than her mother and sister, who are both recorded in the UK census as living in Salisbury, Wiltshire, at least from 1871 to 1901.⁴ Her

¹ 'Obituary: Mr. Guy Boothby.' *The Advertiser*, 1 Mar. 1905.

² Some sources give the date of 12 October. For an instance, cf. 'Boothby, Guy Newell (1867-1905), known as Guy Boothby.' *Dictionary of Australian Biography*. <http://gutenberg.net.au/dictbiog/0-dict-biogBe-Bo.html> (10/11/2009).

³ 'Boothby, Guy Newell (1867-1905).' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A070352b.htm?hilite=guy%3Bboothby> (10/11/2009).

⁴ Cf. <http://www.turle.name/scadding/pages/indil2529.html>, and <http://www.turle.name/scadding/pages/indil2533.html> (10/11/2009).

staying was evidently due to her marriage to Thomas, which took place in 1864. The couple settled in Glen Osmond and Thomas, who owned a pastoral property in the south-east, provided for his family by working as a stock and station agent. In 1873 he 'won a by-election for the Victoria seat in the House of Assembly,'⁵ but his career was undistinguished and came to an end only two years later.

Born three years after the couple's marriage, Guy grew up in this well-to-do colonial family, and his mother, as she later recollected, put him under the care of 'an intelligent black boy' who taught the child 'to sit his pony' and 'instructed him in many Bush arts and crafts.'⁶ At the age of six he left Australia with his mother and two brothers (Benjamin and Herbert), and went to live in Salisbury, Mrs. Boothby's birthplace.⁷ Thomas stayed in Australia, as the couple had meanwhile separated.⁸ The voyage was made aboard the "Carna Kwean" owned by Messrs. Elder, Smith and Co., of Adelaide' and it was 'an adventurous voyage of some three months duration, via Cape Horn, a by no means pleasant route, especially in a sailing ship.'⁹ In Salisbury, the 'quaint house of hundreds of years old' where Boothby lived became one of the first objects on which to 'weave wonderful stories,' some of which he might have jotted down, if his claim that he 'was always a scribbler' is to be trusted.¹⁰ In Salisbury the future writer attended the

⁵ 'Boothby, Thomas Wilde (1839-1885).' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A030499b.htm?hilite=boothby%3Bthomas%3Bwilde> (10/11/2009).

⁶ Quoted in DEPASQUALE. *Guy Boothby*, 11.

⁷ Depasquale suggests 1875 as a possible, though not certain, year of departure, as it was 'categorically given by Guy Boothby's surviving daughter, Mrs. Phyllis Neame, in a letter to Dr. John Playford.' The year of course does not accord with Boothby's claim: if the future author was six when he left, the year should be 1873 or 1874. Cf. DEPASQUALE, 20, note 3.

⁸ DEPASQUALE, 11.

⁹ Cf. Philip M. ROBINSON and Leslie A. SPENCE. *The Robinson Family of Bolsover and Chesterfield*. Chesterfield: Robinson & Sons 1937, 102.

¹⁰ Boothby gave this information during his first interview to *The Windsor Magazine*. John HYDE. 'The Creator of "Dr. Nikola": An Afternoon with Guy Boothby.' *The Windsor Magazine*, Dec. 1896, 129-134.

Priory School, and his education was then completed at Lord Weymouth School, in Warminster, Wiltshire. He stayed in England until the age of sixteen, when he parted from his beloved mother and returned to Australia to work 'in the office of the Town Clerk of Adelaide before becoming private secretary to the Mayor (Lewis Cohen) in 1890.'¹¹ Boothby did not entertain any passion for his job, and had literary aspirations: he wanted to become a professional dramatist; however, as his colleague Fergus Hume had realised about ten years earlier, Australia was no place for would-be artists, even more so if they were colonial-born and had the ambition to become playwrights.¹² Boothby discovered the sad truth not before writing some dramas which enjoyed minor productions. Depasquale gives *Falsely Accused: or The Course of True Love* as Boothby's first piece of theatre to be staged. It was a 'comedy-drama' and was performed at the Albert Hall in Adelaide in October 1888, by a group of amateur actors, and played by an 'efficient orchestra' at the head of which was an important Adelaide music director.¹³ Whether it was a success or not, the play was considered quite derivative – appearing 'to have been constructed from various eighteenth century comedies and dramas,'¹⁴ – and Boothby, who played the hero in it, seems not to

¹¹ DEPASQUALE, 12.

¹² Hume had written a quite theatrical novel, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, with the purpose of attracting theatre managers in Melbourne and persuading them to stage it. However, he could not even find publishers willing to print it, on the ground that 'no Colonial could write anything worth reading.' So he chose to publish it privately, and, if his words are to be trusted, the edition sold 5,000 copies in three weeks. One year later, when he managed to have the book published in London, it became the best-selling mystery novel of the Victorian era, with half a million copies sold. Realising that he would never make a living out of theatre, he became a professional writer of popular fiction, though his next novels never drew near the roaring success of his first book. Cf. Dorothy GOLDMAN. 'Fergus Hume.' In *British Mystery Writers, 1860-1919. Dictionary of Literary Biography, vol. LXX*. Farmington Hills: Gale 1988, 180-183; 'Hume, Fergusson Wright (Fergus) (1859-1932).' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. <http://adbonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/A040500b.htm> (10/11/2009); 'Humes, Fergus (1859-1932).' *Dictionary of Australian Biography*. <http://gutenberg.net.au/dictbiog/0-dict-biogHi-Hu.html> (10/11/2009).

¹³ DEPASQUALE, 13.

¹⁴ Quoted in DEPASQUALE, 13.

have shone as an actor. The operetta that followed, *Dimple's Lovers*, seems to have enjoyed a moderate success when it was performed in 1890 at the Albert Hall. Boothby had written the libretto for it, and Cecil Sharp, an English musician and future distinguished folk-music collector and scholar, had composed the music. Sharp was publicly praised for the music of *Sylvia: or, The Marquis and the Maid*, another joint production by the two artists which was staged in the same year; Boothby, on the contrary, had once more to endure the old charge of plagiarism or of lacking originality – his libretto, it was maintained, resembled too much those of the English dramatist and librettist W. S. Gilbert. The *coup de grâce* to his theatrical aspirations arrived with *The Jonquille*, a 'romantic drama, in four acts,'¹⁵ as the title of its outline reads, produced in 1891, whose moments of pathos were even greeted with hilarity. Boothby tried one last attempt to collect some money that might afford him to sail to London, where his creation might hopefully be better welcomed, but an author's benefit three-night season fell flat. Embittered though not yet defeated, Boothby realized that it was high time to have a change of air, and undertook with his friend Longley Taylor a long journey through the 'Far East, the Pacific Islands, New Guinea, Sumatra, and so on.'¹⁶ This experience was followed, in 1892, by an impressive thirteen-month journey on horseback, and by buggy, boat and train from Northern Queensland to Adelaide, which Boothby's family circle later romanticized – legends grew about it. In 1893 Boothby set to work on a book that narrated his adventures, and the following year he moved to London, where *On the Wallaby; or, Through the East and Across Australia* was presently published. Enriched by photos and drawings by his brother Ben, it seems to have sold well, and at last the doors of success were opened to Boothby. Little is known about Boothby's first years in England as

¹⁵ DEPASQUALE, 14.

¹⁶ DEPASQUALE, 17.

a writer, except that in 1894 Ward & Lock¹⁷ published his first novel, *In Strange Company; A Story of Chili and the Southern Seas*, which was well received.¹⁸ The success of the book persuaded the publishers to invest on Boothby, and the following year three more Ward & Lock novels by the Australian author followed, and one, at least, was a great success, i.e. *A Bid for Fortune; or, Dr. Nikola's Vendetta*. One of Boothby's uncles once claimed that Guy, as a young boy, was a heavy reader of light literature:¹⁹ now, it seems, he was making the most of his literary experience. On 8 October 1895 he married a 'charming and intelligent'²⁰ Englishwoman, Rose Alice Bristowe, and the couple accepted Rose's father's hospitality for a while²¹ – which may point to some financial straits, or may rather indicate that Boothby could not afford yet the grand life style that he pursued. However, as the 1896 *Windsor* interview shows, just two years after his departure from Australia, Boothby had become one of the most popular, and well-paid, writers in England: he now lived at "Claverley," Mr. Boothby's pretty residence at Surbiton,²² a fashionable London suburb, and could afford thoroughbreds, prize dogs, a collection of precious books and one of international weapons, and a wonderful exotic aquarium. He turned out books and short stories at an incredible

¹⁷ The London-based publishing house Ward & Lock later became 'Ward, Lock & Bowden,' and eventually 'Ward, Lock & Co.'

¹⁸ The *Australian Literary Resource* website claims that the novel was 'praised by the critics but not by the reading public.' However, according to many other sources, it was successful. This is also suggested by the fact that it was republished for the *Windsor Magazine* 1896 Christmas supplement; the year before the Christmas number had included a reprint of Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), which had been an outstanding success.

Cf. 'Guy Newell Boothby (1867-1905).' *The Australian Literary Resource*. <http://www.austlit.edu.au/run?ex=GuidedSearch&type=simple&searchWhere=author&generalSearchString=boothby%2C+guy> (30/10/2009); *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A070352b.htm> (10/11/2009).

¹⁹ Cf. DEPASQUALE, 124, note 25.

²⁰ DEPASQUALE, 22.

²¹ 'The couple first lived in William Bristowe's home at Champion Hill.' 'Boothby, Guy Newell (1867-1905).' *Oxford DNB*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/31970> (10/11/2009).

²² 'The Creator of "Dr. Nikola,"' 129.

speed, and they all seem to have sold quite well. His annual income is stated to have possibly reached the impressive amount of £20,000²³ – though this might be an exaggeration – and he changed at least four villas: “Claverley” in Surbiton, “Manor House” near Kempton Park, “Kenton Court” in Sunbury-on-Thames, and “Winsley Lodge” in Boscombe, near Bournemouth where he lived for about a year, the last of his short life. Seemingly, he never returned to Australia and lived quite comfortably until his premature death in 1905, ‘from complications resulting from an attack of influenza’²⁴ – the official cause of death was ‘Acute Pneumonia and Cardiac Arrest.’ He died in his Boscombe house, Watkin Road, on a Sunday morning, aged thirty-seven, and left a wife, two daughters and a son. Guy Boothby is buried in Wimborne Road Cemetery in Bournemouth, next to his mother.²⁵ His epitaph includes the closing line of ‘Life,’ a poem by Anna Laetitia Barbauld which reads:

Say not “Good-night,” but in some brighter clime
Bid me “Good-morning.”

1.2. THE LITERARY CONTEXT: *FIN DE SIÈCLE* POPULAR FICTION

In the 1890s the literacy of the British population had quite increased compared to the figures of a few decades earlier,²⁶ and there was a huge demand of

²³ Cf. *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Boothby, Guy).

²⁴ ‘Obituary.’ *The Times*, 28 Feb. 1905. The article reveals that the author had been ill for a fortnight, but his death was unexpected.

²⁵ Photos of Boothby’s tombstone can be found in a rather unusual search-engine website called ‘Find a Grave.’
<http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSvcid=7941&GRid=15591961&>
(10/11/2009).

²⁶ In 1870, the rate of illiteracy in England and Wales was estimated around 25-30%; in 1890, 10-15%. Carlo Maria CIPOLLA. *Literacy and Development in the West*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.

literature, particularly the so-called “popular” fiction. This phenomenon was not new: already in 1883, with the publication and immediate success of R. L. Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, publishers had realised that a chunk of the reading public was eager for escapist fiction. It was a newly-formed generation of readers consisting not only of middle-class families but also of workingmen, their wives, and boys who had received the elementary education which the 1870 Universal Education Act had made compulsory – at least in principle. The improved living and working conditions granted them a little spare time that they were willing to spend on books – one of the few recreations that were not beyond their finances. After a hard day’s work what they craved for was something light that might entertain them without taxing the attention or requiring intellectual involvement. A writer that wanted to secure a relatively easy earning had to carefully avoid analyses of the contemporary society and the psychological subtleties of character study.²⁷ The new reading public, counting in millions, favoured exciting and thrilling stories that might take them away from their uneventful and often dull routine, and perhaps make them fly with their imagination to some exotic place. Thus adventure, romance, mystery, crime, fantasy and the newly-born science-fiction became the best-selling genres. Writing fiction might become as remunerative a profession as it had never been before, provided that authors were willing to stoop and give the readers what they wanted.²⁸ In a society where technological innovation was making everything faster, writers ‘could not

²⁷ The Foreword to the first number of *The Windsor Magazine* mockingly reads: ‘the world is not yet so completely cured of marvels that every novelist is reduced to evolving analytic significance from the buttons of the heroine’s shoe!’ ‘Foreword.’ In *The Windsor Magazine. Vol. I. January to June*. London: Ward & Lock 1895, 2.

²⁸ In Boothby’s times markets were in rapid expansion, and a British author could hope to be widely read also abroad, that is, at least in the British colonies and the U.S.A. However, until the American Copyright Act was promulgated in 1891, American publishers often resorted to piracy. A British writer had only two ways to prevent them from defrauding him (or her): to publish first with an American publisher or, in “desperate” cases, to accept an American co-author. Cf. WALLER, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations*, 619.

presume forever upon the public's patience as an age of increasing hurry generated competing demands upon the people's attention.²⁹ A book, in many cases, was perceived as no less than a commodity to be consumed quickly and soon forgotten. In such a changed and ever-changing context, the old and ponderous three-decker was becoming more and more obsolete, also because it still cost too much.³⁰ Since the mid 1860s many publishers had realised that the literary market might be greatly extended if only they could find a way to publish much cheaper editions. In the 1880s technological innovations in the printing business, such as the use of pulp to produce paper, made the enterprise possible.³¹ The roaring success of *Treasure Island* was greatly due to the choice of Cassell & Co. to publish the novel as a one-volume edition³² – the author had indeed been asked to write a story that might be contained in one volume. Roger Lancelyn Green makes 'the age of the story tellers' begin then: from the publication of Stevenson's story, adventure books, or books containing adventure, began to appear with increasing frequency. Publishers invested increasingly large sums of money in major advertising campaigns, as in the case

²⁹ WALLER, 668.

³⁰ In the early 1880s 'the official price of a new three-decker was still three guineas, or 63 shillings,' which might be high for the "man of affairs" and was quite beyond the finances of the workingman, who could read it at most only through the circulating library distribution. The single-volume edition, on the contrary, generally firmed at 6s., but in the 1890s prices dropped further: 'in 1896 [...] over three-quarters of the books were in the low-price categories [1d.-3s. 6d.], and 30 per cent at 6d. or under.' Of course this meant that writers had either to accept a smaller royalty or 'achieve sales of 9,000-12,000 copies for a 2s. book, or 8,000 copies at 2s. 6d. and 6,000 copies at 3s., to yield equivalent returns.' Cf. Mike ASHLEY. *The Age of the Storytellers. British Popular Fiction Magazines, 1880-1950*. London and Newcastle: The British Library and Oak Knoll Press 2006, 5; WALLER, 43; Alexis WEEDON. *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836-1916*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2003, 107.

³¹ In 1883, Arrowsmith of Bristol put on the market a relatively cheap novelty such as the 'shilling shocker,' which was usually a short sensational novel printed in paperback and costing 1s. Cf. WALLER, 34.

³² All of Stevenson's 1880s best-sellers were published in one-volume format from the start: *Treasure Island* (1883), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), *Kidnapped* (1886), *The Black Arrow* (1888), and *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889). WALLER, 32.

of H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), which eventually became the best-selling novel of the year.³³ As Green points out, by the end of the century the popular fiction market had become rather overblown.³⁴ By the mid 1890s the three-decker had practically disappeared: it had too long been a luxurious made-to-last product in a market where cheapness and obsolescence had become a necessity and thus the rule.³⁵

The success of many books was ushered in by the initial serial publication in popular fiction magazines. *The Strand* appeared in 1891 and was soon followed by a series of imitators such as *The Windsor Magazine* (1895), *Pearson's Magazine* (1896), *Harmsworth* (1898), *The Royal* (1898), and others, each of them costing no more than 6d., 'half the cost of most middle-class magazines.'³⁶ These products performed a domestic function, not unlike that of radio and television some decades later: they 'brought storytelling, along with pictures, news, information and other diversions, *into* the home, and did so in regular, packaged ways.'³⁷ Through these magazines the short story, and particularly the serial short story, became increasingly popular and reached its climax with Arthur Conan Doyle's adventures of Sherlock Holmes (which were serialized in *The Strand*). As Doyle had realised, the serial short story was the most successful way to attract readers to a magazine and win their fidelity to it. A long series of iconic heroes began to appear – Sherlock Holmes being not only

³³ Waller reports a description of this massive campaign: 'Some nights after the publication of Haggard's book [the publishers] put these posters up *after dark* on hoardings all over London. People went to their work on the horse-buses in the morning to find this message at every turning: '*King Solomon's Mines – The Most Amazing Book Ever Written.*' WALLER, 669.

³⁴ Cf. ASHLEY, 1.

³⁵ 'Between 1894 and 1895 the publication of three-volume novels fell from 184 to fifty-two; in 1896 it halved again, to twenty-five; and in 1897 only four were published.' WALLER, 668.

³⁶ ASHLEY, 11.

³⁷ ASHLEY, 3.

the first, but the favourite among them – who accompanied the readers through an even longer series of adventures. Doyle's choice to kill his most famous creation in 1893 left Britain an orphan of its hero and roused a huge chorus of disappointment and resentment. The newspapers gave the piece of news as if it were real, and Doyle even received threats, to the extent that he was later compelled to resurrect the detective in 1903.³⁸ Meanwhile, however, a host of authors "rode the wave" and tried their hands at detective fiction stories, or stories with detection in them; some of them were rewarded with high sales and momentary popularity, though the great offer and pressing competition did not make it an easy task for a writer to earn a living by his pen.³⁹ Fictional detectives – professional or amateur, – adventurers, and charismatic villains were created with the purpose of filling the void left by Sherlock Holmes and his enemy Professor Moriarty. Among them, Boothby's Dr. Nikola 'for a time enjoyed the same kind of notoriety among readers as did Professor Moriarty,'⁴⁰ and the first novel of the saga caused a 'tremendous sensation.'⁴¹

1.3. A LITERARY PORTRAIT OF GUY BOOTHBY

Between 1894 and 1907 fifty-one books by Guy Boothby were published: forty-three novels (many of which were first serialized in magazines), seven collections

³⁸ After Sherlock Holmes's demise in 'The Adventure of the Final Problem' (1893), the detective reappeared in the short novel *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901), which however is set in an earlier time than Holmes's disappearance. Doyle had to write another story where it was clear that Holmes's "death" had been but a fabrication, which he did with *The Adventure of the Empty House* (1893).

³⁹ In the year 1892 'while perhaps a hundred novelists were able to live by their work, and fifty could be classed as a thousand-pounds-a-year author, the vast majority struggled.' WALLER, 32.

⁴⁰ Peter HAINING. *A Sherlock Holmes Compendium*. London: W. H. Allen 1980, 140.

⁴¹ ROBINSON and SPENCE, 104.

of short stories,⁴² and one travel book.⁴³ A handful of short stories and poems were not collected in volume form but appeared in magazines. As the *New York Times* obituary records, among English authors there was ‘a standing joke that [Boothby had] invented a machine by which he turned [books] out.’⁴⁴ The journalist and poet Richard Le Gallienne took him as a forerunner of the prolific ‘manufacturer’ of best-sellers, one who employed ‘machine-made methods’ to turn out books.⁴⁵ In his early writing years the author confessed to working ‘the canonical eight hours,’ though every morning he was at work by 5 a.m., and part of his creative effort – no less than 6,000 words a day – was dictated to his wife who transcribed it and always typewrote the final manuscripts.⁴⁶ In his later years he grew even more eccentric: he retired at 9 p.m. and got up in the ‘small hours,’ dictated into a wax-cylinder phonograph until 5.30 a.m., when his two secretaries got up to transcribe everything, while he went on filling another cylinder (he possessed a total of three phonographs).⁴⁷ It was a veritable assembly-line work, and in order that time might not be wasted, several rooms in Boothby’s mansion were interconnected by telephones. Boothby of course could not afford much time for revision, which would have been badly needed also considering that, before setting to write, he did not have a clear idea of how his stories would

⁴² In addition to them, Boothby also contributed eleven stories to the collection *Heroes of the Empire* (1903), which featured several writers including the Scottish William Gordon Stables.

⁴³ Bibliographical data have been collected from *The Australian Literary Resource* and Ben Hutchison’s bibliography of Boothby, which seem to be the only reliable sources for a complete bibliography of the author. Ben HUTCHISON. *Bibliography of Guy Boothby, 1867-1905*. Young St., Wayville: Ben Hutchison, 1988.

⁴⁴ ‘Death of Guy Boothby.’ *The New York Times*, 26 Feb. 1905.

⁴⁵ Richard LE GALLIENNE. ‘Imperishable Fiction: An Inquiry into the Short Life of the “Best Sellers.”’ *Munsey’s Magazine*, 60, 1 (Feb.), 1914, 134. The essay is also available online at the University of Virginia *Electronic Text Centre*: <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbib/toccer-new2?id=Gallimpe.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1> (11/10/2009).

⁴⁶ Cf. ‘The Creator of “Dr. Nikola,”’ 130.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Boothby, Guy); and, LE GALLIENNE, 135.

develop and end.⁴⁸ As the denouement approaches, ‘loss of atmosphere,’ ‘weakening of intensity’ and ‘shift of narrative focus’ are likely to be found even in Boothby’s best-written novels.⁴⁹ What Boothby wrote was made to be read quickly and without paying much attention to details. John Sutherland claims that ‘Boothby believed that if you moved fast enough, the reader would not have time to ask questions.’⁵⁰ I would even go further and say that he knew only too well that his contemporary readers were unwilling to ask questions at all, and he clearly never entertained the ambition to write for a different (or future), perhaps more demanding readership. Although he loved high literature – Walter Pater was one of his favourites⁵¹ – he frankly admitted that he did not take his literature seriously, and that there was no art in his books: ‘I’m not an artist, but I turn out books that seem to interest folk and take them out of themselves for a bit, and in return I have everything I want.’⁵² What Boothby wanted was just a comfortable and splendid living, in which he might have spare time to enjoy his many hobbies. In 1899 the *Windsor* interviewer tried in vain to make Boothby speak of his work, and at last felt compelled to recognise ‘the futility of attempting to interview Mr. Boothby.’ The author invariably ‘ignored all the allusions to his craft’ and art in general (for example, he pretended to hold no opinion about ‘the ineptitude of the modern literary critic’ and the “Art for Art’s sake” concept), while he never missed a chance to show the interviewer his beloved prize animals and collection of weapons, and talk about everything else.⁵³ As Le Gallienne observed, Boothby

⁴⁸ Boothby confessed to *The Windsor* interviewer who asked him whether he planned his stories or not: ‘I know no more what may happen than I know whether the work will win the public favour.’ ‘The Creator of “Dr. Nikola,”’ 130.

⁴⁹ DEPASQUALE, 109.

⁵⁰ Cf. Sutherland’s introduction to a current (1996) Oxford UP edition of *A Bid for Fortune* (xvii-xviii).

⁵¹ Cf. LE GALLIENNE, 134.

⁵² ‘Obituary.’ *The Advertiser*.

⁵³ Wilfrid KLICKMANN. ‘Guy Boothby at Home.’ *The Windsor Magazine*, Feb. 1901.

was an unusual writer not only for his impressive working rhythms, but also for his total lack of ambition and blunt frankness: 'Would that all writers of best sellers were as engagingly honest. No few of them, however, write no better and affect the airs of genius into the bargain,' the journalist concluded.⁵⁴

Boothby's greatest best-sellers appear to have been *In Strange Company; A Story of Chili and the Southern Seas* (1894), *The Beautiful White Devil* (1896), *Pharos The Egyptian* (1899), *A Prince of Swindlers* (1900), *The Curse of the Snake* (1901),⁵⁵ and of course the five Dr. Nikola novels: *A Bid for Fortune; or, Dr. Nikola's Vendetta* (1895); *Doctor Nikola* (1896); *The Lust of Hate* (1898); *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* (1899); and, *Farewell, Nikola* (1901).⁵⁶ According to Boothby's contemporaries, all his novels sold quite well,⁵⁷ which was an outstanding achievement even for a popular writer,⁵⁸ and Terence Rodgers adds that he was 'a favourite in public lending libraries.'⁵⁹ He was no doubt one of the

⁵⁴ LE GALLIENNE, 135.

⁵⁵ I cannot produce sale figures, and the list must be taken only as an attempt to detect Boothby's most popular books. I have relied mainly on the number of times a book was claimed (in Boothby's time) and is claimed (today) to have been a success. I have also duly considered how often it is mentioned in the introductory remarks about the author that can be found in the title pages: 'By Guy Boothby, Author of ...' Some books recur more frequently than others (and some are never mentioned at all), which, I think, may be taken as indirect evidence that the former were more popular than the latter. It was, in fact, in the publishers' interest to introduce their authors in the most flattering terms.

⁵⁶ Some of the Dr. Nikola titles may be found reported with some orthographic inaccuracies, such as the replacement of the semi-colon with a comma in the first; the abbreviation of 'Doctor' into 'Dr.' in the second; and the omission of the comma and the addition of an exclamation mark in the fifth. I have attempted to present them in the exact wordings given in the first editions. The dates refer to the publication of the volume editions. In some subsequent editions, the title of *Doctor Nikola* changed into 'Dr. Nikola Returns;' to my knowledge, the text remained the same, except for minor, negligible alterations.

⁵⁷ For an instance, cf. 'Death of Guy Boothby,' *The New York Times*.

⁵⁸ Depasquale rightly observes that Boothby commands attention right because 'he was successful in the unpredictable and intensely competitive market place of popular fiction.' DEPASQUALE, 107.

⁵⁹ Terence RODGERS. "The Extraordinary Dr Nikola." Guy Boothby and Pulp Fiction at the *Fin de Siècle*. In *Doctor Nikola* (Pulp Publications, 1999). I am extremely grateful to Dr. Rodgers, who kindly sent me this introductory essay.

wealthiest authors of his time.⁶⁰ Fellow authors often included his name, in flattering tones, in their narratives,⁶¹ and he was a distinguished guest in mundane events, such as the 'déjeuner' given to celebrate the completion of the Dictionary of National Biography, in which he was entered.⁶² Almost all through Boothby's literary output, appreciative reviews of his work can be found, though it appears that most critics kept his books in quite a low esteem.

The most frequent tribute critics paid to Boothby was that he never allowed the readers' interest to drop. His stories, full of action and incidents (to the extent that they were sometimes labelled as 'novels of incident') were felt to be exciting and intriguing.⁶³ He was credited with being an imaginative writer⁶⁴ – though it

⁶⁰ According to a contemporary, Boothby 'at one time was making nine thousand [pounds] a year out of his writing.' Just to have an idea of the figure, note that R. L. Stevenson, after his *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped* were published, earned about £4,000-5,000 a year, 'equivalent to an annual income of some £¼ million today.' Henry Rider Haggard, perhaps the best paid writer in England between 1887 and 1894, at the time earned about £10,000 annually (cf. WALLER, 297, 635, 12). The critic Alexander Sutherland wickedly defined Boothby a scribe who had discovered 'the command of wealth by the use of the pen.' Henry Gyles TURNER and Alexander SUTHERLAND. *The Development of Australian Literature*. London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, & Co. 1896, 103.

⁶¹ Suffice it to adduce two instances. In Andrew Lang's *The Disentangled* (1902) a character says to a female writer: 'Jolly instructive! But, Miss Martin, you are the Guy Boothby of your sex!,' and the narrator continues: 'At this supreme tribute the girl dashed like dawn upon the hills.' In C. N. and A. M. Williamson's *The Lightning Conductor*, of the same year, another character tells a friend: 'I pretended to be reading an awfully exciting book of Guy Boothby – really great!.' Andrew LANG. *The Disentangled*. Charleston: Bibliobazaar 2007, 33; C. N. WILLIAMSON and A. M. WILLIAMSON. *The Lightning Conductor*. Whitefish: Kessinger 2004, 324.

⁶² 'The Dictionary of National Biography.' *The Times*, 30 Jun. 1900. A little (or big?) mystery I have not been able to solve is Mr. Guy Boothby's participation at 'the 48th yearly dinner in aid of the General Royal Theatrical Fund [...] held last evening in the White hall-rooms of the Hotel Métropole.' The date of the article, in fact, is 26 May 1893, when we suppose Boothby to have been still in Australia. A date error in *The Times* archive?, a case of coincidence of names?, an exceptional discovery? 'Mr. Irving on Dramatic Criticism.' *The Times*, 26 May 1893.

⁶³ *The Times* reviewed *Doctor Nikola* in the following terms: 'The hairbreadth escapes, the disguises, the reverses of fortune, and the other materials which go to form an exciting story are all to be found in "Dr. Nikola."' 'Recent Novels.' *The Times*, 29 Dec. 1896. *The New York Times*: 'the story has motion, swing, and dash.' 'Dr. Nikola.' *The New York Times*, 9 Aug. 1896.

⁶⁴ 'We do not say that his is inspiration of a high order, but inspiration of a sort it is,' maintained *The Times* reviewer about *The Lust of Hate*. 'Recent Novels.' *The Times*, 10 Aug. 1898.

was generally agreed that he often relied heavily on other novels for inspiration⁶⁵ – a bright, lively, and at times realistic narrator, and even a capable weaver of ingenious story plots – a degree that might more rightly have been conferred on, say, Wilkie Collins than Boothby. Also those critics who sneered at him conceded that at the heart of his success lay the interest of the story plots, but the events recounted in them, they claimed, were improbable and the author's style quite commonplace. 'No very profound study' was required to write the kind of books Boothby turned out, as Alexander Sutherland observed in his merciless depiction of the Australian author.⁶⁶ Some noted that, rather than being properly connected, the events in his stories simply piled up. In Boothby's obituary, *The Times* summed the writer's entire production as 'frank sensationalism carried to its furthest limits.'⁶⁷ This was evidently meant to be a critique, though in a recent Boothby edition this quotation is used, on the back cover, as a catching remark for the potential buyer:⁶⁸ further evidence that the taste of the critic does not often coincide with that of the general reader. Frank sensationalism and nothing more was in fact what Boothby's public wanted: 'a stirring story, short enough to be read at a sitting, and thrilling enough to snatch the reader for a while out of the heat and burden of the day.'⁶⁹ Among the journalists, someone tried to explain

⁶⁵ About *The Beautiful White Devil* it was observed that it 'might, for a second title, have "She at Sea." Mr. Boothby's lovely blonde fiend is a "She who must be obeyed," she ravages the remotest Orient in a steam yacht, she carries sultans captive, she kidnaps millionnaires [*sic*], and is a very fine woman – a maritime Robin Hood. Mr. Boothby has a fight on board ship which is a kind of *reduction ad absurdum* of Mr. Stevenson's battle in the round house, where Allan Breck Stuart approved himself "a bonny fetcher." Where Mr. Haggard usually plays a lion Mr. Boothby lays down an orang-utang [*sic*]. His devil is as skilled in disguised as M. Lecoq; in brief, Mr. Boothby holds a very full hand.' 'Recent Novels.' *The Times*, 27 Jun. 1896.

⁶⁶ TURNER and SUTHERLAND, 103-104.

⁶⁷ 'Obituary.' *The Times*.

⁶⁸ Cf. Guy BOOTHBY. *Dr. Nikola, Master Criminal*. Ware: Wordsworth, 2009. This edition collects the first two novels of the Dr. Nikola series.

⁶⁹ The description is taken from the *New York Times* review of Boothby's *A Cabinet Secret* (1901) – 'one of Boothby's thrillers with a continental flavour' (DEPASQUALE, 44),

the hostility of many critics towards Boothby as mere envy. He maintained that Boothby's *On the Wallaby* had been unanimously praised by the critics, and the author 'considered an intelligent man,' but when Boothby's following books began to sell in huge quantities, they wrote that his was not literature:⁷⁰ that a writer of light fiction might become rich and famous, it seems, was unacceptable. However, every author of the time one way or another would have to come to terms with Boothby (and the host of popular fiction writers). Those who wanted to have success had to learn to write like him,⁷¹ as a low-spirited Miles Franklin confessed she had been advised;⁷² and those who, on the contrary, had literary ambitions had to accept that their books would probably be outsold by his.⁷³ Paraphrasing Chesterton, *fin de siècle* England seemed populated mainly by tired men who wanted a book to read, not eager men who wanted to read a book.⁷⁴

As Le Gallienne had easily foreseen, Boothby's production was not destined to enter the category of 'imperishable fiction;' his novels were courses to be consumed when still hot, and time would militate against their appeal.⁷⁵ Today, in fact, Boothby is largely unknown or ignored, except, perhaps, among scholars of *fin de siècle* mass fiction. Even there, a critical bibliography on

– and may rightly be extended to Boothby's entire fiction. 'Guy Boothby's "A Cabinet Secret,"' *The New York Times*, 6 Apr. 1901.

⁷⁰ 'London Literary Letter.' *The New York Times*, 4 May 1901.

⁷¹ Actually, Boothby complained that he was 'inundated with letters from young authors asking the way.' 'The Creator of "Dr. Nikola,"' 130.

⁷² Cf. Nicholas BIRNS and Rebecca McNEER, Eds. *A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900*. Melton, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer 2007, 387.

⁷³ One of the most famous contemporary critiques to hack writing is George Gissing's novel *New Grub Street* (1891).

⁷⁴ G. K. CHESTERTON. *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. 1906, 99.

⁷⁵ In this sense, Boothby's novels shared the destiny of many other books: according to Moberley Bell, less than fifteen per cent of the published books survived five years. Cf. WALLER, 658.

Boothby is rather scanty and unsatisfactory; the great majority of those who have written on him have produced only a few lines, and often incorrect or inaccurate information is sadly to be found. The post-mortem popularity Boothby enjoyed is almost completely due to his Dr. Nikola novels, since the rest of his work seems to have fallen into obscurity.

1.4. THE Dr. NIKOLA NOVELS

The character of Dr. Nikola, an international criminal and a scientist seeking immortality, first appeared in the novel *A Bid for Fortune* (a title that Boothby later extended to *A Bid for Fortune; or, Dr. Nikola's Vendetta*), which was serialized in *The Windsor Magazine* (January-November 1895), a monthly “conservative” periodical⁷⁶ (like most of the late Victorian fiction magazines) that in its publishers’ intentions should rival *The Strand*. The readership showed that they liked the new magazine, as the 100,000 copies that had been printed for the first number had to be increased to a total of 150,000 in order to satisfy the demand.⁷⁷ Much of the credit went to Boothby and Arthur Morrison, who serialized his *Chronicles of Martin Hewitt, Investigator*,⁷⁸ since fiction was meant to be the most appealing (and thus the most important) element of the magazine. *A Bid for Fortune* was

⁷⁶ In the Foreword to the first number, the *Windsor* programmatically made ‘its obeisance to its Sovereign and to the public alike, mingling devotion to the gracious Lady on the throne and to her three direct heirs, whose portraits are here presented, with loyalty to some of the best and widest interests of her subjects.’ The editor did not miss the chance to criticize the rising New Woman movement – ‘The only service she renders to man is to provide him with cynical entertainment, while she fondly imagines that his natural supremacy is seriously in question.’ *The Windsor*, vol. 1, 1.

⁷⁷ Cf. ASHLEY, 226, note 3.

⁷⁸ Martin Hewitt was probably the most famous detective character born after Sherlock Holmes’s demise. The first story featuring Hewitt was released in *The Strand* issue of March 1894 and was illustrated by Sydney Paget, who famously had given a face to Doyle’s sleuth. *The Chronicles of Martin Hewitt, Investigator* is the second series of adventures featuring this ordinary and commonsensical detective – purposely shaped in contrast to Sherlock Holmes. The “stealing” of Morrison from *The Strand* was a great achievement on the side of the *Windsor*.

illustrated at the average rate of one cut for every two pages – the remarkable picture/page ratio of most of 1890s popular fiction magazines⁷⁹ (some illustrations even took the size of an entire page) – by three different artists: Stanley Wood (the most prominent one among them), Oscar Eckhardt, and T. S. Crowther. Boothby was appreciatively presented as ‘a writer who has given proof of his capacity to keep alight in fiction the camp-fires of adventure.’⁸⁰ Near the end of the serial, the character of Dr. Nikola had become so popular that *The Windsor* could triumphantly promise a sequel which would ‘deal fully with the personal adventures of that mysterious individual’ and ‘an illustrated interview with Dr. Nikola himself’⁸¹ for the Christmas number. Of course ‘Dr. Nikola himself’ was no less than Guy Boothby: *The Windsor* was clearly fuelling a beautiful fantasy. The reading public, in fact, seemed to compensate for the chagrin of knowing their idol to be a mere fiction by identifying it with its creator. It had recently happened with Conan Doyle, who famously received (and at times answered) letters addressed to Sherlock Holmes. Thus, the *Windsor* interviewer was then compelled to adjust his aim and re-direct the public’s curiosity to the flesh-and-bone man:

The readers of the WINDSOR MAGAZINE have been so fascinated by the weird genius of ‘Dr. Nikola’ – or rather of ‘Dr. Nikola’s’ creator, Mr. Guy Boothby – that there exists a widespread interest in Mr. Boothby’s personality and work.⁸²

⁷⁹ M. Thomas INGE, Ed. *Handbook of American Popular Culture. Vol. I.* Westport and London: Greenwood Press 1978, 198.

⁸⁰ *The Windsor Magazine, vol. I, 2.*

⁸¹ *The Windsor Magazine. Vol. II. July to December.* London: Ward, Lock & Co. 1895, 561.

⁸² ‘The Creator of “Dr. Nikola,”’ 129; my italics.

A Bid for Fortune; or, Dr. Nikola's Vendetta was later published as a single-volume book, near the end of 1895, by Ward, Lock & Bowden,⁸³ and Boothby dedicated it to his wife, 'to whom it owes so much.' The sequel, *Doctor Nikola*, trod the path of *A Bid for Fortune*: published as a serial (January-August 1896) and then a book, it gained enormous success, possibly even greater than its predecessor. Desmond Flower included it in his list of best-sellers, where it shared the record of best-selling book of the year with W. W. Jacobs's *Many Cargoes*.⁸⁴ The publishers, it appears, spared no money to advertise it, if a contemporary report claiming that pictures of Dr. Nikola by Stanley Wood were 'splashed all over London' is to be trusted.⁸⁵ The pictures must have been copies of Wood's bright-coloured portrait of Nikola (and his cat, Apollyon, on his shoulder) that stands out on the novel's cover. Boothby by then had become a household name among English (and Australian and, possibly, American)⁸⁶

⁸³ The title on the cover reads simply 'A Bid for Fortune,' but in the title page it is restored to its original length. The blue cover is engraved in gold and displays a stylized image of two characters, Richard Hatteras and Phyllis Wetherell as they lean forward the rail of a ship (cf. Appendix A – *A Bid for Fortune*). Similarly, the cover of *The Lust of Hate* shows Gilbert Pennethorne and Agnes Maybourne, another loving couple (cf. Appendix A – *The Lust of Hate*).

⁸⁴ In order to be counted among the best-sellers, Flower required that a book had sold at least 100,000 copies, though in his *The Commercial Side of Literature* (1925) Michael Joseph claimed that in the late Victorian period most novels sold less than 1,000 copies, and over 10,000 copies sold meant an outstanding success. Cf. WALLER, 640, 638.

⁸⁵ Quoted in HAINING, 140.

⁸⁶ Boothby's books were widely read also in his motherland. As Martyn Lyons and John Arnold maintain, 'between the 1890s and the Second World War [...] Australian consumers formed part of a global English-language reading community served and dominated by London publishers. Australia was supplied with a mass of cheap fiction, produced by Macmillan, Methuen, Unwin, and Hodder & Stoughton, among other components of "the mighty Paternoster Row machine." Thousands of titles by Guy Boothby, Phillips Oppenheim and Marie Corelli were to be found in Australian bookshops and lending libraries during the inter-war years. In this sense, Australia could be regarded as a huge continental extension of a typical British circulating library.' And they add: 'Australians differed from the general pattern only in their "laudable tendency to patronise local industry," by reading Rolf Boldrewood and Guy Boothby, 'The Man from Snowy River' and 'The Sick Stockrider'. Martyn LYONS and John ARNOLD. *A History of the Book in Australia, 1891-1945. A National Culture in a Colonised Market*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press 2001, 25, 338. I have not been able to find strong evidence on Boothby's popularity in the U.S.A., where the author's books were also published (Ward & Lock, along with many other publishing houses, published also in New

readers; as Rudyard Kipling averred, his name was 'large upon hoardings, his books [sold] like hot cakes.'⁸⁷ To my knowledge, the third novel of the series, *The Lust of Hate*, was not serialized, but straightforwardly published as a book (1898) by Ward Lock & Co., with illustrations by Stanley Wood. It was followed by *Dr. Nikola's Experiment*, which was first serialized in *The Woman at Home*⁸⁸ (October 1898-April 1899) and later published in book form by the magazine's publishers, Hodder and Stoughton.⁸⁹ The last novel of the series was published again by Ward, Lock & Co., in 1901, though it was illustrated, instead of Wood, by Harold Piffard.⁹⁰

Although Dr. Nikola was not to enjoy an everlasting popularity, the character "survived" its author and preserved some of its appeal for a few decades, not only in literature. Already in 1902, *Doctor Nikola* was adapted for the theatre, as a performance given at *The Princess* bears witness to. The London theatre mainly staged social plays but was not earning enough, and in a desperate attempt to attract the public, it was resolved to give some plays taken

York). However, the several *New York Times* articles I have quoted from (and listed in the Bibliography) seem to indicate that Boothby was rather popular even there.

⁸⁷ This was a quite appreciative comment by a greatly influencing writer, and publishers hardly missed the chance to use it to launch or advertise a Boothby book. For example, it is prominent in the advertising pages of the first edition of *Farewell, Nikola*. Cf. Guy BOOTHBY. *Farewell, Nikola*. London, New York and Melbourne: Ward, Lock & Co., 1901.

⁸⁸ *The Woman at Home* 'was the first popular fiction magazine to be aimed primarily at "the great mass of middle-class women."' According to its editor, the success of the serialization of *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* showed that the magazine 'was attracting male readers' – ASHLEY, 231, 234. It also confirms a quite known fact, i.e. that a Victorian author could hardly overstate the importance of female readership. Among his suggestions to start a successful halpenny daily in London, W. T. Steade included: 'Interest the women and elder children. From an advertising point of view the women are invaluable.' Quoted in WALLER, 97. Significantly, each of the Dr. Nikola novels include a love story (cf. 2.2.).

⁸⁹ This time the cover is green and displays the engraved drawing of a man (Quong Ma) escaping from another (Don Martinos) who, in the background, is running after him (cf. Appendix A – *Dr. Nikola's Experiment*).

⁹⁰ Piffard's drawings are rather poor, and Nikola looks just like an ordinary man. Significantly, the cover of *Farewell, Nikola* displays the same Nikola portrait that can be found on *Doctor Nikola's* cover. The publishers evidently aimed to exploit the appeal that Wood's drawing no doubt had exerted on *Doctor Nikola's* readers.

from best-selling novels, among them *Doctor Nikola* and *Lorna Doone*.⁹¹ The Dr. Nikola series, alongside other Boothby novels, were republished and 'maintained big sales in the old sevenpenny reprints till the war in 1914,'⁹² and some of them were included in the fifteen-number 'Pall Mall Series' published in 1907 (or 1908) by Arthur Westbrook.⁹³

Cinema seems to have been attracted by Boothby's creation from its earliest days. In 1909 a three-roll film based on *Doctor Nikola* was produced by the Danish director Viggo Larsen. It holds the record of being the first novel-based film in Europe long enough to narrate satisfactorily the whole story as it is recounted in the novel.⁹⁴ In 1917, in the UK, Sydney Morgan filmed a cinematic adaptation of *A Bid for Fortune* starring A. Hardy Steerman as Dr. Nikola, Sydney Vautier as Richard Hatteras, the protagonist and narrator of the book, and Violet Graham as his fiancée Phyllis Wetherell.⁹⁵ Finally, in 1935, Gaumont-British planned to film another cinematic adaptation of *Doctor Nikola*, which would star Boris Karloff, who was famous for his interpretations of popular villains such as Frankenstein and the Mummy,⁹⁶ but the attempt was finally aborted, as Gaumont-

⁹¹ Erroll SHERSON. *London's Lost Theatres of the Nineteenth Century*. London: John Lane 1925, 183. I also found on the internet a partly indecipherable theatrical playbill, which seems to have disappeared now, reading: 'Fulham Grand Theatre. Monday, June 9th, ... DR. NIKOLA. The Most Remarkable Doctor that ever lived. A New Drama by Ben Landeck and Oswald Brand. From Guy Boothby's celebrated novel.' It displays an 1895 portrait of Nikola by Stanley Wood: the doctor is sitting, against a red background, with his legs crossed and his big cat on his right shoulder. Curiously enough, Wood's picture has been recently turned into a poster and is sold by a popular international electronic commerce company.

⁹² Malcolm ELWIN. *Old Gods Falling* (1931). Freeport: Books for Libraries Press 1971, 287-288.

⁹³ J. Randolph COX. *The Dime Novel Companion: A Sourcebook*. Westport: Greenwood Press 2000, 276.

⁹⁴ Cf. Patrick ROBERTSON. *Film Facts*. London: Aurum Press 2001, 36.

⁹⁵ The *Internet Movie Database* gives two character names with minor spelling inaccuracies: 'Hattaras' and 'Wetherall.' Whether it was the original screenplay that was inaccurate, I have not been able to ascertain. 'A Bid for Fortune (1917).' *Internet Movie Database*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0175483/> (10/11/2009).

⁹⁶ *The Mummy* (1932) was produced by Universal Studios and starred Karloff in the double role of Imhotep and Ardath Bey. Sally Macdonald and Michael Rice claim that the

British opted for an original production. In literature, Nikola has been recently revived, along with many other popular heroes and villains, in Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula* series, which appeared in 1992.⁹⁷ He has also starred in the *Doom Dynasty* comic saga where he battles against Doc Savage, a pulp hero starring in a series of stories published in the 1930s and 1940s.⁹⁸ He has lived on also through other characters that were apparently inspired by and partly modelled on him. Sax Rohmer, for an instance, is claimed to have borrowed more than one trait from Nikola to shape his Dr. Fu Manchu,⁹⁹ and also "Sapper"'s Carl Peterson, Ian Fleming's Blofeld, and the 1960s comic hero Dr. Doom all apparently share one or more traits of Boothby's original creation.¹⁰⁰

Today a reader who wants to buy a Boothby book must face the fact that many of them have not been reprinted for a long time – nevertheless, many first editions are still available, and often at a rather cheap price. Apart from the Oxford 'Popular Fiction' edition of *A Bid for Fortune* (1996) introduced by John Sutherland,¹⁰¹ no great publishing house seems to have been recently interested

screenplay was inspired by Boothby's 'Professor of History' [*sic*] – they probably mean 'A Professor of Egyptology,' – a mystery story which was collected in *The Lady of the Island*, published by John Long in 1904. Along with the novel *Pharos, the Egyptian* (1899), it bears witness to the author's interest in Egyptology. Sally MACDONALD and Michael RICE. *Consuming Ancient Egypt*. Oxford and New York: Routledge Cavendish 2003, 35.

⁹⁷ *Anno Dracula* is an alternate history series which narrates Dracula's conquest of Britain and of the entire world, which eventually becomes infested with vampires.

⁹⁸ *Doom Dynasty* was released by Millennium Comics in 1991. In the story, Nikola is the only possessor of a life-extension elixir, an episode that was clearly inspired to the authors by Nikola's quest for immortality. Cf. Rick LAI. 'The Life of Dr. Antonio Nikola (1856-1898?).' <http://www.pjfarmer.com/woldnewton/Nikola.pdf> (10/11/2009).

⁹⁹ A Dr. Fu Manchu fan, Lawrence Knapp, cites not only similar physical features between the Australian and the Chinese villains, but also: an outstanding collection of weapons, an international reputation and sphere of influence, and the company of a pet (in Fu Manchu's case, a marmoset). Cf. Lawrence KNAPP. 'The Precursors of Dr. Fu Manchu.' <http://www.njedge.net/~knapp/Precursors.htm> (10/11/2009).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. LAI. 'The Life of Dr. Antonio Nikola (1856-1898?).'

¹⁰¹ There is a striking mistake in Sutherland's introduction. The renowned critic claims that Boothby 'is the grand-master of the loose end – the "no time to explain that now,"' and rightly observes that 'there is a lot that is left unexplained in *A Bid for Fortune*' (cf. also 2.2.), including the use of the Chinese stick that Nikola steals from Wetherell (cf. Appendix A – *A Bid for Fortune*). However, he adds: 'nor should readers hope for

in republishing Boothby's work – one should rather search for Boothby among publishers specialized in hard-to-find books. Critics and scholars must rummage through library archives and the Internet to find, with some exceptions (Depasquale being the most prominent one), nothing more than a line, or at best a paragraph, about this still largely ignored author. They will often be disappointed at discovering that Boothby is treated only as a curio, and are more likely to find scattered traces of his meteoric passage rather than serious critical assessments. However, since this is often the only information we can get on Boothby, nothing is so trivial that can easily be dispensed with.¹⁰²

explanation in any of *A Bid for Fortune's* sequels;' whereas already in *Doctor Nikola* the use of the stick becomes quite clear: it enables Nikola to enter a Tibetan secret sect passing off as one of its members (cf. Appendix A – *Doctor Nikola*).

¹⁰² For an instance, it is a matter of curiosity, but it also gives us further evidence of Boothby's popularity, that Walter J. Obree Smith (1878-1936), alias Louis Nikola, a magician who invented, among other things, the Card Castle and the Nikola Card System, took his stage name from Boothby's villain. Cf. <http://www.lybrary.com/louis-nikola-m-90.html> (10/11/2009).

CHAPTER TWO

THE FORM OF THE Dr. NIKOLA NOVELS: SELECT TOPICS

2.1. ANALYSING THE Dr. NIKOLA NOVELS

The structuring patterns of Boothby's work are predictable in the main, although on occasion elements of unpredictability can surface in them, especially as regards the development of the story plots and the blend of generic elements. As in much popular fiction, the ideological assumptions underlying the Doctor Nikola novels are the values and prejudices of the British middle classes; although they can be detected quite regularly, they will be explored at length in Chapter Three.

I have chosen a "non-invasive" approach to the texts, and have often preferred to let them "speak" almost for themselves, rather than commenting upon them, or larding commentary with hyperanalytical jargon. Boothby's works, it must be admitted, lack sophistication: if they are not "assailed" with disproportionate critical weaponry, they will yield (or surrender) their meaning almost spontaneously; in other words, they will become self-revelatory. This approach has the advantage of exhibiting to the full the qualities of the author's effortless though cheap style, which appealed so much to his common readership – plain, fluent, with a limited, one would say basic vocabulary, and very frequent dialogue.

2.2. PLOT STRUCTURE¹ AND GENRE

The Dr. Nikola novels have been considered, without paying much attention to terminology, either a series or a saga. However, while the former term may imply a weak thematic cohesion or coherence,² the latter does imply a stronger one.³ Dr. Nikola's quest for immortality, which is often adduced as the leading theme underlying the novels, is not developed in all of them. As will be demonstrated below, what actually links together the Dr. Nikola books is mainly (and simply) Dr. Nikola's presence.

A Bid for Fortune narrates the doctor's successful attempt to regain possession of a Chinese stick. This may enable him to enter a Tibetan monastery, where he wants to steal from an exoteric sect some useful secrets to unnaturally prolong human life. The reader learns what the stick may be used for only in the sequel, *Doctor Nikola*, where the title character manages to pass off as a member of the sect. The doctor's plan, however, is not completely successful, as he is eventually discovered to be an impostor and has to escape from the monastery before learning all that he was looking for. If the reader is eager to know how Nikola will put into practice what he has learnt, he will promptly be disappointed, for in *The Lust of Hate* there is no reference at all to the doctor's quest. Indeed, the villain is far from being prominent in the story for, after failing to persuade Pennethorne to kill Bartrand, he simply disappears, to resurface at the very end, when *les jeux sont faits*: the Cornishman has just

¹ The plots of the five novels have been duly summarized in Appendix A. All through the chapter, the reader's acquaintance with the main events of the stories is assumed. Some more information, however, will be added in the notes, where appropriate.

² 'A set of literary compositions having certain features in common, published successively or intended to be read in sequence' (9.a. – *OED*, online edition, 13/11/2009).

³ '[...] in weakened use, a long and complicated (account of a) series of more or less loosely connected events (1.b. – *OED*, online edition, 13/11/2009).

donated to the London hospitals the money that the doctor wanted to extort from him.⁴ What Nikola could have done with that money is left unguessed, except that, as he himself vaguely suggests, he 'would have worked out a scheme that would have paralyzed Europe' (*Lust*, 181). It is useless for the reader to rummage anywhere else for explanation, for throughout the series nothing can clarify the villain's words. In *Dr. Nikola's Experiment*, Nikola's quest is reintroduced; indeed, with the experiment on Don Miguel, it reaches its climax. Since the experiment fails, the reader could expect that in *Farewell, Nikola* the doctor engaged in a further attempt, only to discover that, rather than the last stage of Nikola's quest, the novel represents a sort of epilogue to it. As Depasquale observes, the story is rather 'tedious and circuitous' and full of mumbo-jumbo.⁵ Only in the very last lines of the narrative, when the reader has learned everything about the *ménage à trois* between Gertrude Trevor, the Duke of Glenbarth and Don José de Martinos, and about several other secondary (not to say trivial) events, will Nikola's quest be briefly hinted at, in what seems a revelatory dream: Gertrude sees the doctor standing in the courtyard of an Eastern monastery, looking very old and worn-out (*Farewell*, 169-170), which suggests that he has tried a last experiment on himself which has backfired.⁶

⁴ Michael Koltan even suspects that Boothby did not at first mean the novel to be part of the series, and only later resolved to change the name of the villain to Nikola to exploit the success of the first two Nikola novels. This may well be a conjecture, but it is a matter of fact that 'anyone who fails to read this novel will not, in any case, miss anything essential to the Nikola saga [*sic*].' Michael KOLTAN. 'Dr. Nikola.' (http://pagesperso-orange.fr/arts.sombres/polar/10_article_nikola_koltan_angl.htm, 30/10/2009). This, and the absence of the name 'Nikola' from the title, may explain why some scholars ignore that *The Lust of Hate* actually does belong to the Dr. Nikola series.

⁵ DEPASQUALE. *Guy Boothby*, 67.

⁶ That Gertrude's dream may be revelatory *en abyme*, operating at a metatextual level, is borne out by Nikola's prophecy about his own end (which, of course, the young woman could never hear): 'The time is not far distant when I must leave the world! When that hour arrives there is a lonely monastery in a range of eastern mountains, upon which no Englishman has ever set his foot. Of that monastery I shall become an inmate. No one outside its walls shall ever look upon my face again. There I shall work out my destiny, and, if I have sinned, be sure I shall receive my punishment at those hands that alone can bestow it' (*Farewell*, 157).

On looking closely at the novels, one must acknowledge that there are at least four different plot patterns. To begin with genre. Admittedly, each of the Dr. Nikola novels is a generic melting pot, but with an assorted, unequal blend of adventure, suspense, romance and gothic (including preternatural⁷ events almost always linked to Dr. Nikola).⁸ On the other hand, if, as Depasquale aptly observes, Boothby's books cannot fall under an all-inclusive generic label,⁹ in each of the Dr. Nikola books one genre predominates. *A Bid for Fortune* resembles a thriller, as it is mainly constructed on a long series of *coups de théâtre*: Hatteras's first encounter with Nikola in London, the villain's kidnapping of the Australian and Beckenham in Port Said, the abduction of Phyllis and Beckenham in Sydney, and so on. The goodies have continuously to guard themselves from Nikola and try to thwart the evil plots that he weaves behind closed doors. Much of the suspense of the novel is constructed on the doctor's unpredictability, for the characters never know what Nikola's next step may be.¹⁰

⁷ In the Dr. Nikola series, Boothby does not distinguish between 'preternatural' and 'supernatural.' According to the *OED*, something preternatural is 'Outside the ordinary course of nature; differing from or surpassing what is natural; unnatural [...]' (1.), while 'supernatural' is something 'That is above nature; belonging to a higher realm or system than that of nature; transcending the powers or the ordinary course of nature' (1.). In the series, the uncanny events never transcend nature entirely, so they may rightly be defined 'preternatural.'

Cf. *OED*, online edition.

http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50188195?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=preternatural&first=1&max_to_show=10;

http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50242703?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=supernatural&first=1&max_to_show=10 (14/11/2009).

⁸ Nikola's preternatural powers are explored in Appendix B. In the entire series there is only one preternatural event that can by no means be traced back to Nikola, i.e. Pennethorne's vision of Agnes's face (cf. *Lust*, 59-60). The vision prevents the Cornishman from pressing the spring that would kill Bartrand, thus saving his soul, and should be taken as a manifestation of God's Providence, a leitmotif in the novel.

⁹ Boothby 'blended the totality of the materials employed in his stories into a mixture that can only be called "Boothby."' DEPASQUALE, 122.

¹⁰ In Port Said, Hatteras and Beckenham are imprisoned for a few weeks only to eventually find that they have been Nikola's unwitting "guests." Later the villain easily kidnaps, on two distinct occasions, the Marquis and Phyllis in Australia, and in both cases Hatteras discovers to his bitterness that he has arrived too late. In *Doctor Nikola*, Nikola even baffles the great Chief Priest of Hankow. When the latter reaches the Tibetan monastery, the doctor has been there for a few weeks, passing as the old sage, and has already stolen many secrets from the sect (cf. Appendix A – *Doctor Nikola*). The clash

The atmosphere is pervaded with a sense of impending danger that causes anxiety. On the trail of Phyllis and Beckenham, Hatteras remarks:

It seemed to me, so anxious and terrified was I for my darling's safety, that we were fated never to get the information we wanted; the whole thing was like some nightmare, in which, try how I would to move, every step was clogged.

(*Bid*, 156)

Boothby at first seems to employ this scheme also in the third novel of the series, *The Lust of Hate*, for after Pennethorne has transgressed Nikola's orders and has escaped from London, the reader's expectation may be that the villain will put himself at his heels and, sooner or later, will catch him. However, although the Cornishman goes through many perilous adventures – such as being shipwrecked in a desert island with a young lady, – they never include Nikola. Indeed, *The Lust of Hate* is the only novel of the series where Nikola can be seen at the beginning and at the very end of the story only, and is prominent only on the former occasion. The novel begins like a crime story, for the reader sees the (failed) murder of Bartrand (including its preparation) through the eyes of the killer *manqué*, although the tone is rather that of a thriller. There is, in fact, a great deal of emphasis designed to thrill the reader, which one is hardly likely to find in a proper crime story, as the following excerpt shows:

Leaving Nikola standing on the pavement looking after us, I shook up my horse and drove rapidly down the street. My whole body was tingling with exultation; but that it would have attracted attention and spoiled my revenge, I felt I could have shouted my joy aloud. Here I was with my enemy in my power; by lifting the shutter in the roof of the cab I could see him lolling inside – thinking, doubtless, of his wealth, and little dreaming how close he was to the poor fellow he had wronged so cruelly. The knowledge that by simply

between Nikola's smartness and the other characters' dullness is explored at length in 3.3.1.

pressing the spring under my hand I could destroy him in five seconds, and then choosing a quiet street could tip him out and be done with him for ever [*sic*], intoxicated me like the finest wine. No one would suspect, and Nikola, for his own sake, would never betray me. While I was thinking in this fashion, and gloating over what I was about to do, I allowed my horse to dawdle a little. Instantly an umbrella was thrust up through the shutter and I was ordered, in the devil's name, to drive faster.

'Ah! my fine fellow,' I said to myself, 'you little know how near you are to the master by whom you swear. Wait a few moments until I've had a little more pleasure out of your company, and then we'll see what I can do for you.'

(Lust, 59)

However, when Pennethorne leaves England and is later wrecked, the book turns into an adventure story, though it includes two unusual elements for an adventure story: a woman, Agnes Maybourne, featuring as co-protagonist, and a spiritual journey (that of Pennethorne) from sin to redemption. In the following excerpt, the difference in tone between the initial and the central part of the story should be self-evident. Pennethorne and Agnes have just left the desert island on a makeshift raft, hoping to find a passing-by ship that may rescue them. Here the reader is not left, so to speak, at the mercy of the story plot, for the author's intention is not to take him by surprise; rather, he aims to make him side with the protagonists and give them his support (albeit virtual):

As soon as we had pushed off from the shore I turned the boat's head, and, taking up the oars, set to work to pull out to sea. It was not altogether an easy task, for the boat was a heavy one and the morning was strangely warm. The sky overhead was innocent of cloud, but away to the west it presented a hazy appearance; the look of which I did not altogether like. However, I stuck to my work, all the time keeping my eyes fixed on the rapidly advancing ship. She presented a fine appearance, and it was evident she was a vessel of about three thousand tons. I hoped she would turn out to belong to our own nationality, though under the circumstances any other would prove equally acceptable. At present she was distant from us about six miles, and as she was still heading directly for the island I began to feel certain she had observed our signal. For this reason I pointed my boat's head straight for her and continued to pull with all the strength I possessed.

Suddenly Miss Maybourne uttered a little cry, and seeing her staring in a new direction I turned in my seat to discover what had occasioned it.

‘She is leaving us,’ cried my companion, in agonized tones, pointing to the vessel we had been attempting to intercept. ‘Look, look, Mr. Wrexford,¹¹ she is leaving us!’

(*Lust*, 117)

Doctor Nikola and *Dr. Nikola’s Experiment* are the only novels whose plot structures appear to be similar. In both cases, the good male protagonists (Bruce and Ingleby, respectively) are recruited by Nikola under the latter’s promise to pay them a large sum, to assist him in some task – in *Doctor Nikola*, the stealing of the secrets of immortality from a Tibetan sect, in *Dr. Nikola’s Experiment*, a pioneering experiment on a human being. Differently from the first and third books, here Nikola is not the villain but a co-protagonist. The doctor thus becomes more familiar to the reader, although the latter is never allowed to identify with the former: Nikola, in fact, remains an awe-inspiring and, to some extent, frightening character.¹² The reader sides with the doctor, but his sympathy for him may be relative (one may say, “comparative”), for Boothby introduces other villains who are more disagreeable than the doctor himself (in *Doctor Nikola*, the mean and cruel Tibetan monks; in *Dr. Nikola’s Experiment*, Quong Ma, the repulsive Chinese killer with half an ear missing). In spite of the structural similarity, *Doctor Nikola* – as the *New York Times* reviewer remarked – is a ‘story of adventure in the Rider Haggard manner,’¹³ while *Dr. Nikola’s Experiment* may be considered a gothic thriller, as most of its events take place against a gothic

¹¹ It should be remembered that after Bartrand’s “murder,” Pennethorne always disguises himself under the false name of ‘Wrexford.’

¹² For instance, when Ingleby fails to fulfil his duty, Nikola goes berserk: ‘So menacing was his attitude, and so fiendish the expression on his face, that I instinctively recoiled a step from him, and yet I don’t think my worst enemy could accuse me of being a coward’ (*Experiment*, 105).

¹³ ‘Doctor Nikola.’ *The New York Times*, 9 Aug. 1896.

http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?_r=1&res=9905E1DE1E3AE533A2575AC0A96E9C94679ED7CF (7/9/2009).

setting, i.e. the gloomy Allerdeyne Castle (cf. 2.4.3.). In the “odd man out” game, *Farewell, Nikola* would no doubt be the “odd man,” as it is the only book whose plot pattern does not resemble at all any other book of the series. Indeed, it may not even be claimed to have a proper story plot, but rather a series of intertwining sub-plots. Besides the Gertrude-Glenbarth-Martinos *ménage à trois*, the novel narrates Nikola’s miserable childhood, when he was cruelly abused by his stepfather and stepbrother. The doctor links his sad story with that of his ancestors, the ‘Del Revecce’ family, which includes another *ménage à trois*, (between the Admiral Francesco del Revecce, his wife and the painter Andrea Bunopelli). Don Martinos is revealed to be the doctor’s stepbrother, and Nikola eventually revenges on him. Gertrude, however, finally persuades him to forgive the Spaniard, and in doing so she saves his soul from damnation.¹⁴ In doing so the woman discharges her debt of gratitude to the doctor, who had cured her of a mysterious illness and had thus saved her life. Should a definition be attempted for this book, one might call it a *sui generis* melodrama. Adventure is completely absent, and the atmosphere is rather pathetic¹⁵ (at times, even elegiac), albeit it

¹⁴ Gertrude implores the doctor to release Don Martinos because ‘the safety of your soul depends upon it’ (*Farewell*, 165).

¹⁵ The climax is reached when Nikola complains to Hatteras about his sad existence, and the Australian tries to comfort him. The passage is worth reporting in its entirety:

‘As he spoke he crossed to the window, which he threw open. It was a glorious night, and the sound of women’s voices singing reached us from the Grand Canal. On the other side of the watery highway the houses looked strangely mysterious in the weird light. At that moment I felt more drawn towards Nikola than I had ever done before. The man’s loneliness, his sufferings, had a note of singular pathos for me. I forgot the injuries he had done me, and before I knew what I was doing, I had placed my hand upon his shoulder.

“Nikola,” I said, “if I were to try I could not make you understand how truly sorry I am for you. The life you lead is so unlike that of any other man. You see only the worst side of human nature. Why not leave this terrible gloom? Give up these experiments upon which you are always engaged, and live only in the pure air of the commonplace everyday world. Your very surroundings--this house, for instance--are not like those of other men. Believe me, there are other things worth living for besides the science which binds you in its chains. If you could learn to love a good woman – ”

"My dear Hatteras," he put in, more softly than I had ever heard him speak, "woman's love is not for me. As you say, I am lonely in the world, God knows how lonely, yet lonely I must be content to remain." Then leaning his hands upon the window-sill, he

is here and there dispelled by a few thrilling events (cf. the duel between Don Martinos and Glenbarth), and a touch of gothic horror (the horrible physical and psychological tortures Del Revecce's wife and Bunopelli were made to suffer).

The love story is an ever-present feature in the series, and it develops according to an uncomplicated pattern. The male protagonist encounters a wonderful woman and falls in love with her at first sight, but he is at first prevented from enjoying a happy life with her.¹⁶ After going through many misadventures, he at last earns his right to marry his woman. *Doctor Nikola* and *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* may be described, respectively, as an adventure book and a thriller both *cum* romance, for the love affair is quite accessory – Bruce's encounter with Gladys adds nothing relevant to his adventure in Tibet with Nikola; although she stays in Allerdeyne Castle with Nikola and Ingleby, Doña Consuelo is confined to an isolated room, kept in the dark about the experiment, and Ingleby never allows his love for her to interfere with his "professional" affairs. On the contrary, in *A Bid for Fortune* and *Farewell, Nikola* the love affair is part and parcel of the story plot. In the former, Nikola's vendetta on Wetherell consists just in the kidnapping of the colonel's daughter, and much of the story hinges on Hatteras's attempt to thwart the villain's plans and rescue his beloved; in the latter, the competition between Glenbarth and Don Martinos eventually leads to a duel to the death between the two suitors (which Nikola eventually stops). In *The Lust of Hate*, the love affair even intertwines with adventure, since Pennethorne is shipwrecked in a desert island with the woman he loves.

looked out upon the silent night, and I heard him mutter to himself, "Yes, lonely to the end" (*Farewell*, 49).

¹⁶ The aristocratic Wetherell will not consent to marry off his daughter to the middle-class Hatteras; Gladys's brother-in-law asks Bruce to wait some time, so that the truthfulness of his love for her may be tested; being persuaded that he has committed a murder, Pennethorne will not consider himself fit to love Agnes until the latter forgives his sin; although Ingleby wins Consuelo's love rather easily, he cannot love her until Nikola's dangerous experiment on Don Miguel is over; before being allowed to love Gertrude, Glenbarth has to face both Don Martinos and the young woman's illness.

The Dr. Nikola series is entirely narrated in the first person by the male protagonist, who recalls the adventures he went through some time (usually a few years) before the moment of writing. The only exception is the Prologue of *A Bid for Fortune*, which is recounted in the third person by an anonymous narrator, and describes a meeting in a London restaurant between Nikola and his henchmen. Also the other novels include an introductory piece of writing – in *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* and *Farewell, Nikola*, a chapter; in *Doctor Nikola* and *The Lust of Hate*, an actual introduction – but there the male protagonist only introduces himself and gives a brief résumé of the recent events in his life. The most exciting part of the story begins when he encounters Dr. Nikola, for the event triggers a long series of adventures. That Boothby did not devote much time to plan his story plots is self-evident (besides self-confessed, cf. 1.3.). Rather than interlocking the events, he just accumulates them. Swept along by the hectic narrative pace, the reader never needs to “look back” to see whether the narrative works on a structural level. This allowed the writer to be quite inaccurate with details and even to care little about leaving narrative elements “dangling” – the above-mentioned cases of Nikola’s obscure words at the end of *The Lust of Hate* and Gertrude’s no less uncanny illness are emblematic.

2.3. THE SETTING: TIME

Boothby was also extremely careless about the chronology of his stories. Inconsistent and even contradictory information can be found in each of the Dr. Nikola novels, which frustrates any attempt to date with certainty the events narrated. The first clear time reference the reader finds is in *Doctor Nikola*, when the villain recruits the China expert Bruce for his prospective adventure in Tibet. Nikola wants someone that can easily pass off as a Chinese, and considers

Bruce since the latter was 'present at the meeting at Quong Sha's house in the Wanhsien on the 23rd August, 1907' where he 'assisted Mah Poo to evade capture by the mandarins the week following' (*Nikola*, 15). This should mean that the story in *Doctor Nikola* must occur after 1907, and yet *The Lust of Hate* is evidently set in the 1890s, as there is a clear reference to the historical Matabele revolt that took place in South Africa in 1896-97. What is more, in *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* Ingleby once avers that 'this [is] the Nineteenth Century' (*Experiment*, 30), and the doctor remarks that three years have elapsed since his adventure in Tibet – clearly referring to the adventure narrated in *Doctor Nikola*¹⁷ – so that there can be no doubt that the events in *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* are subsequent to those in *Doctor Nikola*. In *Farewell, Nikola* Hatteras twice states that they are in the twentieth century,¹⁸ and adds that five years have passed since he last saw Nikola.¹⁹ As the following dialogue between Phyllis, Nikola and Hatteras suggests, their last encounter occurred in South Australia, as narrated in *A Bid for Fortune*:

'Have you been long in Venice?' my wife inquired when she had completed the record of our doings, feeling that she must say something.

¹⁷ As Nikola recounts to Ingleby: 'In order to obtain the information necessary for carrying out the experiment upon which we are now engaged, I penetrated, as I think I have already informed you, into a certain monastery situated in the least known portion of Thibet [*sic*]. My companion and I carried our lives in our hands if ever men have done so in the history of the world. The better to carry out my scheme, I might explain, I impersonated a high official who had lately been elected one of the rulers of the order. At a most unfortunate moment the fraud was discovered, and my companion and I were ordered to be hurled from the roof of the monastery into the precipice below. We managed to escape, however, but not before I had secured the precious secret for which I had risked so much. The monks traced us on our journey back to civilisation, and two of the order, who have had special experience in this sort of work, were detailed to follow us, in the hope that they might not only regain possession of a book which contained the secret, but at the same time revenge the insult which had been offered to them' (*Experiment*, 29).

¹⁸ 'This is the twentieth century!;' 'Remember that this is the twentieth century [...]' (*Farewell*, 82, 150).

¹⁹ 'Five years had elapsed since I had last seen him' (*Farewell*, 4).

'I seldom remain anywhere for very long,' he answered, with one of his curious smiles. 'I come and go like a Will-o'-the-wisp; I am here to-day and gone to-morrow.'

It may have been an unfortunate remark, but I could not help uttering it.

'For instance, you are in London to-day,' I said, 'in Port Said next week, and in the South Sea Islands a couple of months later.'

He was not in the least disconcerted.

'Ah! I see you have not forgotten our South Sea adventure,' he replied cheerfully. 'How long ago it seems, does it not? To me it is like a chapter out of another life.'

(*Farewell*, 5-6)

However, there is a passage where Hatteras enigmatically claims that the doctor performed for his special benefit some 'very curious experiments' (*Farewell*, 25) only two years before. Since, in all probability, he refers to the odd turns the doctor performed in *A Bid for Fortune*, one would be prompted to think, quite inconsistently, that between the events narrated in *A Bid for Fortune* and those in *Farewell*, *Nikola*, only two years have elapsed. Also, the doctor is claimed to be thirty-three in the first novel (*Bid*, 7), and barely thirty-eight in the second (*Nikola*, 15). This, however, cannot be the case if the time lag between the first and last novels is but two years. Even if one conjectures that five, not two, years have actually elapsed, all the novels should then occur in one year, which, besides generally sounding absurd, would contradict Nikola's statement that three years have intervened between the events narrated in *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* and in *Doctor Nikola*. Although other contradictions and inconsistencies can be detected in the series, there is evidence enough that it is impossible to fix a clear chronology for the series.

It must be concluded that Boothby was rather unconcerned with the time setting of his stories and never made up his mind about it. Considering the frenetic pace of his work, it is quite reasonable to assume that he did not revise his texts accurately (if he revised them at all); it may not be a flight of fancy to think that when it came to set a date for an episode, Boothby must have

indifferently referred to the last chronological clue he had in mind; in fact, he probably dictated his stories, sunk in his armchair, without the aid of any written notes, as he is depicted in a photograph included in a *Windsor* interview to him.²⁰ One should confine oneself to observing that the Dr. Nikola series can be reasonably set at the turn of the nineteenth century. However, those who do not like this vagueness and demand a more precise dating may refer to 'The Life of Dr. Antonio Nikola (1856-1898?),' where Rick Lai has picked up every hint to time in the series and has tried to assign a year to each story. Needless to say, Lai's method is arbitrary and his work, however fascinating and commendable, is extremely conjectural, to the point that he sometimes seems to be quixotically fighting against the windmills.²¹

2.4. THE SETTING: PLACES

Cosmopolitanism and exoticism were titillating features of mass fiction, and Boothby one of the writers who could best exploit them, if, as Depasquale observes, 'geographic amplitude [was] a characteristic of Boothby's novels.'²² The events of the Dr. Nikola series take place in many countries and almost all

²⁰ Cf. HYDE. 'The Creator of "Dr. Nikola,"' 130.

²¹ Lai suggests the following dating: *A Bid for Fortune*: 1893; *Doctor Nikola*: 1894-5; *The Lust of Hate*: 1895-6; *Dr. Nikola's Experiment*: 1897; *Farewell, Nikola*: 1898. His contention is made explicit in its entirety in 'The Life of Dr. Antonio Nikola (1856-1898?),' a freely accessible electronic document where he tries to reconstruct Nikola's entire life by pretending that the character and its life are historical. This is only one among many similar ventures in the field of narrative theory where the realms (and times) of fiction and reality are taken to be one and the same thing. For an instance, starting from the fact that from 'May 3rd 1891 to April 1st 1894' Sherlock Holmes 'was mysteriously absent from his usual environments, and about which he gave only vague and unsatisfactory explanations to Dr. Watson when he reappeared,' Anders Fage-Pedersen has tried to demonstrate that the great sleuth 'under the alias Dr. Nikola in the year 1892 forced his way into the holy lama monastery in Tibet and there from the Tibetan monks he learned the secret of the experiments in immortality – experiments which at the time were not complete, but which Holmes was later to complete successfully.' Anders FAGE-PEDERSEN. *A Case of Identity* (1963). Copenhagen: Antikvariat Pinkerton 1981, 3.

²² DEPASQUALE, 28.

the continents: London, the New Forest, Bournemouth (England), Port Said (Egypt), and Sydney and the South Australia islands in *A Bid for Fortune*; Shanghai, Peking, Tientsin (China) and Tibet in *Doctor Nikola*; London (England), Australia, and Cape Town (South Africa) in *The Lust of Hate*; London and Northumberland (England) in *Dr. Nikola's Experiment*; and Venice (Italy) in *Farewell, Nikola*. The list becomes much longer if one includes also the places where, to use a theatrical metaphor, "off-stage" events occur, that is events that do not unfold "under the reader's eyes," once the setting has been established. The most striking instance can be found in *A Bid for Fortune*, when Nikola's henchmen talk of where they first heard his name; in a handful of lines, fifteen international locations are mentioned:

They shook hands all round with marked cordiality, seated themselves again, and took it in turns to examine the clock.

'Have you ever had the pleasure of meeting our host before?' asked Mr. Baxter of Mr. Prendergast.

'Never,' replied that gentleman, with a shake of his head. 'Perhaps Mr. Eastover has been more fortunate?'

'Not I,' was the brief rejoinder. 'I've had to do with him off and on for longer than I care to reckon, but I've never set eyes on him up to date.'

'And where may he have been the first time you heard from him?'

'In Nashville, Tennessee,' said Eastover. 'After that, Tahupapa, New Zealand; after that, Papeete, in the Society Islands; then Peking, China. And you?'

'First time, Brussels; second, Monte Video; third, Mandalay, and then the Gold Coast, Africa. It's your turn, Mr. Baxter.'

The clergyman glanced at the timepiece. It was exactly eight o'clock.

'First time, Cabul, Afghanistan; second, Nijni Novgorod, Russia; third, Wilcannia, Darling River, Australia; fourth, Valparaiso, Chili; fifth, Nagasaki, Japan.'

'He is evidently a great traveller and a most mysterious person.'

(*Bid*, 6)

However, in spite of the many place names that can be counted in the series, the characters invariably seem to act against the same stereotypical backdrop, as Boothby's characteristically rapid shift of location is often only virtual. The writer, in fact, is not concerned with description, which is usually brief and commonplace. Boothby is rather careless even when it comes to his homeland, Australia, which he knew so well.²³ The narrative focus is always on action, and the reader is hardly ever granted the privilege of making a pause and "give a look around." In Boothby's view, places are nothing but suitable backgrounds to the events narrated. Significantly, the stories are all set in places that, being somehow related to the British Empire, were familiar to Boothby's readers – either from personal experience, or, more frequently, through the filter of newspapers, periodicals and fiction. Besides England and its capital, the stories, in fact, take place in nineteenth-century British colonies (Australia and South Africa), a *de facto* protectorate (Egypt), legations and trading posts (Shanghai, Tientsin and Peking), and a military target of the Empire (Tibet).²⁴ It is a matter of conjecture whether in doing so Boothby aimed to exploit his readership's previous familiarity or acquaintance with the places where he set his stories: may it be that he thought this an efficient way to sound convincing while avoiding detailed descriptions? Also, like many popular fiction authors, he occasionally avails himself of the opportunity to mix real with fictitious places,

²³ Cf. DEPASQUALE, 85. It should not be forgotten that before settling in England for good, Boothby had been an adventurous traveller and had crossed Australia from coast to coast (cf. 1.1). Indeed, the *Windsor* interviewer's impression was that 'with every phase of Australian life Mr. Boothby is acquainted.' 'The Creator of "Dr. Nikola,"' 132.

²⁴ 'In the mid-19th century the Tibetans repeatedly rebuffed overtures from the British, who saw Tibet at first as a trade route to China and later as countenancing Russian advances that might endanger India. Eventually, in 1903, after failure to get China to control its unruly vassal, a political mission was dispatched from India to secure understandings on frontier and trade relations. Tibetan resistance was overcome by force, the Dalai Lama fled to China, and the rough wooing ended in a treaty at Lhasa in 1904 between Britain and Tibet without Chinese adherence.' 'Tibet since 1900.' *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, online edition.
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/594898/Tibet/71442/Tibet-since-1900> (11/10/2009).

such as the phantom 'Republic of Equinata' about which Dr. Nikola and Don Martinos talk in *Farewell, Nikola* (*Farewell*, 88-89).

The Dr. Nikola series is set in four main types of place. Each of them may be associated to one of the genres that Boothby uses in the series: the 'Cesspool' (thriller), the Wild Land (adventure), the Gothic Scenery (gothic), and the Haven of Peace (romance).

2.4.1. THE 'CESSPOOL'

The 'cesspool' is a degraded urban area that attracts malefactors and criminals. In Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Dr. Watson, from whom the definition is borrowed, returns to England from his service in the Second Afghan War and dismally remarks: 'I naturally gravitated to London, that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained.'²⁵ In the late Victorian period the unwholesome conditions where the slums' dwellers lived became a major concern – they were, in fact, assumed to be the main cause of degeneration among the lower classes (cf. 3.3.4.). *Fin de siècle* London was often perceived as no longer the glorious centre of the Empire, but as a dangerous place for the respectable Briton. As Hatteras walks its streets, he notes that in the city 'the happiness and the misery, the richness and the poverty, all [is] mixed up together in one jumble, like good and bad fruit in a basket' (*Bid*, 29). The 'cesspool' is thus often identified with the city itself, as if its "good" side could be contaminated by the "bad" one.

Besides London, the 'cesspools' of the series are Port Said and the Chinese cities where part of *Doctor Nikola* is set. Their quarters are invariably described as ill-lit ones, crowded with poor and desperate people, and their roads

²⁵ Arthur Conan DOYLE. *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). London: Ward, Lock & Co. 1900, 14.

as narrow and dirty. Hatteras observes that the London quarters are clouded in 'a general air of gloom' (*Bid*, 34), and he has to walk a long way before he can find a restaurant decent enough for a gentleman to lunch in.²⁶ He soon becomes disappointed with the city which he had 'heard so much about' (*Bid*, 13), to the extent that in a few lines he once suggests and once declares that he would never settle in such a place.²⁷ A similar feeling is expressed by Pennethorne, who regrets having come to London to spend the winter instead of enjoying the Australian summer. The capital looks like a Dantesque *girone* ruled only by chaos, which the inclement weather renders all the gloomier:

When I reached England, the icy hand of winter was upon the land. The streets were banked feet high with snow, and the Thames at London Bridge was nothing but a mass of floating ice upon which an active man could have passed from shore to shore. Poor homeless wretches were to be seen sheltering themselves in every nook and cranny, and the morning papers teemed with gruesome descriptions of dead bodies found in drifts, of damage done to property, and of trains delayed and snowed up in every conceivable part of the country. Such a winter had not been experienced for years, and when I arrived and realised what it meant for myself, I could not but comment on my madness in having left an Australian summer to participate in such a direful state of things.

(*Lust*, 21-22)

The Cornishman later follows a 'filthy little gutter urchin' (*Lust*, 53), who is supposed to take him to one of Nikola's helpmates, in a court 'as black as the Pit

²⁶ 'A church clock somewhere in the neighbourhood struck "One", and as I was beginning to feel hungry, and knew myself to be a long way from my hotel, I cast about me for a lunching-place. But it was some time before I encountered the class of restaurant I wanted. When I did it was situated at the corner of two streets, carried a foreign name over the door, and, though considerably the worse for wear, presented a cleaner appearance than any other I had as yet experienced' (*Bid*, 34).

²⁷ 'One thing at least is certain, I had never had experience of anything approaching such a city before, and, between ourselves, I can't say that I ever want to again. [...]

There certainly is no place like London for show and glitter, I'll grant you that; but all the same I'd no more think of taking up my permanent abode in it than I'd try to cross the Atlantic in a Chinese sampan' (*Bid*, 29).

of Tophet [...] [which] seemed to twist and turn in every conceivable direction' (*Lust*, 53). In Port Said Hatteras euphemistically (and ironically) state that 'gas lamps were at a discount' (*Bid*, 104). The Chinese cities are even more unwholesome than London. This is Bruce's description of Tientsin:

Any one [*sic*] who has had experience of Tientsin will bear me out when I say that of all the dirty and pestilential holes this earth of ours possesses, there are very few to equal it, and scarcely one that can surpass it. Narrow, irregular streets, but little wider than an average country lane in England, run in and out, and twist and twine in every conceivable direction. Overhead the second stories of the houses, decorated with sign-boards, streamers and flags, almost touch each other, so that even in the middle of the day a peculiar, dim, religious light prevails. At night, as may be supposed, it is pitch dark. And both by day and night it smells abominably.

(*Nikola*, 54)

The main characteristic of Peking is that in its streets lies a layer of dust 'six inches deep,' and the storms occurring 'on an average at least three times a week' cover everything 'with a coating of the vilest impurity' (*Nikola*, 71).

In the 'cesspool' Boothby sets much of the intrigue and crime of the series; there many of the most thrilling events occur. Nikola uses these cities as headquarters to plan his crimes around the world and, in fact, it is there that the protagonists encounter him for the first time: Hatteras, Pennethorne and Ingleby in London; Bruce, in Shanghai. At the London *New Imperial Restaurant* the doctor meets his henchmen and plans his revenge against Wetherell (*Bid*, 1-11). In a London pub, Hatteras witnesses one of Nikola's "magic" turns and sees, in what seems an induced vision, Phyllis calling his name in distress (*Bid*, 39). In Port Said the doctor kidnaps Hatteras and Beckenham; in Shanghai he manages to pass off as a Chinese merchant and participate in the meeting of a 'secret society aiming at the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty' (*Nikola*, 49). In *The Lust of Hate* the capital is scourged by a long series of murders involving personages

from the London aristocracy; there the villain also persuades Pennethorne to kill Bartrand, and, in *Dr. Nikola's Experiment*, he recruits Ingleby for his direful experiment on Don Miguel.

2.4.2. THE WILD LAND

Once the male protagonist has found Nikola on his way, he must live through a series of adventures which take place, entirely or partly, in the wilds. Boothby relies mainly on height and grandeur to convey the sense of a threatening environment; in his intentions, the reader should be stunned by the vastness of the landscapes, and feel as if he suffered from vertigo (occasionally, the author even gives height figures). The most adventurous episodes take place in Tibet, while Nikola and Bruce try to reach the remote monastery where they will join the secret sect. As they leave civilization, the landscape becomes 'more and more rocky, and the ascents and descents more precipitous' (*Nikola*, 128). The farther they go, the more they find themselves hemmed in by high cliffs:

From one window we could look across the range of mountains, over valley and peak, into the very eye of the setting sun. From another we could gaze down, nearly three hundred feet, sheer drop, into the valley, and perceive the track we had followed that morning, winding its way along, while, through a narrow gully to our left we could distinguish the stretch of plain, nearly fifty miles distant, where we had camped two nights before.

(*Nikola*, 128-129)

The cañon, to employ an American term [*sic!*], stretched to right and left of us, as far as the eye could reach, in unbroken grandeur. Certainly, on the side upon which we stood, the cliff sloped enough for an experienced mountaineer to clamber down, but across the ravine it rose a sheer precipice for fully 1,500 feet, and though I examined it carefully I could not see a single place where even a goat could find a footing.

(*Nikola*, 147)

The scenery changes a bit in *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* as Boothby tries to create an oppressive atmosphere. Yet, what strikes most Ingleby as he reaches Allerdeyne Castle, in Northumberland, is the mountain chain surrounding the manor and the immense bay:

At the moment the yacht was entering a small bay, surrounded by giant cliffs, against which the great rollers of the North Sea broke continuously. The bay itself was in deep shadow, and was as dreary a place as any I have seen. I looked about me for a dwelling of any sort, but not a sign of such a thing could I discover: only a long stretch of frowning cliffs and desolate, wind-swept tableland.

(*Experiment*, 79)

While he was speaking we had passed from the open sea into the still water of the bay, and the yacht was slowing down perceptibly. Gradually the picture unfolded itself, until, standing out in bold relief upon the cliffs like some grim sentinel of the past, the castle which, for some time to come at least, was destined to be my home came into view. Who its architect had been I was never able to discover, but he must have been impregnated with the desolation and solemn grandeur of the coast, and in his building have tried to equal it.

(*Experiment*, 80)

Even the Australian island where Nikola imprisons Phyllis, and that on which Pennethorne and Agnes wreck, are described as rocky, and even include steep cliffs:

The undergrowth was very thick and the ground rocky. [...] A small perpendicular cliff, some sixty feet in height, was before me [...].

(*Bid*, 223)

The other side of the island – that is to say, the side exactly opposite that upon which we had landed – was almost precipitous, and at the foot of the cliffs, extending for some distance out into the sea, were a number of small islets, upon which the seas broke with never-easing violence.

(*Lust*, 109-110)

2.4.3. THE GOTHIC SCENERY

Although never predominant, the gothic element is present throughout the series and is always connected to Dr. Nikola and his world. It is in isolated or lonely places, ancient and dirty, oddly furnished and more oddly inhabited, that most of the uncanny events of the series occur. The first gothic place that the reader encounters is Nikola's laboratory in Port Said. Besides being 'begrimed with dirt and smoke,' this *Wunderkammer* of sorts is full of strange things, from 'enormous bottles' filled with human specimens to animal and human bones scattered on the floor, from a collection of exotic weapons coming from all over the world to 'implements for every sort of wizardry known to the superstitious' (*Bid*, 119). Of course, the strangest and most horrific things that Hatteras finds there are the "freaks," on whom the doctor experiments.²⁸ Ingleby encounters the same freaks in Allerdeyne Castle, and freakish creatures inhabit the Tibetan monastery in *Doctor Nikola*. Both places are described according to the stereotype of the gothic palace – they both have great courtyards that lead to labyrinthine corridors and broad staircases:

Moving in procession, as before, we crossed the great courtyard, which echoed to the sound of our footsteps, and, reaching a door on the farther side, entered and found ourselves standing in a well-proportioned hall, from which a staircase of solid stone, up which a dozen soldiers might have marched abreast, led to the floors above. With Nikola still in advance, we made the ascent, turned to the right hand, and proceeded along a corridor, upwards of fifty yards in length, out of which opened a number of lofty rooms.

(*Experiment*, 82)

²⁸ The "freak" stereotype is described below (2.5.5.) and discussed in 3.3.3.

The stairs conducted us to a long passage, on either side of which were small rooms or cubicles. Leaving these behind us, we approached another flight of steps which led to the highest floor of the building. At the end of a long corridor was a small ante-chamber hung round with dark-coloured silks, just as we had seen in the great hall below. From this we entered another nearly twice the size, which was lighted with three narrow windows.

(*Nikola*, 107)

Allerdeyne Castle is the setting for the pioneering experiment to rejuvenate Don Miguel,²⁹ and in the Tibetan monastery Nikola and Bruce witness preternatural events such as a recovery from complete paralysis (*Nikola*, 164), and a case of momentary resurrection (*Nikola*, 165). Besides, Nikola claims he saw the flesh of mummified bodies turn ‘soft and healthy as that of a little child’ (*Nikola*, 168), and was shown the effects of ‘a new aesthetic that does not deprive the patient of his sense, and yet renders him impervious to pain’ (*ibid.*).

Farewell, Nikola is entirely set in Venice, a city by which Boothby shows to be fascinated – in the incipit, Hatteras claims: ‘We were in Venice; Venice the silent and mysterious; the one European city of which I never tire’ (*Farewell*, 1). All through the series, no place can be found that is granted so many descriptions as the lagoon city, but the reader is soon to discover that Boothby’s knowledge of it is extremely bad: the place names are often inaccurate or wrong, and the descriptions rather stereotypical. In daytime the city seems only a beautiful resort.

²⁹ Ingleby describes Nikola’s futuristic laboratory in the following terms: ‘it was upwards of twenty feet in length and possibly eighteen in width. The walls and the ceilings were as black as charcoal, and, when the electric light was extinguished, not a ray of anything would be visible. In the centre was a strange contrivance which I could see was intended to serve as bed, and for some other purpose, which at the moment was not quite apparent to me. In the farther corners were a couple of queer-looking pieces of machinery, one of which reminded me somewhat of an unusually large electric battery; the other I could not understand at all. A machine twice the size of those usually employed for manufacturing ozone stood opposite the door; thermometers of every sort and description were arranged at intervals along the walls; while on one side was an ingenious apparatus for heating the room, and on the other a similar one for cooling it. At the head and foot of the bed were two brass pillars, the construction and arrangements of which reminded me of electric terminals on an exaggerated scale’ (*Experiment*, 87).

There is the island of Murano with its ‘famous glass factories’ (*Farewell*, 2), Piazza San Marco (in the book, ‘piazza of Saint Mark’), crowded ‘as usual,’ where Hatteras and his friends stop for a coffee at the famous ‘Florian cafe’ (Caffè Florian, *ibid.*), and ‘the church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo’ (Basilica dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo), where they can see ‘the mausoleum of the Doge, Pietro Mocennigo [*sic*], the statues of Lombardi [*sic*, Pietro Lombardo], and the ‘famous tomb of Andrea Vendramin, ‘considered by many to be the finest of its kind in Venice’ (*Farewell*, 30). Other classic sights in Venice are ‘St. Mark’s Cathedral,’ the Rialto bridge and the Arsenal (*Farewell*, 34), which Hatteras openly appreciates without ever favouring the reader with any description. The characters also visit Chioggia (*Farewell*, 81), a sea town in the province of Venice, and a sort of “Venice in miniature,” where Carlo Goldoni famously set his *Le baruffe chiozzotte* (1762).³⁰ There is also a series of place names which I have not been able to identify and were probably Boothby’s own creation.³¹ The atmosphere of the lagoon city is ‘enlivened by the strains of the invariable *Finiculi Finicula* [*sic*, *Funiculi*, *Funiculà*]’ (*Farewell*, 33) and other classic *canzoni*, while the gondoliers, although speaking English fluently, here and there punctuate their discourses with a ‘signor’ (*Farewell*, 11).³² At night, however, the lagoon city turns into a silent and dark place, clouded in an air of mystery, as Hatteras remarks:

³⁰ Other place names and “historical” characters that Boothby mentions are: ‘Falieri’ who ‘yielded his life’ (he is probably referring to Marino Faliero, the Doge who tried a *coup d’état* and was executed in 1355), ‘the church of St. Maria del Formosa’ [*sic*, Chiesa di Santa Maria Formosa], the ‘Ducal Palace,’ and ‘the island of S. Georgio Maggiore’ [*sic*, actually a conflation of Isola di San Giorgio and its church, i.e. Basilica di San Giorgio Maggiore!], (*Farewell*, 132).

³¹ Hatteras and his company stay at ‘Galaghetti’s famous hotel overlooking the Grand Canal’ (*Farewell*, 1); Nikola, at the Palace Revecce, in Rio del Consiglio.

³² ‘Signor’ is Italian, but a gondolier was more likely to call his guests by the Venetian title of ‘siòr.’

I have seen it at every hour, and under almost every aspect: at break of day, when one has it to oneself and is able to enjoy its beauty undisturbed; at midday, when the importunate shopkeepers endeavour to seduce one into entering their doors (by tales of the marvels therein); at sunset, when the cafes are crowded, the band plays, and all is merriment; and last, but not least, at midnight, when the moon is sailing above Saint Mark's, the square is full of strange shadows, and the only sound to be heard is the cry of a gull on the lagoon, or the "Sa Premi"³³ of some belated gondolier.

(*Farewell*, 2-3)

Boothby sticks to the Victorian literary cliché of Venice as a decadent city whose glory is past³⁴ – ‘the grand old city, with its palaces and churches, its associations stretching back to long-forgotten centuries, and its silent waterways, possessed a great fascination for us’ (*Farewell*, 2). The city becomes the perfect background against which Boothby can set the ancient Palace Revecce, Nikola’s Venice residence, a stately but declining building which seems to be a synecdoche for the great city. Palace Revecce obeys to all the stereotypes of the gothic manor-house, including a curse that seems to loom over it and make people shun the place. As Nikola recounts, some centuries earlier the palace was the setting of a case of adultery which was cruelly punished, and each time Hatteras goes to visit the doctor, he observes that the gondoliers are scared by the place – one positively refuses to stop outside the palace (‘not for anything would he remain there longer than was necessary to set us [i.e. Hatteras and Glenbarth] down,’ *Farewell*, 19); another is ‘anxious to set me [i.e. Hatteras] down, to collect his fare, and to get away again as soon as possible’ (*Farewell*, 44). The ‘abominable dwelling’ (*Farewell*, 44), as the Australian calls it, has a

³³ I have not been able to recognize this song. It may be a corruption of “se premi,” which however, to my knowledge, is not a song title.

³⁴ As James H. Johnson points out, Venice’s downfall in 1797, when Napoleon ceded it to Austria (Treaty of Campoformio), was generally interpreted as a right punishment for the cruel tyranny and moral corruption of the millenarian *Serenissima*. Venice soon became a gloomy and mysterious setting for many operas, and artists started to fashion about it epics of ‘grandeur and decadence that endured for most of the nineteenth century.’ James H. JOHNSON. ‘The Myth of Venice in Nineteenth-Century Opera.’ *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 36, 3 (Winter), 2006, 533-554.

'handsome courtyard, in the centre of which was a well' and a 'broad staircase' but shows 'unmistakable signs of having been allowed to fall to decay (*Farewell*, 40). In night-time, it is rather dark and gloomy, as Hatteras can see during his second visit to Nikola:

The house was in deep shadow, and looked very dark and lonesome. A solitary lamp had been placed upon the coping of the wall, and its fitful light illuminated the courtyard, throwing long shadows across the pavement and making it look even drearier and more unwholesome than when I had last seen it. After we had shaken hands we made our way in silence up the great staircase, our steps echoing along the stone corridors with startling reverberations. How thankful I was at last to reach the warm, well-lit room, despite the story Nikola had told us about it [i.e. the adulterous relationship between Del Revecce's wife and Bunopelli], I must leave you to imagine.

(*Farewell*, 44)

In Palace Revecce Nikola makes his guests witness a purportedly historical event, i.e. the marriage between Francesco del Revecce and the daughter of the Duke of Levano, as if they were, in the doctor's own words, 'Spirits in a Spirit World' (*Farewell*, 92). The place also becomes Don Martinos's home, after the doctor has, in the Spaniard's words, got him 'body and soul' (*Farewell*, 144); and it would be his grave, too, if Gertrude did not persuade Nikola to let him go.

2.4.4. THE HAVEN OF PEACE

The stories end almost inevitably with the protagonist settling in a peaceful place, where he enjoys the life of the married and well-off gentleman.³⁵ If London has become an unsafe place (cf. 2.4.1.), Boothby seems to suggest, one should leave the capital and settle at the imperial margins.

³⁵ The only exception is *Dr. Nikola's Experiment*, at the end of which Ingleby and Consuelo leave Allerdeyne Castle and sadly prepare to face a life of poverty – it is not known where (*Experiment*, 156-157).

Immersed in nature, the rural spot can inspire peace to the human soul. At the end of *A Bid for Fortune*, Hatteras inherits his uncle's mansion in the New Forest, Hampshire, a place that he had visited some time earlier and described in the most flattering terms:

Beautiful elms reared themselves on either hand and intermingled their branches overhead; while before us, through a gap in the foliage, we could just distinguish the winding river, with the thatched roofs of the village, of which we had come in search, lining its banks, and the old grey tower of the church keeping watch and ward over all. There was to my mind something indescribably peaceful and even sad about that view [...]. For the first time since my arrival in England the real beauty of the place came home upon me. I felt as if I could have looked for ever on that quiet and peaceful spot.

(*Bid*, 43-44)

Although Bruce is eventually compelled to retire from the world and hide himself, he is nonetheless a happy man for he lives, with his wife and newborn son, in an Eden-like place:

It is shut in on all sides by precipitous mountain ranges, on the western peaks of which at this moment, as I sit in my verandah [*sic*] writing to you, a quantity of cloud, tinted a rose pink by the setting sun, is gathering. A quieter spot, and one more remote from the rush and bustle of civilization, it would be difficult to find. [...] But now the snow has departed, spring is upon us, clad in its mantle of luscious grass and accompanied by the twitterings of birds and the music of innumerable small waterfalls, and I am a new man. All nature is busy, the swallows are working overtime beneath the eaves [...].

(*Nikola*, 6)

Having found that the man he thought he had murdered is alive, and having redeemed himself by means of saving his life, Pennethorne can at last marry Agnes and settle in her father's mansion. As the Cornishman remarks, after experiencing the shabby and chaotic life of London, it is hardly surprising that Agnes 'had so often expressed a preference for South Africa as compared with

England' (*Lust*, 142). Her father's residence is a three-storey building 'surmounted by a tower' and surrounded by verandas. It is placed 'on a fine terrace, which [...] [leads] down by a broad flight of steps to [a] flower garden and orangery.' Immersed in rank vegetation, its entrance resembles 'the entrance to an English park' (*Lust*, 141-142).

2.5. CHARACTERIZATION

As in many popular fiction books, the only character which in the series is depicted in the round is the "star." Dr. Nikola is described several times over, and is always granted the privilege of expressing his point of view on many subjects. On the contrary, the remaining characters are cardboard and rather uninteresting. Their names may change, but their function remains unchanged throughout the series, so they may be grouped under the following main categories: the Male Protagonist, the Young Woman, the Foreigner, and the Freak.

The character placement in each novel is governed by a sort of rigid "diarchy," whereby there is invariably a male protagonist of sorts whose adventures provide the reader with a stimulus to look for Nikola when he is not there, and to naively contrast the two males when the doctor is there.

2.5.1. THE "STAR": Dr. NIKOLA³⁶

Like Professor Moriarty, Nikola is an international criminal who is assisted by fixed henchmen – Eastover, Baxter and Prendergast – and many occasional helpmates; yet, unlike Holmes's rival, the doctor 'is much more inclined to

³⁶ The information on Dr. Nikola is massive, at times contradictory, and scattered throughout the series. Thus, for practical reasons, the discussion on this character has been split in two. An overall portrayal of Nikola has been attempted in Appendix B, while in this section Boothby's main literary "debts and credits" have been acknowledged.

undertake the leading role in his adventures – it is not part of his hyperactive nature to sit motionless in the centre of the web, as Moriarty is prone to do.³⁷ Like H. G. Wells's Doctor Moreau, Nikola is a votary of science experimenting on living creatures to further his scientific knowledge. Depasquale claims that one of the outstanding differences between Moreau and Nikola is that the latter is driven, besides scientific curiosity, by the desire to benefit his fellow men, and that if at times he seems unscrupulous, it is just because he has taken 'that most modern of all scientific positions, namely, that the end justifies the means.'³⁸ However, Nikola's goodwill may be called into question for, if the doctor is sincerely keen to help humankind, he seems equally concerned with wealth, glory and power. Witness the programmatic speech delivered to Bruce:

'With the knowledge I shall gain I shall revolutionize the whole science of medicine. There will be only one doctor in the world, and he will be Dr. Nikola! Think of that. If I desired fame, what greater reputation could I have. If money, there is wealth untold in this scheme for me. If I wish to benefit my fellow-man, how can I do it better than by unravelling the tangled skein of Life and Death? It is also plain that you have not grasped my character yet. I tell you this, if it became necessary for me, for a purpose I had in view, to find and kill a certain fly, I would follow that fly into the utmost parts of Asia, and spend all I possessed in the world upon the chase; but one thing is very certain, *I would kill that fly*. How much more then in a matter which is as important as life itself to me?'

(*Nikola*, 126-127)

His desire to give life unnaturally, by creating a man that 'shall live a thousand years' (*Experiment*, 29) – the first step towards immortality, – may recall Dr. Frankenstein's dream to reanimate the dead. The experiment that Nikola performs in Allerdeyne Castle, which includes a pioneering use of electricity, may have inspired some scenes in the 1931 Universal movie

³⁷ DEPASQUALE, 70.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

Frankenstein – in Mary Shelley’s novel, in fact, ‘the life-giving process is left delightfully vague.’³⁹ Like Sherlock Holmes, Nikola at times shows extraordinary deductive abilities, and like the great sleuth he is a master of disguise – an ability that he shares also with E. W. Hornung’s A. J. Raffles and, less famously, with Boothby’s own Simon Carne: like Nikola, both are gentlemanly and chivalrous criminals.⁴⁰ Finally, like Count Dracula and Du Maurier’s Svengali, the doctor is a skilful hypnotist, and like the vampire, he appears to possess preternatural powers such as thought reading and mind control.

2.5.2. THE MALE PROTAGONIST

The male protagonist is a middle-class Englishman, or colonial of English stock,⁴¹ in his twenties or thirties,⁴² whom Boothby usually depicts as strong and

³⁹ DEPASQUALE, 69.

⁴⁰ Simon Carne is a thief and murderer that disguises himself as Klimo the detective to perpetrate his crimes. The character first appeared in the story ‘A Prince of Swindlers,’ published in the *Pearson’s Magazine* in January 1897, which was later collected in the namesake book (1900). ‘Carne is introduced to London society as a short, hunchbacked student of, and collector of, oriental treasures with a taste for high living.’ However, it is only a masquerade, for when he becomes Klimo, he takes off his false lump and stands at his normal stature. It might be defined a case of disguise in reverse. Boothby unveils the trick only in the last story of the book. DEPASQUALE, 43.

⁴¹ Richard “Dick” Hatteras, of Thursday Island, North Queensland (*Bid*, 11), is a ‘pearler, copra merchant, beche-de-mer and tortoise-shell dealer, and South Sea trader generally’ (*Bid*, 11-12). His father came from a village in the New Forest, Hampshire (*Bid*, 42-43). As Wilfred Bruce reveals: ‘[...] I had run away from home at the age of fifteen to go to sea; had spent three years in the roughest life before the mast any man could dream of or desire; had got through another five, scarcely less savage, as an Australian bushman on the borders of the Great Desert; another two in a detachment of the Cape Mounted Police; I had also held a fair appointment in Hong-Kong, and had drifted in and out of many other employments, good, bad, and indifferent’ (*Nikola*, 21). That Bruce is an Englishman is never directly stated but can be easily inferred – “‘I am an old resident in the East, and I think I may say I know China as well as any living Englishman,’” the man boasts with Nikola (*Nikola*, 15); seeing that Bruce is dressed as a Chinese man, Gladys asks him: ‘But if you are an Englishman why are you disguised in this fashion?’ (*Nikola*, 68); when Bruce thanks Gladys’s brother-in-law for his help, the man replies: ‘We English are only a small community in Peking, and it would be indeed a sorry thing if we did not embrace chances of helping each other whenever they occur’ (*Nikola*, 83). The surname ‘Bruce’ was probably suggested to Boothby by that of his friend ‘Talbot Bruce,’ to whom *Doctor Nikola* is dedicated. Gilbert Pennethorne is a Cornishman who worked as a storekeeper in an Australian station, and then became a gold seeker (*Lust*, 2-3). Douglas

healthy.⁴³ He is an independent man who was left parentless (or motherless) and had to quit home to face life alone at an early age.⁴⁴ He is a model of Victorian purposefulness and industry.⁴⁵ Unlike the great doctor, he is morally upright, and even when he chooses to get involved with the criminal, Boothby indicates that his choice is to some extent inevitable.⁴⁶ Imbued with many conservative values,

Ingleby is a surgeon working in a London hospital, the only son of a well-known 'country-practitioner of the old-fashioned sort in the west of England' (*Experiment*, 1-2).

⁴² Hatteras is twenty-eight (*Bid*, 12); Bruce, thirty-five (*Nikola*, 21); Pennethorne's age is never stated, but at the time of the story only a few years have elapsed since his departure from home, which occurred when he was still attending the university: he went to Australia where he spent, it may be surmised, between two and three years working in the 'Murrumbidgee sheep station' (*Lust*, 3) and looking for gold. He then found a job as a storekeeper at the Markapurlie station, where he stayed three years. Thus, he must be in his late twenties. Similarly, readers never learn Ingleby's age, though they know that he became a surgeon and, finding no job in London, went to Australia and then worked in Ashanti (Ghana) and Cape Town before returning to London (*Experiment*, 12). It is quite reasonable to believe that only some years have passed between his first departure from and last return to London, so that he must be in his late twenties or early thirties.

⁴³ Hatteras is six foot two inches tall and with a chest forty six inches large (*Bid*, 12), and he describes himself as 'strong as a Hakodate wrestler' (*ibid.*). He demonstrates to be so when he rescues Phyllis from three 'larrikins' in Sydney (*Bid*, 17-18). Bruce, almost six feet tall and weighing thirteen stones (*Nikola*, 21), shows his physical strength when he rescues Gladys in Shangai by punching a man and making him roll over 'like a ninepin' (*Nikola*, 64). The Englishman can boast that in thirty-five years, and despite the many adventures he went through he has hardly ever 'known what it was to be really sick or sorry' (*Nikola*, 21). At the beginning of *The Lust of Hate*, Pennethorne knocks down his boss, Bartrand, whom he describes to be 'not the sort of foe to be taken lightly' since the man is 'as hard as whalebone and almost as pliable' (*Lust*, 9). The Cornishman has a 'splendid constitution' (*Lust*, 128), as the captain of *The King of Carthage* observes after rescuing him from a shipwreck.

⁴⁴ Hatteras's mother died of fever on the same year he was born, and six months later he lost also his father, who died at sea during a voyage. Ten days later he found a job aboard the *Little Emily*, a trading schooner headed for Papeete, French Polynesia (*Bid*, 12). Bruce left home at the age of fifteen to go at sea and left no relative behind, being the only son of a couple who had been dead for some years (*Nikola*, 21). Pennethorne left home when he was still a university student, after a long series of quarrels with his father – his mother had died while she was giving life to him – and sailed for Australia. When Ingleby's father died, he left his family only money enough to pay off his own debts and his funeral. This put Ingleby's family in financial straits, a shock that 'proved too much for my mother, and she followed him a few weeks later (*ibid.*).

⁴⁵ Hatteras can complacently claim: 'I'd got more money to my hand to play with than most of the swells who patronise the first saloon; I had earned it honestly [...]' (*Bid*, 13). Bruce has won the reputation of being a great China expert, which is the reason why Nikola chooses him to assist him in his perilous adventure in Tibet. Pennethorne has been a tenacious gold seeker in Australia, and would have made a fortune if Bartrand had not stolen him his mine. Ingleby studied hard and became so good a surgeon that Nikola wants him to assist him in his experiment.

⁴⁶ Hatteras is involved *malgré lui*, as the villain abducts his fiancée; Bruce, in desperate need for money, unsuccessfully applies for no less than thirteen jobs (*Nikola*, 27) before

he is patriotic, chauvinistic, and even racist, as he takes for granted the superiority of the British race and despises those that he considers to belong to the “lower” races. Towards these people, as towards the poor and disabled, he never shows any sympathy nor does he entertain feelings of pity for their plights. He is never willing to call into question his beliefs, and invariably takes everything that is not in tune with his commonplace opinions as a threat that needs be averted. In this, he may be described not only as conservative, but also reactionary.⁴⁷ Boothby conveniently used him as the narrator of the story, so that the point of view from which the events are seen mirrored that of his readers.

2.5.3. THE YOUNG WOMAN

As a rule, the young woman plays a rather passive and flimsy role. While Phyllis Wetherell is used as a pretext for involving Hatteras in Nikola’s criminal plan, Gladys Mary Medwin and Doña Consuelo de Moreno are rather inessential to plot development. Agnes Maybourne is an exception, as she stars as the co-protagonist of the story, and even acts as Pennethorne’s redeeming angel.⁴⁸

resigning himself to accepting Nikola’s rather lucrative but extremely dangerous offer; Pennethorne at first lets himself be tempted by Nikola to murder Bartrand, but later realises that the doctor’s hypnotic powers had almost erased his free will; Ingleby helps Nikola both because he has an impending need for money and because he is “scientifically” curious, though at first he does not seem to realise the moral consequences of Nikola’s experiment – just before performing the experiment, he wonders, too late to back down: ‘Should the experiment prove successful, how would it affect the world? Would it prove a blessing or a curse?’ (*Experiment*, 99).

⁴⁷ All these attitudes are explored at length in Chapter 3.

⁴⁸ Of the two, Agnes often seems the more resourceful and purposeful. Pennethorne is even compelled to admit that ‘Miss Maybourne’s wits [...] were sharper than mine’ (*Lust*, 101). Boothby depicts a woman that seems stronger than a man, in spite of her ‘sex and weakness’ (*Lust*, 120) – the latter is implied to be a consequence of the former, – because of her unshakable faith in God. Agnes gives comfort to Pennethorne and encourages him to have faith – a faith the man has lost. The woman even asks him to kneel down and thank God ‘for His great mercy in sparing our lives’ (*Lust*, 105), and reassures him: ‘Come, come, my friend, let us look our situation in the face and see what is best to be done. Believe me, I have no fear, God will protect us in the future as He has done in the past’ (*Lust*, 121). Pennethorne can finally forgive himself only when, in a supreme act of love, Agnes believes in his good nature – ‘come what may, I believe in

No less stereotypical than the male protagonist, she is depicted as the Victorian “angel in the house:” a lady faithful to her man and in need of his protection.⁴⁹ Younger than him – she is in her early twenties,⁵⁰ – she is described as the gentlest and most beautiful woman that a man could possibly desire.⁵¹ She can be either English or colonial,⁵² though Boothby is not usually interested to indicate which of the two.⁵³ In three cases – Gladys, Consuelo and Gertrude – she appears to belong to the middle classes, while in two – Phyllis and Agnes – she is of aristocratic descent.⁵⁴ Tall and slimly-built, her body is graceful, and her

you. Nothing shall ever convince me that you would have killed the man who so cruelly wronged you. You hated him; you longed to be revenged on him; but you never would have murdered him when it came to the point’ (*Lust*, 157).

⁴⁹ She is invariably rescued by her man. Hatteras rescues Phyllis from a group of muggers and, later, from Nikola. At the beginning of *Doctor Nikola*, Gladys is saved from a madding crowd; Pennethorne rescues Agnes twice from drowning at sea; Ingleby assists Consuelo when she enters Nikola’s laboratory and is horrified on seeing the doctor’s freaks (*Experiment*, 101).

⁵⁰ According to Hatteras, Phyllis is about twenty-one or twenty-two years old (*Bid*, 18); Bruce claims that Gladys’s age ‘might have been anything from twenty to twenty-three (*Nikola*, 67); Ingleby observes that Consuelo is ‘scarcely twenty years of age, but looking several years older’ (*Experiment*, 40).

⁵¹ Hatteras observes that ‘a daintier, prettier, sweeter little angel never walked the earth than the girl I had just been permitted the opportunity of rescuing’ (*Bid*, 20). Bruce confesses: ‘of all the girls I had ever met, Miss Gladys Medwin was by far the most adorable’ (*Nikola*, 84). To Pennethorne, Agnes is ‘the truest and noblest woman [...] who ever came into this world for a man’s comfort and consolation’ (*Lust*, 2), and after marrying her, he adds: ‘no better, sweet, or more loyal wife than I possess could possibly be desired by any mortal man’ (*Lust*, 182). Ingleby maintains that Consuelo is ‘the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in my life,’ and emphatically adds: ‘I have said “the most beautiful girl,” but this does not at all express what I mean, nor do I think it is in my power to do so’ (*Experiment*, 40). The Duke of Glenbarth protests that his obsession with Gertrude is justified as she is ‘the most adorable woman in the world’ (*Farewell*, 66).

⁵² Note that Doña Consuelo and her great-grandfather, Don Miguel, are English of Spanish origins. As Nikola tells Ingleby, ‘they’re English and not Spaniards [...] as you might very well think yourself from the name. I believe the old gentleman was a merchant of some sort in Cadiz, but that must have been fifty years ago’ (*Experiment*, 39).

⁵³ In Boothby, a woman may be beautiful and desirable only provided that she is Western. In *A Bid for Fortune*, after describing Phyllis as the most beautiful woman he has ever met, Hatteras reports these words by her: ‘Are you then, like myself, an Australian native? I mean, of course, as you know, colonial?’, and he adds: ‘The idea of her calling herself an Australian native in any other sense! The very notion seemed preposterous’ (*Bid*, 22).

⁵⁴ Phyllis is the daughter of the Hon. Wetherell, the ‘Colonial Secretary’ (*Bid*, 19) of Australia; Gladys and Gertrude, of two churchmen, a Christian missionary in Shanghai (*Nikola*, 67) and ‘the well-known Dean of Bedminster’ (*Farewell*, 2), respectively; Agnes,

sweet face, often noted to be of a perfectly oval shape⁵⁵ – a traditional sign of feminine beauty – is graced with bright haunting eyes and framed by hair of a beautiful shade.⁵⁶ She honours the stereotype of the unpredictable (and cunning) woman who “suffers” from abrupt mood swings while being courted by the man she secretly loves.⁵⁷ Like her male counterpart, she is parentless or at least motherless,⁵⁸ and shares the values and prejudices of her male counterpart. The only difference (in form though not in substance) is that, in tune with her

of ‘a big mine owner at the Cape [Town]’ (*Lust*, 76), who must be an aristocrat since Pennethorne notes that his daughter is of ‘gentle birth’ (*Lust*, 86).

⁵⁵ Phyllis has ‘a sweet oval face’ (*Bid*, 18); Bruce notes that Gladys’s ‘face was a perfect oval in shape’ (*Nikola*, 67); Pennethorne is prevented from pressing the spring that would kill Bartrand when he preternaturally sees a woman’s face, ‘perfect’ and ‘oval’ (*Lust*, 60), which the Cornishman will later discover to be Agnes’s – ‘there, gazing across the sea, was the same woman’s face I had seen suspended in mid-air above my cab on the previous night. [...] I was quite convinced by this time, however, that she was flesh and blood’ (*Lust*, 75). Consuelo has a ‘pale, oval face’ (*Experiment*, 40)

⁵⁶ In Hatteras’s words, Phyllis has ‘bright brown hair, and the most beautiful eyes I have ever seen in my life’ (*Bid*, 18). Gladys’s face has a sweet expression which, Bruce notes, ‘was the chief charm of her face, and this was destined to haunt me for many a long day to come’ (*Nikola*, 67), and both eyes and hair of ‘a beautiful shade of brown’ (*ibid.*). To Pennethorne, what makes Agnes’s face ‘the most captivating I had ever seen in my life’ (*Lust*, 60) is ‘the expression of gentleness and womanly goodness that animated it’ (*ibid.*). Consuelo has hair ‘as black as the raven’s wings’ (*Experiment*, 40) and ‘dark, lustrous eyes’ (*ibid.*). Gertrude has ‘black hair and large, luminous eyes that haunted one’ (*Farewell*, 2).

⁵⁷ Guessing that Bruce is in love with her, Gladys becomes distant and leaves the man to reflect: ‘Had I offended her, or was this the way of women? I had read in novels that it was their custom, if they thought they had been a little too prodigal of their favours whilst a man was in trouble, to become cold and almost distant to him when he was himself again. If this were so, then her action on this particular occasion was only in the ordinary course of things, and must be taken as such’ (*Nikola*, 85). When Agnes understands that in spite of her efforts Pennethorne refuses to open his heart to her, she treats him indifferently as she would treat any other man, and thus exasperates his jealousy. The Cornishman is compelled to admit: ‘how little we men understand the opposite sex’ (*Lust*, 153). Gertrude acts similarly, and arouses Hatteras’s suspicions that she may be just playing a part: ‘[...] there was by this time not the least doubt that the Duke admired Miss Trevor. Though the lad had known her for so short a time he was already head over ears in love. I think Gertrude was aware of the fact, and I feel sure that she liked him, but whether the time was not yet ripe, or her feminine instinct warned her to play her fish for a while before attempting to land him, I cannot say; at any rate, she more than once availed herself of an opportunity and moved away from him to take her place at my side. As you may suppose, Glenbarth was not rendered any the happier by these manoeuvres; indeed, by the time we left the palace, he was as miserable a human being as could have been found in all Venice’ (*Farewell*, 59).

⁵⁸ Phyllis and Agnes are motherless (*Bid*, 32; *Lust*, 76); Gladys’s father is killed by a madding crowd (*Nikola*, 64-65); Consuelo’s parents ‘have been dead for many years’ (*Experiment*, 39); Gertrude’s father is a character of *Farewell*, *Nikola*, though nothing is known about her mother.

belonging to the weaker sex, she shows her cynical unconcern towards the poor and deformed and her distaste for the “lower” races by being horrified by them, rather than by expressing disgust and hate.⁵⁹

2.5.4. THE FOREIGNER

In Boothby the foreigner, no matter what social class he belongs to, is always depicted as threatening and treacherous. In spite of his apparent civility and courteous manners, Don José de Martinos, a Spaniard, reveals himself as a false, vengeful man prone to gambling and alcoholism. After the aborted duel between the Don and Glenbarth, Hatteras claims: ‘It’s all very well for a Spanish braggart to go swaggering about the world, endeavouring to put bullets into inoffensive people, but it’s not the thing for an Englishman’ (*Farewell*, 135). Although they keep the world’s knowledge, the Tibetan monks are only a ‘disreputable crew [...] steeped to the eyebrows in sensuality and crime’ (*Nikola*, 107), and ‘the most loathsome and blackguardly ruffians it would be possible to imagine’ (*Nikola*, 109). Even the High Priest of Hankow is depicted as a petty old man. As Prendergast narrates, in order to abduct him, it was enough to appeal to his greed for money:

‘His old eyes twinkled greedily as they fell upon this goodly store [i.e. a small bag of precious stones], and his enthusiasm rose as each successive bag was opened. When at last the contents of the bag of stones were spread out before him he forgot his priestly sanctity altogether in his delight and stooped to examine them. As he did so Chung-Yein sprang forward, and threw a noose over his head, a chloroformed sponge was clapped

⁵⁹ Ingleby’s and Consuelo’s reactions when they first see the freaks in Allerdeyne Castle are emblematic. The man defines them ‘loathsome creatures’ (*Experiment*, 92) and even has a dream in which he beats them (*Experiment*, 94); the woman, on the contrary, faints; when she revives, she desperately implores Ingleby to save her from those horrible creatures (*Experiment*, 101).

against his nose, while the spurious cousin pulled his heels from under him and threw him on his back upon the floor.'

(*Nikola*, 100)

On reaching Port Said, Hatteras and Beckenham are 'immediately beset by the usual crowd of beggars and donkey boys' (*Bid*, 98), and they presently meet 'a lame young beggar who, leaning on his crutches, blocked our way while he recited his dismal catalogue of woes' (*Bid*, 98). At best, these creatures, who are hardly ever granted the privilege of being called 'men,' are nothing more than a hindrance. Showing mercy to them is not only useless but even harmful, as they are only crooks, ever ready to cheat the incautious tourist. The candid Marquis of Beckenham discovers it when he learns that the beggar he has helped by giving him half a sovereign is only a 'rascal' (*Bid*, 98) who moves the passer-by with fake stories in order to squeeze money out of him. In order that there is not even the shadow of a doubt about the man's malice, the two Western men presently catch him while he stakes the half sovereign in a casino. Hatteras lets himself be duped by an Egyptian boy who offers to guide the couple of friends around the city: they are eventually stunned and find themselves to be Nikola's prisoners.

As one moves eastbound, Boothby suggests, he will find even more unhealthy and dirty people. In China Bruce and Nikola find themselves among a crowd of common people 'in all degrees of loathsomeness, carrying the scars of almost every known ailment upon their bodies' (*Nikola*, 86), so that the annoying beggars of Port Said become comparatively inoffensive. In *The Lust of Hate* the Matabele are nothing but 'brutes' who attack the band of Western men with that instinctive blind fury that one is more likely to find in an animal than a man: 'The words were hardly out of his mouth before the enemy were upon us, brandishing their assegais and shields, and yelling in a manner that would have chilled the blood of the oldest veteran' (*Lust*, 168).

2.5.5. THE FREAK

The inclusion of deformed and monstrous creatures is one of the most sensational aspects of Boothby's narrative. The author does not restrict 'himself to such mechanical piling-up of abnormalities [...] [which] any canny writer for the mass market must do,'⁶⁰ but rather shows to have a 'sort of pathological interest in deformity.'⁶¹

Although the word 'freak' occurs only once in the whole series,⁶² people with disproportioned limbs can be found almost in each novel. At his old uncle's mansion, Hatteras meets his cousin Gwendoline, whom he defines a 'thing,' finding it difficult to consider her a human being:

How shall I give you a proper description of the – thing that entered. She – if *she* it could be called – was about three feet high, dressed in a shapeless print costume. Her hair stood and hung in a tangled mass upon her head, her eyes were too large for her face, and to complete the horrible effect, a great patch of beard grew on one cheek, and descended almost to a level with her chin. Her features were all awry, and now and again she uttered little moans that were more like those of a wild beast than of a human being. In spite of the old woman's endeavours to make her do so, she would not venture from her side, but stood slobbering and moaning in the half dark of the doorway.

(*Bid*, 52)

In *Port Said* the Australian enters Nikola's secret laboratory where he finds three veritable freaks: a native of Northern India with a head 'at least three times too big for his body' (*Bid*, 120), a Burmese monkey-boy, and an albino dwarf. The Tibetan monastery that Bruce and Nikola reach is also inhabited by dwarfish, awkward creatures:

⁶⁰ DEPASQUALE, 95.

⁶¹ DEPASQUALE, 99.

⁶² 'Try to picture for yourself the inmates of a dozen freak museums [...],' says Ingleby to his readers while recalling when he first saw Nikola's deformed creatures (*Experiment*, 92).

Then from among the rocks to our right appeared one of the most extraordinary figures I have ever seen in my life. He was little more than three feet in height, his shoulders were abnormally broad, his legs bowed so that he could only walk on the sides of his feet, while his head was so big as to be out of all proportion to his body. He was attired in Chinese dress, even to the extent of a pigtail and a little round hat. Waddling towards us he said in a shrill falsetto:

‘Will your Excellencies be honourably pleased to follow me?’

Thereupon he turned upon his heel and preceded us up the valley for nearly a hundred yards. Then, wheeling round to see that we were close behind him, he marched towards what looked like a hole in the cliff and disappeared within. We followed to find him standing in a large cave, bowing on the sand as if in welcome. On either side in rows were at least a dozen dwarfs, dressed in exactly the same fashion, and every one as small and ugly as himself.

(*Nikola*, 150)

In *The Lust of Hate*, the Australian miner and misanthrope Ben Garmand is described by Pennethorne as ‘very short, very broad, very red faced’ and as having ‘enormous ears, and the largest hands and feet I have ever seen on a human being’ (*Lust*, 4) – admittedly, not a *lusus naturae*. In London the Cornishman meets, under Nikola’s instructions, a woman ‘short almost to dwarfishness, well-nigh bald’ and with one eye missing (*Lust*, 54). Finally, when Ingleby enters Dr. Nikola’s laboratory in Allerdeyne Castle, he describes the doctor’s creatures as ‘like men, but not men as we know them; some were like monkeys, but of a kind I’ve never seen before,’ and adds ‘there were things dull, flabby, faceless things’ (*Experiment*, 92). To these may be added Ah-Win, Nikola’s dumb and deaf Chinese servant, who looks like a freak though he is only a man that has undergone horrible mutilation. As Nikola recounts, he was once ‘the confidential servant of the Viceroy of Kweichow until he was detected in an amiable plot to assassinate his master with poisoned rice’ (*Lust*, 37). Although he was condemned to die by ‘*ling-chi*,’ the death of a thousand cuts, Nikola could

exercise his influence and the culprit was released after his half ear was cut, his nose slit, and his tongue torn out.⁶³

⁶³ Pennethorne recalls the first time he encountered Ah-Win as follows: 'Next moment the door opened, and in walked the most hideous man I have ever yet beheld in my life. In Australia I had met many queer specimens of the Chinese race, but never one whose countenance approached in repulsiveness that of the man Nikola employed as his servant. In stature he was taller than his master, possibly a couple or three inches above six feet, and broad in proportion. His eyes squinted inwardly, his face was wrinkled and seamed in every direction, his nose had plainly been slit at some time or another, and I noticed that his left ear was missing from his head' (*Lust*, 36).

CHAPTER THREE

MOTIFS, THEMES AND SOCIAL CONCERNS

3.1. THE Dr. NIKOLA SERIES AND ITS TIMES

The Dr. Nikola series gives not only a partial, but, to some extent, misleading representation of the British *fin de siècle*. While this was a period of restlessness which aroused many heated debates on morality, religion, science, and politics, in the world of Dr. Nikola there seems to be no intellectual involvement or social commitment at all. Of course, one should not expect to find overt argument in a popular fiction work, yet in the series even allusions to contemporary issues are rare. The British characters never hint at the retrenchment of the British Empire or the decline of the national economy, nor do they show to be worried about the prospect that their race might irreversibly degenerate – a late Victorian widespread anxiety. If they are quite remote from the figure of the progressive intellectual who criticized the imperial ideology and supported the socialist cause, they are not much nearer to the staunch conservative who strongly advocated imperial aggressiveness and domestic rigour. In fact, these characters may share the ideology of the *fin de siècle* Tory, not his political idealism and dedication. Actually, their only concern seems to find their “haven of peace” (cf. 2.4.4.) where they may lead a comfortable and carefree life. The *fin de siècle* society as Boothby depicts it seemingly consists only of slothful individualists, while in reality it comprised many eager citizens that sincerely wished to contribute to the improvement of their nation. This does not imply that the *fin de siècle* issues are absent from the Dr. Nikola series, which remains, as the phrase goes, ‘a product of its times.’ If the goodies have nothing relevant to say, at least Nikola does favour the reader with his point of view, although his (often defiant) remarks

rather than being taken up as a challenge by the other characters, are usually dismissed or overlooked. Also, if Boothby hardly ever lets discourse on contemporary issues surface – evidently, in order not to bore his readers and make them feel miserable, as the “rules” of popular fiction demanded – on a deeper level he deftly plays with *fin de siècle* fears and anxieties. Even in escapist fiction such as the Dr. Nikola series provides, the scholar of the *fin de siècle* can recognize the signs of the times.

3.2. BRITAIN UNDER THREAT

Since Dr. Nikola’s ultimate aim is to dominate the world, for Boothby’s reader a thrilling question runs through the series: will Britain eventually be able to avert the doctor’s menace? The answer is a long series of neat negatives, not only because Nikola is an extraordinary enemy, but also because the Boothbian Britain is an inert country that cannot even face its internal problems – such as the insularism of the ruling classes, the degeneration of its population, its urban slums, and the backwardness of its frame of mind. By depicting its inhabitants as virtually blind to whatever goes beyond their interest and the routine of their daily life (cf. 2.5.2), Boothby exasperated the *fin de siècle* anxiety that Britain might not be able, on one side, to cope with the extremely competitive, not to say threatening, international panorama – one may think of the rising economic power of the U.S.A., and of Germany, – and, on the other, to prevent its decline and the loss of its colonies. Boothby opposed too weak a contender (Britain) to a too strong one (Nikola). The doctor embodies the impending modernity that *fin de siècle* Britain had to cope with, and the characters’ powerlessness against him reflects Britain’s perceived powerlessness against the world.

3.3. FIN DE SIÈCLE ISSUES

'Degeneration' was a key word in the *fin de siècle*, and particularly in the 1890s. Triggered by Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) and by the French physician B. A. Morel's 1850s medical theories, the notion was far from new but became extremely popular after the publication of Max Nordau's *Entartung* (1892). Nordau framed into a logical argumentation many common sense beliefs on degeneration, and his work became one of the most widely read books of the 1890s. When it was translated into English and published as *Degeneration* in 1895, the first edition 'went through seven printings.'¹ 'Degeneration' soon became a superordinate term accounting for many and different phenomena that seemed to lie behind Britain's economic and cultural decline. As a form of popular wisdom, it naturally entered the realm of popular fiction, and there it became 'an effective means for "othering" large groups of people by marking them as deviant, criminal, psychotic, defective, simple, hysterical, diseased, primitive, regressive, or just dangerous.'² In other words, the ruling classes tried to do away with the doubts that they entertained about their own sanity and health by transferring them to others, or the "other." The Dr. Nikola series can be taken as an instance, as the characters try obsessively to distance themselves from whatever they consider to be degenerate. Although the word is never used,³ degeneration is an ever-present theme, as will be seen in the discussion that follows, where a comparison has been attempted between Dr. Nikola and Britain (that is, Britons) by using recognizable parameters.

¹ ARATA. *Fictions of Loss*, 2.

² ARATA, 17.

³ One is free to formulate hypotheses about this peculiar absence: did Boothby consider the word to entail too strong a social connotation that might displease his unconcerned audience?

3.3.1. ATTITUDE AND HEALTH

In a world that, thanks to technological innovation, is becoming more and more globalised, and thus “smaller,” to lead a secluded life in one’s little world is the perfect recipe for falling prey to more enterprising men. This is what Boothby seems to suggest when, in *A Bid for Fortune*, he introduces some British characters that are “affected” by insularity. As he travels to the New Forest, Hampshire, Hatteras is told by the driver that he has never been ‘as far as Southampton, a matter of only a few miles by road and ten minutes by rail’ (*Bid*, 42). According to the Australian, the ‘yokel Englishmen’ never leave their birthplace because they lack curiosity for the rest of the world:

And that self-same sticking at home is one of the things about England and yokel Englishmen that for the life of me I cannot understand. It seems to me – of course, I don’t put it forward that I’m right – that a man might just as well be dead as only know God’s world for twenty miles around him. It argues a poverty of interest in the rest of creation – a sort of mud-turtle existence, that’s neither encouraging nor particularly ornamental.

(*Bid*, 42)

Even worse, as Hatteras soon finds out, the noble Englishmen abstain from travelling for fear to be corrupted by the world outside. The Duke of Glenbarth, father of the Marquis of Beckenham, has a ‘plan for making a nobleman’ (*Bid*, 65) which provides that his son should meet as few strangers as possible. The duke is – so to speak – well-intentioned, but his desire that Beckenham should have ‘all the best traditions of his race kept continually before his eyes’ (*Bid*, 64) while being denied any cultural exchange, betrays ‘an extraordinarily strong and complacent sense of national superiority,’ which Richard Faber observes to have been peculiar to the Briton since the defeat of Napoleon ‘until well into the

twentieth century.⁴ When Hatteras suggests the duke should let his son travel – a culturally debased echo of the Grand Tour – ‘before he settles down’ (*Bid*, 65), he seems to be aware that the nobleman’s overprotective attitude is pernicious for the marquis, as it removes from the latter’s life the need to strive for self-development – a more modern version of the Renaissance self fashioning – which may ultimately cause him to degenerate. In late Victorian Britain the degeneracy of the upper classes, which the increasingly popular Aesthetic movement was largely held responsible for, became a major concern. With their mock of Victorian industry and cultivation of indolence, the aesthetes led an idle and inane life which, it was thought, had perverted their taste and morality. In his *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880), the British zoologist Edwin Ray Lankester, fearing that the British race might be ‘drifting, tending to the condition of intellectual Barnacles or Ascidians,’⁵ explained that in nature as elaboration (development) is triggered by necessity, so degeneration (regression) is the inevitable consequence of satiety:

Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained, seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration; just as an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he suddenly becomes possessed of a fortune; or as Rome degenerated when possessed of the riches of the ancient world. The habit of parasitism clearly acts upon animal organisation in this way. Let the parasitic life once be secured, and away go legs, jaws, eyes, and ears; the active, highly-gifted crab, insect or annelid may become a mere sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs.⁶

Lankester extended his biological theory to the social context, and warned Europe to ‘fear lest the prejudices, preoccupations, and dogmatism of modern

⁴ Richard FABER. *The Vision and the Need: Late Victorian Imperialist Aims*. London: Faber & Faber 1966, 63.

⁵ Edwin Ray LANKESTER. *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*. London: Macmillan & Co. 1880, 60.

⁶ LANKESTER, 33.

civilisation should in any way lead to atrophy and loss of the valuable mental qualities inherited by our young forms from primaeva [sic] man.⁷ As a member of the British establishment, Beckenham becomes a potential threat to Britain's future, for he shows signs of incipient degeneration. No sooner does he venture offshore that he risks drowning – he is rescued by Hatteras (cf. Appendix A – *A Bid for Fortune*), – which becomes a telling metaphor of his inability to survive outside the narrow boundaries his father has imposed to him. As the power of the British Empire reached its peak, Britain had to face the alarming phenomenon – in actual fact, more perceived than real – of the intellectual and physical decay of its inhabitants. It was a standing opinion that Britons were no longer the strong enterprising men that had built the largest empire in history. Indeed, at the turn of the century fantasies of racial decline and degeneration were intensified by 'the difficulty in raising sufficiently healthy recruits amongst the population of London for the Boer War of 1899-1902.'⁸ Thus, when the duke eventually consents to Hatteras's request, the Australian may be credited with having providentially saved Beckenham's life twice – once from the sea, once from prospective degeneration – and, at least on a synecdochic level, the future of Britain. In fact, Hatteras's "therapy" works, and when the marquis is put on his mettle, he proves himself to be an even more enterprising and brave man than Hatteras. Imprisoned in Nikola's building in Port Said, the couple of men resolve to batter down the door, fight their gaolers and escape; Hatteras at first fears that his inexperienced friend might not be up to the task, but the marquis reassures him:

⁷ LANKESTER, 61.

⁸ Sally LEDGER and Roger LUCKHURST, Eds. *The Fin de Siècle. A Reader in Cultural History c.1880-1900*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP 2000, xvi.

'I've a good mind to try it,' I said; 'but in that case, remember, it will probably mean a hand-to-hand fight on the other side, and, unarmed, and weak as we are, we shall be pretty sure to get the worst of it.'

'Never mind that,' my intrepid companion replied, with a confidence in his voice that I was very far from feeling. 'In for a penny, in for a pound; even if we're killed it couldn't be worse than being buried alive in here.'

(*Bid*, 116-117)

On hearing that, Hatteras must have felt relieved. He had recently been to see his old uncle and cousin in England, and had a living proof of what the British society might become if the degenerative process were not quickly reversed. The old man lives in the English countryside, in a stately mansion surrounded by a wonderful park, which at first seems just a suitable residence for a noble member of the glorious British race.⁹ Hatteras, however, is soon disappointed to find that the splendour of the place is spoiled by the neglect in which it is kept, and that its inhabitants are in keeping with the general air of misery and gloom.¹⁰ He soon

⁹ 'There was to my mind something indescribably peaceful and even sad about that view, a mute sympathy with the Past that I could hardly account for, seeing that I was Colonial born and bred. For the first time since my arrival in England the real beauty of the place came home upon me. I felt as if I could have looked for ever on the quiet and peaceful spot. [...]

Leaving the shelter of the trees, I opened on to as beautiful a park as the mind of man could imagine. A herd of deer were grazing quietly just before me, a woodman was eating his dinner in the shadow of an oak; but it was not upon deer or woodman that I looked, but at the house that stared at me across the undulating sea of grass.

It was a noble building, of grey stone, in shape almost square, with many curious buttresses and angles. The drive ran up to it with a grand sweep, and upon the green that fronted it some big trees reared their stately heads. In my time I'd heard a lot of talk about the stately homes of England, but this was the first time I had ever set eyes on one. And to think that this was my father's birthplace, the house where my ancestors had lived for centuries! I could only stand and stare at it in sheer amazement' (*Bid*, 43-45).

¹⁰ 'My mind once made up, however, off I went, crossed the park, and made towards the front door. On nearer approach, I discovered that everything showed the same neglect I had noticed at the lodge. The drive was overgrown with weeds; no carriage seemed to have passed along it for ages. Shutters enclosed many of the windows, and where they did not, not one but several panes were broken. [...]

An old man [i.e. the butler], whose years could hardly have totalled less than seventy years, stood before me, dressed in a suit of solemn black, almost green with age. [...] A nobler hall no one could wish to possess, but brooding over it was the same air of poverty and neglect I had noticed all about the place. [...]

He [i.e. the uncle], like his servant, was dressed entirely in black, with the exception of a white tie, which gave his figure a semi-clerical appearance. His face was long and somewhat pinched, his chin and upper lip were shaven, and his snow-white,

discovers that his relative is only a miserly and covetous old man, who shows him some civility only on learning that he is well-off. The Australian's disappointment turns to horror when his cousin, the freakish Gwendoline is introduced (cf. 2.5.5.). The girl seems to offer a living proof of the late Victorian theory that moral deformity could be genetically transmitted and turn into physical monstrosity, which, it was thought, could finally bring the British race to extinction.¹¹ What most horrifies Hatteras is that Gwendoline is recognized by her father as his worthy descendant. The old man introduces her as his 'beautiful daughter' and claims that she is 'fit to be a prince's bride' with, in Hatteras's words, 'inhuman merriment' (*Bid*, 52). One might suspect that the uncle is only feigning love in order to persuade his nephew to give him the £1,000 which he purportedly wants to use 'to keep her out of the grave' (*Bid*, 53). However, the old man seems to love his daughter in earnest, as when she is accidentally drowned in a pond, he presently dies of a broken heart on learning the news (cf. *Bid*, 206). Boothby conveniently uses this tragedy to ward off the dangerous prospect that Britain might one day be inhabited only by freaks, and the British race ultimately die out. At the end of *A Bid for Fortune*, Hatteras inherits both wealth and title (a baronetcy) from his uncle; the Australian settles in his uncle's mansion for good and becomes the only perpetuator of his noble lineage. At the root of this narrative ploy lies an historical scepticism: many Britons in the 1890s doubted whether Britain might be able to cure itself successfully from degeneracy. The

close-cropped whiskers ran in two straight lines from his jaw up to the level with his piercing, hawk-like eyes. In a low, monotonous voice he bade me welcome, and pointed to a chair, himself remaining standing' (*Bid*, 46).

¹¹ As Hurley summarizes it, according to the degeneration theory, 'heredity was not the vehicle of progress: it was an invisible source of contamination, with the infection jumping across bodies, across generations, and manifesting itself in visible physical deformity. While the evolution from animal to human, from savage to modern, had taken place gradually, over an unthinkable span of time, degeneration was rapid and fatal. A family line could suffer extinction in four generations, hardly more than a human lifetime; and a culture, too, could sicken and die almost as quickly.' Kelly HURLEY. *The Gothic Body. Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin De Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1996, 66.

perverted and enfeebled British race, it was maintained, could be reinvigorated only through an injection of manliness that had to come from the outside. Continually exposed, from his early days, to a harsher climate and a wilder life, the colonial-born citizen of the Empire could grow up into a man who '[combined] the intellectual maturity of the Westerner with a physical and emotional vigor no longer found in the ageing West.'¹² Boothby brings forward his motherland as a possible solution to Britain's constitutional problems, as Kipling, with his literary Anglo-Indian type, was doing with his. In order to survive Britain had to renew both its body politic and the physical body of its citizen. It could fulfil one task by means of incorporating the "man of the frontier" – or the 'Coming Man,' as Robert Dixon has it¹³ – into its system; and the other, by sending its men to its colonies, where they would be reinvigorated. In *A Bid for Fortune* Hatteras satisfies just this double need. By replacing his degenerate uncle, he reverses 'the decline in his own family line;' by taking Beckenham with him in his adventurous journey to Australia, he makes the young man a sturdy Briton and thus makes Englishmen "fit" to sustain their heritage of Englishness.¹⁴

However, *A Bid for Fortune* remains the only novel of the series starring a healthy male protagonist. The "heroes" of the rest of the novels – all of them British – show signs of the degeneration that affects their country and, although at first they appear to be no less sturdy than Hatteras (cf. 2.5.2.), during their adventures they are taken ill, usually more than once, and even faint¹⁵ –

¹² ARATA, 159.

¹³ Robert DIXON. *Writing the Colonial Adventure: Race, Gender and Nation in Anglo Australian Popular Fiction, 1875-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1995, 165.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bruce faints and is presently taken ill in Pekin (*Nikola*, 78-79). He faints also after witnessing preternatural events in the Tibetan monastery (*Nikola*, 166), and gets a 'burning fever' after falling in a river (*Nikola*, 194). Pennethorne is taken ill twice in Australia; he is once nursed by Ben Garmand (*Lust*, 4), once by a certain Mr. Gibbs and his wife (*Lust*, 15). He also faints just after the battle against the Matabele (*Lust*, 171). As the experiment on Don Miguel approaches its end, Ingleby is caught 'in a high state of

traditionally a prerogative of the weaker sex. Bruce is taken ill in China, apparently due to a wild climate to which, in spite of his many adventures in the East, he seems not to have got accustomed yet.¹⁶ This contradicts the theory in *A Bid for Fortune* that Britons can be reinvigorated by exposure to wild climates, but it is a contradiction that was part and parcel of the debate over degeneration. As Arata points out, ‘by century’s close Darwin’s work was being invoked to support the claim that a change of locale might reinvigorate a species or race, just as it had earlier been used, under the pressure of different cultural needs, to back the opposite conclusion.’¹⁷ The adventure of Bruce and Nikola in the Far East also arouses fears of reverse colonization, in a period when the so-called “Yellow Peril” scare was beginning to spread. The massive immigration of Chinese and Japanese workers to Europe and the U.S.A. which began in the last quarter of the century, it was thought, could disturb the balance of power among the Western countries and pave the way to colonization in reverse. Although Bruce’s remarks on China are never flattering, it is significant that he openly vents his racist feelings only *after* having been taken ill in Tientsin. As he walks the crowded streets of the city in Gladys’s company, he observes:

Beggars in all degrees of loathsomeness, carrying the scars of almost every known ailment upon their bodies, and in nine cases out of ten not only able but desirous of presenting us with a replica of the disease, swarmed round us, and pushed and jostled us as we walked. Add to this the fact that at least once in every few yards we were assailed with scornful cries and expressions that would bring a blush to the cheek of the most blasphemous coalheaver [*sic*] in existence, accompanied by gestures which made my

fever’ (*Experiment*, 131), and just before the end of the story, he loses consciousness: ‘I suppose I must have fainted, for when I returned to my senses once more, I found myself seated on the top of the stairs, and Consuelo’s arms about me’ (*Experiment*, 156).

¹⁶ One of Nikola’s partners, Mr. Edgehill, observes, as he looks at Bruce: ‘Eyes bright, hands shaky – the old thing, I suppose?’ Then on knowing that the man has been ill, he concludes: ‘Too much Pekin air. [...] This beastly country would make an Egyptian mummy turn up his toes’ (*Nikola*, 94).

¹⁷ ARATA, 158.

hands itch to be upon the faces of those who practised them. Mix up with all this the sights and smells of the foulest Eastern city you can imagine, add to it the knowledge that you are despised and hated by the most despicable race under the sun, fill up whatever room is left with the dust that lies on a calm day six inches deep upon the streets, and in a storm – and storms occur on an average at least three times a week – covers one from head to foot with a coating of the vilest impurity, you will have derived but the smallest impression of what it means to take a walk in the streets of Pekin. To the Englishman who has never travelled in China this denunciation may appear a little extravagant. My regret, however, is that personally I do not consider it strong enough.

(*Nikola*, 86)

That the British race was particularly inclined to ‘pride of colour and prejudice of race,’¹⁸ as the historian William Winwood Reade observed, hardly accounts for Bruce’s overreaction. What Boothby here depicts is the late Victorian paranoia that Britons might be unfit for colonial enterprise. Bruce is defeated and rendered harmless by the land that, on a symbolic level, he has come to subdue – by stealing its most precious secrets, a form of exploitation that potentially paves the way for conquest and colonization.

Ironically enough, it is the ‘slimly-built’ Nikola, not the “strong” male protagonists, who would make a perfect colonizer. In spite of his ‘sallow face,’ the doctor never gets ill, and nobody can stand his pace. At least in the first two novels, Boothby constructs much of the villain’s power on his skill to anticipate his victims wherever they are (cf. 2.2.). If Nikola is one of the most feared men in the world, as Boothby is never tired of emphasizing, one of the main reasons is that one can never be too confident that the doctor is not in one’s whereabouts. It might be enough to adduce Hatteras’s shock, in *Farewell, Nikola*, when he suddenly sees the doctor approach him while he is sitting in Saint Mark’s Square,

¹⁸ Quoted in FABER, 67.

five years after their last encounter.¹⁹ Unlike the English ruling classes, Nikola is aware that power comes from knowledge – hardly a nineteenth century doctrine – and seems to have absorbed something from every culture in the whole world. The impressive collection of international weapons that Hatteras finds in Nikola's laboratory in Port Said²⁰ may be taken as an eloquent sign of the doctor's enormous cultural curiosity. Also, there is evidence that the doctor can speak at least three languages and easily pass off as an English gentleman or a Chinese (cf. Appendix B), but the characters speak so convincingly (and often) of him as an almost omnipotent man, that the reader is led to believe that he may metamorphose into anyone and anything at will. Nikola's identity, in fact, is so fluid that, before discovering, in *Farewell, Nikola*, that the doctor is of Italian origins, the reader may be misled into thinking that he is English or even East European (cf. 2.5.1. and Foreword).

3.3.2. FRAME OF MIND

Besides being cosmopolitan, Nikola's knowledge is all-embracing, for the doctor does not snub unorthodox sciences such as occultism. However, in spite of his apparently preternatural powers (cf. Appendix B), Nikola is not a wizard; rather, as he points out, someone that has happily married the Western rationalism to the Eastern esotericism: 'All the knowledge that modern science has accumulated I have acquired. The magic of the East I have explored and tested to the uttermost' (*Experiment*, 29). He is the only character of the series that is aware of the importance of canonical knowledge, while recognizing its limits and

¹⁹ At first the Australian cannot believe his eyes: 'I looked at him, looked away, and then looked again. No! there was no room for doubt; the likeness was unmistakable. I should have known him anywhere. He was Doctor Nikola' (*Farewell*, 4).

²⁰ Cf. quotation on page 23.

trying to go beyond them. Except for him, the society depicted by Boothby clings to the old Victorian rationalistic system. In *Farewell, Nikola*, Hatteras and Phyllis discuss about Gertrude's mysterious illness which, no less mysteriously, showed itself in conjunction with Nikola's appearance – a case that closely resembles that of Lucy Westenra in *Dracula*, which might have inspired Boothby.²¹ When the woman mildly suggests that it may not be a coincidence, the Australian, in spite of the uncanny events that he witnessed during his previous misadventure with Dr. Nikola, shows himself sceptical and even derisive:

'God help her,' I said to myself. And then I continued aloud to my wife, 'Doubtless Nikola's extraordinary personality has affected her in some measure, as it does other people, but you are surely not going to jump to the conclusion that because she has spoken to him he is necessarily responsible for her illness? That would be the wildest flight of fancy.'

'And yet, do you know,' she continued, 'I have made a curious discovery.'

'What is that?' I asked, not without some asperity, for, having so much on my mind, I was not in the humour for fresh discoveries.

She paused for a moment before she replied. Doubtless she expected that I would receive it with scepticism, if not with laughter; and Phyllis, ever since I have known her, has a distinct fear of ridicule.

'You may laugh at me if you please,' she said, 'yet the coincidence is too extraordinary to be left unnoticed. Do you happen to be aware, Dick, that Doctor Nikola called at this hotel at exactly eleven o'clock?'

I almost betrayed myself in my surprise. This was the last question I expected her to put to me.

'Yes,' I answered, with an endeavour to appear calm, 'I do happen to be aware of that fact. He merely paid a visit of courtesy to the Don, prior to the other's accepting his hospitality. I see nothing remarkable in that. I did the same myself, if you remember.'

²¹ The aristocratic Lucy Westenra is Dracula's first English victim. While spending her holidays in Whitby, she is bitten by the Count several times during her sleep and during a trance induced by the villain. Although she is visibly weak and feels ill, no one can account for her malady until Van Helsing, come from the Netherlands to examine her, discovers that a vampire is behind it. Nothing in *Farewell, Nikola* suggests that Nikola might have secretly had "vampiric," that is parasitic, relations of any conceivable kind with Gertrude. If the doctor's presence (uncannily) affects the woman's life, it seems to be *malgré lui*.

'Of course, I know that,' she replied, 'but there is more to come. Are you also aware that it was at the very moment of his arrival in the house that Gertrude was taken ill? What do you think of that?'

She put this question to me with an air of triumph, as if it were one that no argument on my part could refute. At any rate, I did not attempt the task.

'I think nothing of it,' I replied. 'You may remember that you once fell down in a dead faint within a few minutes of the vicar's arrival at our house at home. Would you therefore have me suppose that it was on account of his arrival that you were taken ill? Why should you attribute Miss Trevor's illness to Nikola's courtesy to our friend the Don?'

(*Farewell*, 101-102)

Phyllis is clearly suggesting that something preternatural may have happened, but his husband's mocking attitude indicates that the civilized Western man cannot accept that behind an unaccountable event there might be an "irrational" explanation. The late Victorian Western society seems totally unable to face the preternatural. Even the China expert Bruce – and China is presented in the series as the cradle of the uncanny (cf. Appendix A – *Doctor Nikola*) – is compelled to admit that, brave as he is, he cannot cope with the preternatural. Thus, when he has to engage in hand-to-hand combat with the monastery's guardians, he is even relieved: 'it was the creepy, crawly, supernatural [*sic*], business that shook my nerve. When it came to straightforward matter-of-fact fighting I was not afraid of anything' (*Nikola*, 182).²² In *Farewell*, *Nikola* the villain ridicules the doctors that have been summoned to cure Gertrude; with all their knowledge and science they are at a loss when it comes to figuring out her malady. Nikola hints that their failure is due to their unwillingness to go beyond the established orthodox knowledge: 'But that those other blind worms are content to go digging in their mud, when they should be seeking the light in another direction, they could do as much as I have done.' (*Farewell*, 115). This is not the only instance, nor the most eloquent one of Nikola's reprimand of

²² A distinction has been made between 'preternatural' and 'supernatural' in 2.2., note 7.

Western scepticism and narrow-mindedness. As he explains to Bruce the reasons why he means to enter the Tibetan secret sect, the doctor detects the inherent contradiction of the civilized Western man who (blindly) believes only what he has been taught to believe:

'In our own and other countries which we are accustomed to call "civilised" it has long been the habit to ridicule any belief in what cannot be readily seen and understood by the least educated. To the average Englishman there is no occult world. But see what a contradictory creature he is when all is said and done. For if he be devout, he tells you that he firmly believes that when the body dies the soul goes to Heaven, which is equivalent to Olympus, Elysium, Arcadia, Garden of Hesperides, Valhalla, Walhalla, Paradise, or Nirvana, as the case may be. He has no notion, or rather, I think, he will not be able to give you any description of what sort of place his Heaven is likely to be. He has all sorts of vague ideas about it, but though it is part of his religion to believe beyond question that there is such a place, it is all wrapped in shadow of more or less impenetrable depth. To sum it all up, he believes that, while, in his opinion, such a thing as – shall we say Theosophy? – is arrant nonsense, and unworthy of a thought, the vital essence of man has a second and greater being after death. In other words, to put my meaning a little more plainly, it is pretty certain that if you were to laugh at him, as he laughs at the Theosophist and Spiritualist, he would consider that he had very good ground to consider his intelligence insulted. And yet he himself is simply a contradiction contradicted.'

(Nikola, 34-35)

In Kelleran's house, Nikola deals out a second dose after one of his "magic" turns has left his guests speechless:

'What a doubting world it is, to be sure! The same world which ridiculed the notion that there could be anything in vaccination, in the steam engine, in chloroform, the telegraph, the telephone, or the phonograph. For many years has it scoffed at the power of hypnotism! How many of our cleverest scientists fifty years ago could have foretold the discovery of argon, or the possibility of being able to telegraph without the aid of wires? And because the little world of to-day [*sic*] knows these things and has survived the wonder of them, it is convinced it has attained the end of wisdom. The folly of it!'

(Experiment, 28)

Nikola's words remind those of Stoker's Professor Abraham Van Helsing, a contemporary character that shares Nikola's view and *modus operandi*. Van Helsing is the Dutch professor and all-round intellectual – being a doctor of Medicine, Philosophy, Letters and a lawyer as well – that apparently disposes of Count Dracula²³ through his double knowledge of 'traditions' (science) and 'superstitions' (occultism).²⁴ The Western band of men that Van Helsing with outstanding difficulty persuades about the existence of vampires is the same matter-of-fact society that is shocked by Nikola's uncanny powers. The professor is no less rigorous than Nikola in his censure of the stubborn scepticism shown by the civilized man. In his broken English, he rebukes Dr. Seward, who in the novel embodies the man of positive science, for not understanding the reason behind Lucy's loss of blood, that is Dracula's "kiss":

'You do not let your eyes see nor your ears hear, and that which is outside your daily life is not of account to you. Do you not think that there are things which you cannot understand, and yet which are, that some people see things that others cannot? But there are things old and new which must not be contemplated by men's eyes, because they know, or think they know, some things which other men have told them. Ah, it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all, and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain.'²⁵

The story plot of *Dracula* hinges upon the clash between rationalism and the uncanny, and Stoker penned an anonymous and cryptic introductory note where he invites the reader to perform an inquiry into the "meaning and truth" of a

²³ To the attentive reader, the Count's death is far from certain. The vampire is not dispatched according to Van Helsing's instructions: 'cut off his head and burn his heart or drive a stake through it, so that the world may rest from him'. Actually, Dracula's throat is sheared through, and his heart is stabbed with a bowie knife, not a stake. Bram STOKER. *Dracula* (1897), ed. by John Paul RIQUELME. Boston and New York: Bedford and Martin's 2002, 212.

²⁴ *Dracula*, 243.

²⁵ *Dracula*, 200.

story 'almost at variance with the possibilities of the later-day belief.'²⁶ Stoker and Boothby seem to warn the *fin de siècle* readership that, employing a Shakespearean concept that they both use, 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.'²⁷ By reviving this sentence at the turn of the century the two authors perhaps suggested that the distance between the heavenly and earthly realms was not as great as it had been thought for some decades.²⁸ After the publication of *The Origin of Species*, 'evolutionism rapidly superseded creationism, and science replaced theology as the primary means of approaching questions about human origin, nature and destiny.'²⁹ Although Darwin did not aim to negate the role, not to say the existence, of God, many interpreted his findings as the demonstration that scientific research could enable man to free himself from (the concept of) God. This, in turn, could ultimately render unnecessary, or even meaningless, the postulation of a metaphysical reality; with its idea that actual sense experience is the only authentic knowledge, positivism was (and is) a case in point. On the contrary, the manifestation of King Hamlet – in connection with which Prince Hamlet speaks the abovementioned line – reminded the *fin de siècle* audience that the super-terrestrial and terrestrial domains communicated with one another; indeed, the former could affect the life of the latter: the King's appeal that his murder be avenged marks a turning point in the story plot of *Hamlet*. Hamlet asks Horatio to abandon his scepticism and

²⁶ *Dracula*, 26.

²⁷ This slightly inaccurate quotation from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* closes the Preface that Stoker wrote for the first Icelandic edition of *Dracula* (1901). Similarly, Boothby makes Nikola observe in connection to Gertrude's trance, which has led her to the doctor's house (cf. Appendix A – *Farewell, Nikola*), 'there is something in this that passes our philosophy' (*Farewell*, 166).

²⁸ In late Victorian Britain, this was an increasingly popular belief, which is attested by the widespread interest in nineteenth-century metaphysical doctrines such as Spiritualism and Theosophy (see also the above quotation from *Doctor Nikola*).

²⁹ Nicholas RUDDICK. 'The Fantastic Fiction of the Fin de Siècle.' In *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail MARSHALL. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2007, 190.

accept the apparition as true although the friend cannot square it with his frame of mind – significantly, the prince invites him to accept it ‘as a stranger.’³⁰ Similarly, Stoker and Boothby invite their readers to acknowledge the existence of an “other” reality, less visible and prominent, whose mystery is impenetrable, but whose influence on human life is nonetheless tangible. Although a preternatural creature – he was once a man who ‘had dealings with the Evil One’³¹ – Dracula is no less “real” than Van Helsing and his band of vampire hunters; indeed, his threat is all the more feared as he can avail himself of powers unknown, or at least inaccessible, to human beings. Bruce at first calls into question the truthfulness of the preternatural events that he witnessed in the Tibetan monastery - ‘Whether it was that I was hypnotized, and fancied I saw what I am about to describe, or whether it really happened as I say, I shall never know’ (*Nikola*, 166), – but after Nikola’s experiment on Don Miguel, the reader cannot entertain doubts that uncanny events can “actually” happen; as a matter of fact, Ingleby “unquestionably” sees the decrepit Don Miguel turned into a much younger man: ‘It was the countenance of a young man, if you can imagine a man endowed with perpetual youth, and with that youth the cunning, the cruelty, and the vice of countless centuries’ (*Experiment*, 135). After much doubting, the characters in *Dracula* and in the Dr. Nikola series are finally compelled to acknowledge that things like these happen “for real.” However, Van Helsing & Co. use their knowledge for a “conservative” purpose, Nikola for a “revolutionary” one. The former, in fact, fight in order that the international community may be allowed to go on living in the illusion that what cannot be explained does not

³⁰ William SHAKESPEARE. *Hamlet*, ed. by G. R. HIBBARD. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP 1998, 195 (I.V.173).

³¹ *Dracula*, 245.

exist, thus preserving the established social order;³² on the contrary, the latter, through his quest for immortality, aims to radically change not only the social but even the natural order of things.

3.3.3. MORALITY

Nikola's value system is different from, even opposite to, that of the society in which he lives. In *Doctor Nikola* he plainly confesses to Bruce: 'Whatever I do I consider right' (*Nikola*, 30). This ambiguous statement may sound a parodic inversion of the traditional value system, as it may mean that Nikola's only condition for considering something right is that he did it, when of course the norm is that one should only do what one considers right. In order that any doubt may be dispelled, and that it is clear enough that between the two systems there is an unbridgeable gap, Nikola adds: 'Whatever you [i.e. Bruce] might do, in nine cases out of ten, I should consider wrong' (*Nikola*, 30).

Nikola's quest for immortality is exposed as immoral and against the law of God all through the series. The experiment that he conducts in his laboratory in Allerdeyne Castle is contrary to Don Miguel's will. The only but quite significant words that the old man pronounces show that Nikola's intention to prolong life unnaturally is pure folly. To Ingleby, who has just assured him that soon he will be better, Don Miguel replies:

'If to be still alive is to be better, then I suppose I must be,' he answered, in a tone that was almost one of regret; and then continued, 'The days of our age are threescore

³² As late as seven years after Dracula's apparent disposal, which the world has evidently been left in the dark about, Van Helsing claims: 'We want no proofs; we ask none to believe us!' *Dracula*, 369.

years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years, yet is their strength but labour and sorrow; labour and sorrow – aye, labour and sorrow.’

(*Experiment*, 66)

Boothby makes Don Miguel paraphrase the Psalmist,³³ as if to endow the old man’s words with the unquestionable truth of the Holy Bible and thus stress the blasphemy of Nikola’s deed. Ingleby might be recalling them when, just before starting the experiment and looking at Don Miguel lying on his bed, he is haunted by doubts about the moral legitimacy of the enterprise. The man who at first felt ‘the blood tingling through [his] veins with new life and strength’ (*Experiment*, 34) at the prospect of working with the brilliant Nikola, now wonders: ‘Should the experiment be successful, how would it affect the world? Would it prove a blessing or a curse?’ (*Experiment*, 99). This happens at a time when Ingleby and the reader are still unaware that Nikola has already used three men as guinea-pigs in as many previous unsuccessful experiments, during which they were accidentally killed.³⁴ According to the human law, Nikola should be charged at least with manslaughter, but the doctor considers himself above any law. When Ingleby puts in jeopardy the success of the experiment to help Consuelo, and tries to apologize, Nikola menacingly warns him: ‘I would willingly sacrifice a thousand girls to accomplish the great object I have in view’ (*Experiment*, 104). That the experiment eventually fails seems but the inevitable consequence of a foolish enterprise that has ‘outraged nature’ (*Experiment*, 153). Nikola manages to rejuvenate Don Miguel’s body but destroys his brain, so that the old man reverts to the condition of an animal and ultimately dies falling from the castle’s

³³ Psalm 90 reads: ‘The dayes of our yeres *are* three-score yeres and ten, and if by reason of strength they *be* fourscore yeres, yet is their strength labour and sorrow: for it is soone cut off, and we flie away’ (AV).

³⁴ As Nikola will later reveal: ‘I have made the attempt three times before, and on each occasion my man has died simply through a moment’s inattention on the part of my assistant’ (*Experiment*, 97).

battlements in a bestial fit of fury; Boothby seems once more to rehearse the ancient adage that when man plays God only tragedy can ensue. A novel Dr. Frankenstein, Nikola has crossed the boundaries imposed by the divinity and doomed to damnation his creature's soul, which Ingleby "sees" 'fight against the effect of man's prying into what should have been the realms of the unknowable' (*Experiment*, 153). Don Miguel's countenance reveals that he is no longer under the grace of God; as a terrified Ingleby observes, the old man's face is 'so terrible, so demoniacal I might say, that I involuntarily shrank from it' (*Experiment*, 135). Don Miguel's transformation reminds that of R. L. Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde. The Spaniard and the English doctor both revert to younger, more vigorous, but at the same time more atavistic creatures. There is something unexplainable in them that, paraphrasing Ingleby's words, causes revulsion (*Experiment*, 135) – at first sight Hyde gives 'an impression of deformity without any nameable malformation' and arouses 'disgust, loathing and fear'³⁵ which his displeasing physical traits and manners cannot however account for. Yet, in the series Don Miguel is not the only, nor the most striking, instance of atavistic regression. In *Farewell, Nikola*, without any apparent reason but revenge, the doctor mesmerizes another Spaniard, Don Martinos. In a revelatory dream, Hatteras sees Martinos as 'no longer a human being, but an animal' (*Farewell*, 147):

He uttered horrible noises in his throat, that were not unlike the short, sharp bark of a wolf, and when Nikola bade him move he crawled upon the floor like a dog. After that he retreated to a corner, where he crouched and glowered upon his master, as if he were prepared at any moment to spring upon him and drag him down. As one throws a bone to a dog so did Nikola toss him food. He devoured it ravenously, as would a starving cur.

³⁵ Robert Louis STEVENSON. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and Other Tales of Terror* (1886), ed. by Robert MIGHALL. London: Penguin 2003, 16.

There was foam at the corners of his mouth, and the light of madness in his eyes.
(*ibid.*)

Through the descriptions of Don Miguel and Don Martinos, Boothby overtly plays with the post-Darwinian fear that ‘if humans derived from beasts, then they might still be abhuman entities, not yet “fully evolved,” not yet “fully human.”’³⁶ Also, as Lankester explained, evolution could be followed by ‘devolution’ (cf. 3.3.1.). H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1895) famously struck this nerve in the 1890s readership.³⁷ Moreau’s experiments make the boundaries between human and animal blur to the extent that it becomes impossible to tell one element from the other – when Prendick first sees the Leopard-man, he claims: ‘What on earth was he, – man or beast?’³⁸ Prendick is soon horrified at the thought that Moreau’s creatures might once have been human beings, though he is later assured – if the word can be used – that the doctor’s only experiments are on beasts. Read as it originally was in the 1890s, Nikola, with his experiments on human beings, must have appeared even more frightening, as it was the proximity between human and animal, the prospective indistinguishability of the two, that aroused hysteria. Nikola’s freaks (cf. 2.5.5.) are horrifying not because they are physically loathsome, but because despite their subhuman traits, they are allowed to live with Nikola, a “normal” human being. As Hatteras’s description reveals, Nikola’s laboratory in Port Said is a place where human and animal mix, and yet part of its furniture recalls the sitting-room of an ‘old English manor house,’ the English “hearth.” The rather lengthy description is worth reporting in its entirety:

³⁶ HURLEY, 56.

³⁷ The book’s thrilling subhead, ‘A Possibility,’ is eloquent of Wells’s skill as a sensational writer.

³⁸ H. G. Wells. *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. New York: Stone & Kimball 1896, 77.

To begin with, round the walls were arranged, at regular intervals, more than a dozen enormous bottles, each of which contained what looked, to me, only too much like human specimens pickled in some light-coloured fluid resembling spirits of wine. Between these gigantic but more than horrible receptacles were numberless smaller ones holding other and even more dreadful remains; while on pedestals and stands, bolt upright and reclining, were skeletons of men, monkeys, and quite a hundred sorts of animals. The intervening spaces were filled with skulls, bones, and the apparatus for every kind of murder known to the fertile brain of man. There were European rifles, revolvers, bayonets, and swords; Italian stiletos, Turkish scimitars, Greek knives, Central African spears and poisoned arrows, Zulu knobkerries, Afghan yataghans, Malay kris, Sumatra blowpipes, Chinese dirks, New Guinea head – catching implements, Australian spears and boomerangs, Polynesian stone hatchets, and numerous other weapons the names of which I cannot now remember. Mixed up with them were implements for every sort of wizardry known to the superstitious; from old-fashioned English love charms to African Obi sticks, from spiritualistic planchettes to the most horrible of Fijian death potions.

In the centre of the wall, opposite to where we stood, was a large fireplace of the fashion usually met with in old English manor-house, and on either side of it a figure that nearly turned me sick with horror. That on the right hand was apparently a native of Northern India, if one might judge by his dress and complexion. He sat on the floor in a constrained attitude, accounted for by the fact that his head, which was at least three times too big for his body, was so heavy as to require an iron tripod with a ring or collar in the top of it to keep it from overbalancing him and bringing him to the floor. To add to the horror of this awful head, it was quite bald; the skin was drawn tensely over the bones, and upon this great veins stood out as large macaroni stems.

On the other side of the hearth was a creature half-ape and half-man – the like of which I remember to once have seen in a museum of monstrosities in Sydney, where, if my memory serves me, he was described upon the catalogue as a Burmese monkey-boy. He was chained to the wall in somewhat the same fashion as we had been, and was chattering and scratching for all the world like a monkey in a Zoo.

But horrible as these things were, the greatest surprise of all was yet to come. For, standing at the heavy oaken table in the centre of the room, was a man I should have known anywhere if I had been permitted half a glance at him. It was Dr. Nikola.

When we entered he was busily occupied with a scalpel, dissecting an animal strangely resembling a monkey. On the table, and watching the work upon which his master was engaged, sat his constant companion, the same fiendish black cat I have mentioned elsewhere. While at the end nearest us, standing on tiptoe, the better to see what was going on, was an albino dwarf, scarcely more than two feet eight inches high.

(Bid, 119-120)

The semantic fields here become mixed up as the 'specimens' – a word that is usually associated to the animal kingdom – are described as 'human.' The skeletons of monkeys and other sorts of animals are scattered on the floor along with those of human beings. Nikola is caught in the act of dissecting an animal that is not, but strangely resembles, a monkey, which might frightfully suggest the creation of another 'half-ape and half-man' creature. However, the paroxysm of hysteria is reached when in Allerdeyne Castle Nikola introduces to Ingleby the freaks as his 'patients' and, in an unbearable parody of the English hearth, as his 'happy family':

Anything more gruesome could scarcely have been discovered or even imagined. Try to picture for yourself the inmates of a dozen freak museums, and the worst of the monstrosities of which you have ever read or heard, and you will only have some dim notion of the folk whom Nikola so ironically called his patients. Some were like men, but not men as we know them; some were like monkeys, but of a kind I had never seen before, and which I sincerely hope I may never see again; there were things, dull, flabby, faceless things – but there, I can go no farther. To attempt to describe them to you in detail is a work of which my pen is quite incapable.

'A happy family,' said Nikola, advancing into the room, 'and without exception devoted to their nurse, Ah-Win, yonder, who, as you are aware, in a measure shares their afflictions with them. Some day [*sic*], if you care about it, I should be only too pleased to give you a lecture, with demonstrations, such as you would get in no medical school in the world.'

Though I have attempted to set down his offer word for word, I have but the vaguest recollection of it; for, long before he had finished speaking, I had staggered, sick and faint with horror, into the corridor outside. Not for the wealth of England would I have remained there a minute longer. To see those loathsome creatures fawning round Nikola, clutching at his legs and stroking his clothes, was too much for me, and I verily believe an hour in that room would have had the effect of making me an idiot like themselves. A few moments later Nikola joined me in the passage.

'You are very easily affected, my dear Ingleby,' he said, with one of his peculiar smiles. 'I should have thought your hospital experience would have endowed you with stronger nerves. My poor people in yonder –'

‘Don’t, don’t,’ I cried, holding up my hand in entreaty. ‘Don’t speak to me of them. Don’t let me think of them. If I do, I believe I shall go mad. My God! are you human, that you can live with such things about you?’

(*Experiment*, 92)

In these descriptions Boothby performs a traumatic displacement, and depicts his “good” characters as they try to redress the balance: the right place where a freak should be is ‘in a Zoo,’ as Hatteras suggests, or one of the many ‘freak museums’ that the civilized world used for its entertainment, as Ingleby does. These creatures are never considered human beings, and pity is never shown for their unfortunate condition. However, as Andrew Smith explains in connection with the emblematic case of Joseph Carrey Merrick,³⁹ this kind of persons were not discussed in medical terms, not even by doctors and medicine scholars. The deformed man was ‘perceived as monster from science to fiction [...], or as a beast [...] or described in tones of moral outrage.’⁴⁰ The characters in the Dr. Nikola series, not unlike Sir Frederick Treves – the doctor who took care of Merrick, – can account for the condition of the freaks only in Gothic terms, where only ‘the horrors of monstrosity’ are highlighted.⁴¹

³⁹ Joseph Carey Merrick (1862-1890) was a young English man whose body had been disfigured, as many assume, by the Proteus syndrome, ‘a disturbance of cell growth including benign tumours under the skin, overgrowth of the body [...] and overgrowth of finger’ (<http://www.medterms.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=5087> – 12/11/2009). Part of his life was spent working as a freak attraction under the stage name of ‘The Elephant Man.’ A fairly faithful account of Merrick’s life is given in David Lynch’s namesake movie (1980), starring John Hurt as Merrick.

⁴⁰ Andrew SMITH. *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle*. Manchester: Manchester UP 2004, 45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

3.3.4. SOCIETY

In the series, the characters show no concern even for the plights of the poor and destitute in London, who are seen but as cause and consequence of the degenerative urban blight. In fact, with its unwholesome air and general filth, the urban slum was described as a place where degeneration among the lower classes could easily spread. The Scottish physician James Cantlie noted in 1885:

It is sad to contemplate that now-a-days honest labour brings with it of necessity illness and misery, instead of health and comfort – that the close confinement and the foul air of our cities are shortening the life of the individual, and raising up a puny and ill-developed race.⁴²

In the late Victorian period a shoal of journalists and authors undertook the social mission to bring the condition of the urban poor to the attention of the general public. Their accounts sometimes appeared at first cold and distant – as Arthur G. Morrison’s social novels – or even disrespectful – as with George R. Sims’s journalistic enquiries; – yet they concealed a passionate involvement. As Arata observes, Morrison’s blunt realism was meant to be ‘a tool for shaming readers into recognising their complicity in the everyday oppressions of contemporary life;’⁴³ in the Preface to his *How the Poor Live* (1883), a collection of articles that had been published in 1881, Sims advised: ‘If an occasional lightness of treatment seems to the reader out of harmony with so grave a subject, I pray that he will remember the work was undertaken to enlist the sympathies of a class not generally given to the study of “low life.”’⁴⁴ Other times

⁴² James CANTLIE. *Degeneration Amongst Londoners* (1885); the online text is available at: <http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications/degeneration.htm> (12/11/2009).

⁴³ Stephen ARATA. ‘Realism.’ In MARSHALL, 179.

⁴⁴ George R. SIMS. *How the Poor Live* (1883); online text at: <http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications2/howthepoorlive-1.htm> (12/11/2009).

the style was blatantly designed to solicit emotional participation, as in the Reverend Andrew Mearns's pamphlet *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* (1883),⁴⁵ where the clergyman tries to convey to the reader the unspeakable suffering of his unfortunate fellow-citizens. The Dr. Nikola series, on the contrary, may be included in the group of works where 'the "residuum" are more feared than pitied.'⁴⁶ Boothby's description of the London slums is quite derivative of the late Victorian social journalism, albeit in Boothby the sympathetic view is replaced with a feeling of horror and disgust. A comparison between the 'The Condition in Which They Live' section in *The Bitter Cry* and two excerpts from *The Lust of Hate*, both worth quoting in full, reveals how Mearnes's and Boothby's descriptions reach opposite effects in spite of their general similarity (my italics throughout):

We do not say the condition of their homes, for how can those places be called homes, compared with which the lair of a wild beast would be a comfortable and healthy spot? Few who will read these pages have any conception of what these pestilential human rookeries are, where tens of thousands are crowded together amidst horrors *which call to mind what we have heard of the middle passage of the slave ship*. To get into them you have to penetrate courts reeking with poisonous and malodorous gases arising from accumulations of sewage and refuse scattered in all directions and often flowing beneath your feet; courts, many of them which the sun never penetrates, which are never visited by a breath of fresh air, and which rarely know the virtues of a drop of cleansing water. You have to ascend rotten staircases, which threaten to give way beneath every step, and which, in some places, have already broken down, leaving gaps that imperil the limbs and lives of the unwary. You have to grope your way along dark and filthy passages swarming with vermin. Then, if you are not driven back by the intolerable stench, you may gain admittance to the dens in which these thousands of beings *who belong, as much as you, to the race for whom Christ died*, herd together. *Have you pitied the poor creatures* who sleep under railway arches, in carts or casks, or under any shelter which they can find in the open air? You will see that they are to be envied in comparison

⁴⁵ [Andrew MEARNES]. *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor*. London: James Clarke, 1883.

⁴⁶ LEDGER and LUCKHURST, xv.

with those whose lot it is to seek refuge here. Eight feet square – that is about the average size of very many of these rooms. Walls and ceiling are black with the accretions of filth which have gathered upon them through long years of neglect. It is exuding through cracks in the boards overhead; it is running down the walls; it is everywhere. What goes by the name of a window is half of it stuffed with rags or covered by boards to keep out wind and rain; the rest is so begrimed and obscured that scarcely can light enter or anything be seen outside. Should you have ascended to the attic, where at least some approach to fresh air might be expected to enter from open or broken window, you look out upon the roofs and ledges of lower tenements, and discover that the sickly air which finds its way into the room has to pass over the putrefying carcasses of dead cats or birds, or viler abominations still. The buildings are in such miserable repair as to suggest the thought that if the wind could only reach them they would soon be toppling about the heads of their occupants. As to furniture – you may perchance discover a broken chair, the tottering relics of an old bedstead, or the mere fragment of a table; but more commonly you will find rude substitutes for these things in the shape of rough boards resting upon bricks, an old hamper or box turned upside down, or more frequently still, nothing but rubbish and rags.

Every room in these rotten and reeking tenements houses a family, often two. In one cellar a sanitary inspector reports finding a father, mother, three children and four pigs! In another room a missionary found a man ill with small pox, his wife just recovering from her eighth confinement, and the children running about half naked and covered with dirt. Here are seven people living in one underground kitchen, and a little dead child lying in the same room. Elsewhere is a *poor widow*, her three children, and a child who had been dead thirteen days. Her husband, who was a cabman, had shortly before committed suicide. Here lives a widow and her six children, including one daughter of 29, another of 21, and a son of 27. Another apartment contains father, mother and six children, two of whom are ill with scarlet fever. In another nine brothers and sisters, from 29 years of age downwards, live, eat and sleep together.

Here is a mother who turns her children into the street in the early evening because she lets her room for immoral purposes until long after midnight, when *the poor little wretches* creep back again if they have not found some miserable shelter elsewhere. Where there are beds they are simply heaps of dirty rags, shavings or straw, but for the most part these miserable beings huddle together upon the filthy boards. The tenant of this room is a widow, who herself occupies the only bed, and lets the floor to a married couple for 2s. 6d. per week. In many cases matters are made worse by the unhealthy occupations followed by those who dwell in these habitations. Here you are choked as you enter by the air laden with particles of the superfluous fur pulled from the skins of rabbits, rats, dogs and other animals in their preparation for the furrier. Here the smell of paste and of drying match-boxes, mingling with other sickly odours, overpowers you; or it may be the fragrance of stale fish or vegetables, not sold on the previous day, and kept in

the room overnight. Even when it is possible to do so the people seldom open their windows, but if they did it is questionable whether much would be gained, for the external air is scarcely less heavily charged with poison than the atmosphere within. Wretched as these rooms are they are beyond the means of many who wander about all day, *picking up a living as they can*, and then take refuge at night in one of the common lodging-houses that abound. These are often the resorts of thieves and vagabonds of the lowest types, and some are kept by receivers of stolen goods. In the kitchen men and women may be seen cooking their food, washing their clothes, or lolling about smoking and gambling. In the sleeping room are long rows of beds on each side, sometimes 60 or 80 in one room. In many cases both sexes are allowed to herd together without any attempt to preserve the commonest decency. But there is a lower depth still. Hundreds cannot even scrape together the two-pence required to secure them the privilege of herding in those sweltering common sleeping rooms, and so they huddle together upon the stairs and landings, where it is no uncommon thing to find six or eight in the early morning. *That people condemned to exist under such conditions take to drink and fall into sin is surely a matter for little surprise. We may rather say, as does one recent and reliable explorer, that they are 'entitled to credit for not being twenty times more depraved than they are.'* One of the *saddest* results of this over-crowding is the inevitable association of honest people with criminals. Often is the family of an honest working man compelled to take refuge in a thieves' kitchen; in the houses where they live their rooms are frequently side by side, and continual contact with the very worst of those who have come out of our gaols is a matter of necessity. There can be no question that numbers of habitual criminals would never have become such, had they not by force of circumstances been packed together in these slums with those who were hardened in crime. *Who can wonder that every evil flourishes in such hotbeds of vice and disease? Who can wonder that little children taken from these hovels to the hospital cry, when they are well, through dread of being sent back to their former misery? Who can wonder that young girls wander off into a life of immorality, which promises release from such conditions. Who can wonder that the public-house is 'the Elysian field of the tired toiler'?*⁴⁷

[I] turned to question a *filthy little gutter urchin*, who, with bare feet and chattering teeth, was standing beside me.

'Where is 23, my lad?' I inquired. 'Can you take me to it?'

'Twenty-three, sir?' said the boy. 'That's where Crooked Billy lives, sir. You come along with me and I'll show you the way.'

'Go ahead then,' I answered, and the boy thereupon bolted into the darkness of the alley before which we had been standing. I followed him as quickly as I could, but it was a matter of some difficulty, for the court was as black as the Pit of Tophet, and seemed to

⁴⁷ *The Bitter Cry*, 7-12.

twist and turn in every conceivable direction. *A more unprepossessing* place it would have been difficult to find. Half-way down I heard the boy cry out "Hold up, mother!" and before I could stop I found myself in collision with a woman who, besides being unsteady on her legs, reeked *abominably* of gin. Disengaging myself, to the accompaniment of her curses, I sped after my leader, and a moment later emerged into the open court itself. The snow had ceased, and the three-quarter moon, sailing along through swift flying clouds, showed me the surrounding houses. In one or two windows, lights were burning, revealing sights which almost made *my flesh creep with loathing*. In one I could see a woman sewing as if for her very life by the light of a solitary candle stuck in a bottle, while two little children lay asleep, half-clad, on a heap of straw and rags in the corner. On my right I had a glimpse of another room, where the dead body of a man was stretched upon a mattress on the floor, with two old *hags* seated at a table beside it, drinking gin from a black bottle, turn and turn about. The wind whistled mournfully among the roof tops; the snow had been trodden into a *disgusting* slush everywhere, save close against the walls, where it still showed white as silver; while the reflection of the moon gleamed in the icy puddles golden as a spade guinea.

(*Lust*, 53)

The door was opened to me, and I immediately stepped into the grimiest, most evil-smelling passage *it has ever been my ill luck to set foot in*. The walls were soiled and stained almost beyond recognition; the floor was littered with orange peel, paper, cabbage leaves, and garbage of all sorts and descriptions, while the stench that greeted me baffles description. I have never smelled anything like it before, *and I hope I may never do so again*.

The most I can say for the old lady who admitted me is that *she matched her surroundings*. She was short almost to dwarfishness, well-nigh bald, and had lost her left eye. Her dress consisted of a ragged skirt, and in place of a body – I believe that is the technical expression – she wore a man's coat, which gave *a finishing touch of comicality* to the peculiar outline of her figure. As soon as she saw that I had entered, she bade me shut the door behind me and follow her. This I did by means of a dilapidated staircase, in which almost every step was taken at the risk of one's life, to the second floor.

(*Lust*, 54)

Both authors write of ill-lit and foul-smelling streets and rooms, makeshift furniture, floors covered with garbage, filthy and blackened walls, unsafe ladders, and dead bodies. Yet, while Mearnes's children, whom their mother sent away from home, are 'poor little wretches,' Boothby's barefoot child chattering his teeth

is a 'filthy little gutter urchin;' while Mearnes's woman whose husband committed suicide is a 'poor widow,' Boothby's two women sharing a room with a dead body are 'old hags;' while Mearnes claims that the condition of the dwellers of the slums should be even more pitied than that of the homeless, the sight of two children lying 'asleep, half-clad, on a heap of straw and rags in the corner' makes Pennethorne's flesh 'creep with loathing;' and so on. In Mearnes's narrative surfaces a desire to approach the poor, while in Boothby's the tendency is to distance oneself from that world. Hatteras's worry that the "good" London may be contaminated by the "bad" one (what has been labelled as 'the cesspool,' cf. 2.4.1.) signals that the well-off classes fear a collapse of social boundaries which, in their view, would lead to moral decline; if happiness and richness come into contact with misery and poverty, Hatteras seems to say, the former will be infected by the latter, as a good fruit rots when placed near a rotten one. As is the case with the freaks, Boothby's middle-class characters seem too worried about shielding themselves from the threatening society to feel sorry for anyone but themselves.

Yet, the whole society is crossed by the same classism, as the middle classes are despised in turn by the upper classes. It seems that the latter accept to mix with the former only under extraordinary circumstances, such as when they have to pay a great debt of gratitude. When Hatteras declares to Wetherell his intentions about Phyllis, the nobleman looks at first outraged and makes himself quite clear about it: 'an alliance with you, sir, is distasteful to me in every possible way. I have other views for my daughter' (*Bid*, 135). In *The Lust of Hate*, Mr. Maybourne never gives vent to his thoughts, yet when he suspects that his daughter is in love with Pennethorne, he '[looks] at her rather anxiously' (*Lust*, 146). Significantly, Boothby lets his male characters be at last accepted within the familial circles of their women only after the former have saved the latter's lives at

least once (cf. 2.5.3.). Until he has saved Phyllis from the danger of Nikola, Hatteras's protest to Wetherell that he is 'an honest and industrious man' (*Bid*, 28) and therefore has a right to marry the young woman is of no avail.

Honesty and industry were part and parcel of Victorian respectability, a value which the middle classes were particularly sensitive to. Of course 'respectability' had less to do with substance than with appearance, as gentlemen were less concerned with their actual virtue than reputation. The work that exposes this Victorian inbuilt hypocrisy best is probably Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Stevenson shows that there is no real difference between the "respectable" and the lower classes but that the former have a name to protect. Jekyll is known to be a most respectable man only because, unlike Hyde, he enjoys his vices 'discreetly and with an eye to maintaining his good name.'⁴⁸ As Stevenson suggests, the blame should not be put on the individual, who is double by nature, but on the order of society which makes the two aspects incompatible and accepts that 'gentlemen may sin so long as appearances are preserved.'⁴⁹ Thus, a man like Jekyll who, in his own words, is 'inclined by nature to industry, fond of the respect of the wise and good among [his] fellow-men' but at the same time has 'a certain impatient gaiety of disposition,' is forced to a 'profound duplicity of life' in order to fulfil his 'impervious desire to carry [his] head high, and wear a more than commonly grave countenance before the public.'⁵⁰ This necessity to keep up appearances can be seen also in the Dr. Nikola series. When Phyllis is abducted, Wetherell thinks about asking the Government's help, but Hatteras stops him by suggesting not to 'open the whole affair' and 'make a big sensation' (*Bid*, 198). Bruce considers himself 'an honourable man' (*Nikola*, 89) and resolves to confess his love for Gladys to her brother-in-law; yet, he

⁴⁸ ARATA, 40.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 55.

never lets him know the real nature of his dealings with Nikola – a man ‘who is very generally feared,’ according to the brother-in-law, and whom the man evidently distrusts (*Nikola*, 90). As he flies from England persuaded that he has killed Bartrand, Pennethorne is frightened at the prospect of spending the rest of his life in jail, but he is equally concerned about ‘what would be said in England when the news got into the paper’ (*Lust*, 109). Although Ingleby can hardly be said to play fair with Doña Consuelo and Don Miguel – he conceals from them the real motive behind the old man’s involvement with Nikola, i.e. his experiment, – he nonetheless tries to present ‘a fairly respectable appearance’ (*Experiment*, 40). Respectability is so important for these characters that they do not give up their gentlemanly manners even in the direst situations – with a comical effect, at least for the modern reader. Just to give some instances, in Port Said, after Beckenham, with Hatteras’s help, has managed to throw off the chain that bound him to the wall, the two men ‘[shake] hands warmly in the dark’ (*Bid*, 115). After Phyllis has been abducted by Nikola, Wetherell is so broken-hearted that Hatteras even ventures to pour him a glass of whisky ‘without asking permission’ (*Bid*, 144)! Just after the shipwreck, as she is swimming in the ocean during a storm, and in a desperate attempt to survive, Agnes receives the news that her uncle has died as if she were comfortably taking tea in a sitting-room: ‘My poor, poor uncle! [...] Can he have perished! Oh, it is too awful!’ (*Lust*, 96).

Respectability was inevitably linked to wealth, as the former largely depended on the latter. This may explain the Victorian obsession with money. Hatteras and Wetherell try to save the £100,000 that Nikola has asked as Phyllis’s ransom by paying him fake money. Note that in doing so they are aware that they are putting the young woman’s life at risk, as Wetherell’s words indicate after the trick is discovered: “Oh, my God, I’ve ruined all!” cried Mr. Wetherell as he put the letter down on the table; “and, who knows? I may have killed my poor

child!” (*Bid*, 192). What Hatteras and Wetherell try to do is to get something at the most convenient price, as if their case obeyed to the market law. In fact, if for Nikola Phyllis is nothing but a bargaining chip, for Hatteras and Wetherell she is something to ‘regain possession of’ (*Bid*, 187). Hatteras’s attitude has hardly changed when, in *Farewell, Nikola*, he refuses to call the best doctors in Europe to cure Gertrude, who is slowly dying of a mysterious illness, on the ground that her father would then feel obliged to repay him the money spent for it. Phyllis’s indignant reply is that he ‘would allow her to die for the sake of a few paltry pounds’ and that he is ‘a money-grabber’ (*Farewell*, 103).

Nikola’s life does not comply with such rules. Being a criminal, he obviously has no reason to be concerned with respectability. Unlike the Victorians, Nikola thinks that social justice is fundamentally unjust, as it is only a means to favour the rich and powerful and thus preserve the privileges of the few. He explains his point of view to Pennethorne, in order to persuade him to yield to his desire to revenge on Bartrand, and get rid of his conscientious horror for crime:

[...] what is crime? A very pliable term, I fancy. For instance, a duke may commit an offence, and escape scot free, when, for the same thing, only under a different name, a costermonger would be sent to gaol for five years. And *vice versa*. A subaltern in a crack regiment may run up tailors’ bills – or any other, for the matter – for several thousands of pounds and decamp without paying a halfpenny of the money, never having intended to do so from the very beginning, while if a chimney sweep were to purloin a bunch of radishes from a tray outside a greengrocer’s window, he would probably be sent to gaol for three months. And yet both are stealing, though I must confess society regards them with very different eyes. Let clergymen and other righteous men say what they will, the world in its heart rather admires the man who has the pluck to swindle, but he must do so on a big scale, and he must do so successfully, or he must pay the penalty of failure.’

(*Lust*, 38)

This cynical social system, Nikola – or rather Boothby? – suggests, encourages a criminal attitude, as everybody is led to fend for himself. Centuries of civilization, it seems, have produced nothing better and more sophisticated than the ancient *lex talionis*: ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth, was the old Hebrew law, and whatever may be said against it, fundamentally it was a just one,’ says Nikola to an astonished Pennethorne (*Lust*, 38). Yet the doctor is not an anarchist, nor a socialist. He stresses the injustices of the world not because he dreams to change it, but only to justify his selfish and criminal behaviour; and, if he aims to subvert the world order, it is only to replace it with his own dominion. In *The Lust of Hate*, Nikola and the anarchists are both suspected of being behind the long series of murders that are plaguing London, but with quite different motives. The chief steward of the ship that is taking Pennethorne to South Africa thinks that behind them there lies the anarchists’ class hate,⁵¹ while Pennethorne is convinced that the doctor must have instigated some men to murder for money, as he has done with him.⁵² In Nikola’s megalomaniac dream, the concerns of the middle classes become petty and insignificant. He has no need to keep up appearances, so he is not afraid of mixing with lower-class people, and even avails himself of their help;⁵³ nor does he have to use money to secure his place in society. The doctor accumulates wealth only to further his

⁵¹ “Well, what I think is that the Anarchists are at the bottom of it all, and I’ll tell you for why. Look at the class of men who were killed. Who was the first? A Major-General in the army, wasn’t he? Who was the second? A member of the House of Lords. Who was the third?”

He looked so searchingly at me that I felt myself quailing before his glance as if he had detected me in my guilt. Who could tell him better than I who the last victim was?

“And the third – well, he was one of these rich men as fattens on Society and the workin’ man, was he not?” (*Lust*, 74).

⁵² ‘The men who actually did the deeds were innocent – here was the real murderer – the man who had instigated and egged them on to crime’ (*Lust*, 64).

⁵³ It may be enough to remind when, in *The Lust of Hate*, Nikola involves in his plan to kill Bartrand a Jewish man living in a London slum. Pennethorne, who has been instructed to meet him, notes that the man is ‘dressed in a black frock coat two sizes too large for him, black trousers that would have fitted a man three times his size, and boots that had been patched and otherwise repaired till their original maker would not have known them again’ (*Lust*, 54).

plan, but he is otherwise rather lavish with it: he forfeits the increased sum of £150,000 that he asked as Phyllis's ransom; sends the young woman a diamond collier as a wedding present; and always offers great sums of money to his helpmates.⁵⁴

If social order and justice is nothing but an illusion to keep the lower classes in their place, the New Imperialist notion of 'the white man's burden' is exposed as an ideological cover that only conceals cynical exploitation. Boothby's protagonists share the belief that the Western, and especially the British, race is the most civilised, and thus the greatest, in the world. Hatteras notes that the Duke of Glenbarth advances towards him 'using that dignified tone that *only* [my italics] an English gentleman can assume with anything approaching success' (*Bid*, 63). Thus it is a precise duty of a Briton to offer his unconditioned help to his fellow countrymen, as Hatteras and Beckenham do in Port Said with some English tourists that are about to be lynched. Although they have behaved foolishly, i.e. they have stubbornly refused to take off their shoes in a mosque, Beckenham avers that they must be helped as 'they are still our countrymen' (*Bid*, 99). It is no less a duty, not to say a religious mission, of the Briton to educate and civilize the 'brutes,' as Pennethorne and his men evidently think as they fight the Matabele. Just before the battle, Pennethorne confesses to feeling superstitious, but Agnes comforts him: "I have prayed to God for you," she said. "He who has protected us before will do so again. Let us do our duty and leave the rest to Him" (*Lust*, 167). After the first averted attack, Mr. Maybourne with relief can state that they have 'taught the brutes a lesson in all

⁵⁴ In order to help him through his adventure in Tibet, Nikola pays Bruce £10,000 (*Nikola*, 23); to Ingleby he promises what the man acknowledges to be a breathtaking sum (*Experiment*, 31). It must be noted that, in spite of this promise, Ingleby ends up as poor as he was at the beginning of the story. As he leaves Allerdeyne Castle with his beloved Consuelo, he recalls: 'I told her of my straitened means, and how hard the struggle would be at first' (*Experiment*, 156). Did Nikola change his mind and refuse to pay Ingleby? or, was Boothby so inattentive to forget about this detail?

conscience' (*Lust*, 169). 'God,' 'duty,' 'brutes,' 'lesson,' and 'conscience' – words such as these indicate that the Britons do not think of the battle as a mere struggle for survival, but rather as a right and benevolent dispensation of justice. So when they are eventually (and providentially) helped by the arrival of the British Army – 'the credit, however, is due to Captain Haviland and his men; but for their timely arrival I fear we should have been done for' (*Lust*, 172) – there can be little doubt that, as Agnes had foreseen, God has been on the side of the white men. However, in the Dr. Nikola series the protagonists' support to the 'white man's burden' ideology never goes beyond a sense of racial superiority; nothing indicates that these men really care for the welfare of the "lower" races. Here as elsewhere, it is Nikola's task to unmask the Victorian hypocrisy: 'I think you will allow, Mr. Hatteras, that half the world is born for the other half to prey upon!' (*Bid*, 37), he tells the Australian as he first encounters him. Of course Hatteras, a citizen of the Empire, cannot admit such a thing; and his reaction reveals that he is quite unprepared to answer such a provocative question: 'I stumbled out some sort of reply, which evidently did not impress [Nikola] very much' (*ibid.*) He hardly appears a convinced supporter of the imperialistic ideology, for if he is not so intellectually honest (or, perhaps, refined) as to agree upon Nikola's words, he is neither willing to take up the New Imperialist challenge to show, as the British statesman Joseph Chamberlain maintained, 'that [the British Empire] adds to the happiness and prosperity of the people' and bring 'security and peace and comparative prosperity to countries that never knew these blessings before.'⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Joseph CHAMBERLAIN. 'The True Conception of Empire' (1897). In LEDGER and LUCKHURST, 137.

3.3.5. SEXUALITY

In a time when romance was used as ‘an antidote to an effeminate modernity,’⁵⁶ it may surprise that Boothby chose just an effeminate (cf. Appendix B), and possibly a homosexual, as the star of his series. In the 1890s, and particularly after the Wilde trials, an effeminate behaviour began to be associated to homosexuality – which ‘in an earlier epoch simply had signalled aristocratic privilege and affectation.’⁵⁷ Although the reader is given no irrefutable evidence that Nikola is actually sexually deviated, there are a few hints that he might. Nikola is said to dress like a perfect gentleman, so much so that ‘the greatest dandy must have admitted that he was irreproachably dressed’ (*Bid*, 7). Since dandies were particularly sensitive to fashion, this might be only a candid compliment; yet, one may ask, why did Boothby choose to implicate a figure, i.e. the dandy, that in the mid 1890s was quite likely to be associated to homosexuality? Even more significantly, when Hatteras tries to comfort Nikola and suggests that he should marry a good woman, the doctor sadly confesses that ‘woman’s love is not for me’ (*Farewell*, 49).⁵⁸ This rather ambiguous sentence might only imply that Nikola is incapable to love at all, but it might as well hint at an unawowed, perhaps repressed, homosexuality.⁵⁹

In the 1890s homosexuality became a major concern. It was often taken to be the main cause (and consequence) of degeneration, and there was a

⁵⁶ ARATA, 89.

⁵⁷ Richard A. KAYE. ‘Sexual Identity at the Fin de Siècle.’ In MARSHALL, 60.

⁵⁸ Also, Bruce once notes that ‘the idea of Nikola and matrimony somehow did not harmonize very well’ (*Nikola*, 53).

⁵⁹ It must be reminded that in late Victorian Britain, homosexuals were taught to consider their sexual inclination as a deviation and a disease which it was their duty to cure by fighting down their immoral desires. In *Sexual Inversion* (1897), the physician Havelock Ellis put the homosexual in the category of the biologically ill-developed human beings, among ‘the congenital idiot, [...] the instinctive criminal, [and] the man of genius.’ The latter case is explored below. Cf. Chris WHITE, Ed. *Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality. A Sourcebook*. London and New York: Routledge 1999, 101.

widespread conviction that, since (most) homosexuals were effeminate, ‘a nation with a large homosexual population [was] an easy prey for a virile foe’.⁶⁰ Ironically, in the Dr. Nikola series it is the masculine Briton that easily falls prey to the effeminate Nikola, and not vice versa. Like many 1890s authors, Boothby faced his readership with the prospect that Britain might be subdued and conquered by an incredibly powerful but no less degenerate enemy – Count Dracula, Dr. Moreau, Professor Moriarty, and even Sherlock Holmes,⁶¹ only to mention some, are all cases in point. For the *fin de siècle* society, that a powerful individual might be a degenerate needed not be a paradox. According to Cesare Lombroso, the ‘man of genius’ was a human being gifted with extraordinary intellectual abilities, whose degradation was only ‘a compensation for considerable development and progress accomplished in other directions.’⁶² Like Moreau, Moriarty and Holmes, Nikola is portrayed as a man of genius not only for what he can accomplish but also because he matches, albeit only in part,

⁶⁰ Graham ROBB. *Strangers. Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century*. London, Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador 2003, 22.

⁶¹ Holmes’s degeneracy is famous, his addiction to cocaine being its most revealing instance. Frederick L. De Naples points out that Holmes’s incredible power finally almost made him a menace for *fin de siècle* Britain: ‘As Ian Ousby notes, “Holmes occupies a position of almost Olympian superiority from which he can pass judgement on the affairs of men.” While Holmes’s *Strand* audience may once have felt at ease with his use of science to solve mysteries, by the end of the decade he has become like a monstrous calculator designed to track not only criminals but *everyone*: to him, any person can be involved in a mystery, and every person is a potential criminal. Watson calls him “an automaton – a calculating machine [...] ... [t]here is something positively inhuman in [him].” [...] This very fine line separating hero from demon indicates the ease with which Holmes can cross over into humanity.’ Thus, ‘After Holmes’s “death,” when his personality began to overshadow the mysteries he solved, writers began revising the Holmesian stereotype, creating manipulative and self-fulfilling characters, who reflect diabolically onto the “dead” Holmes. The great detective then appears as a machine, a scientific calculator who plots out every human movement and deprives persons of their free will.’ Frederick L. DE NAPLES. ‘Unearthing Holmes: 1890s Interpretations of the Great Detective.’ In *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s*, ed. by Nikki Lee MANOS and Meri Jane ROCHELSON. New York: St. Martin’s 1994, 228, 231.

⁶² Cesare LOMBROSO. *The Man of Genius* (1889). TRANS. by Havelock ELLIS. London: Walter Scott 1891, 316. Lombroso’s theory of the strict relationship between genius and degeneration, like most of the great criminologist’s theories, deeply influenced the Western idea of degeneration.

Lombroso's portrayal of his study subject.⁶³ Nikola possesses a rather pallid, at times even ghastly white face, a trait about which Lombroso remarks: 'it has been ascertained [...] that this is one of the most frequent signs of degeneration in the moral insane' (7). Besides pallid, the doctor's face is 'sallow,' traditionally a sign of emaciation which Lombroso considers one of the distinct signs of the man of genius (ibid.). Also, emaciation at times manifests itself in 'leanness of the body' (ibid.), and Nikola's body is often described as 'most slenderly-built' and 'very slim' (although, "paradoxically," quite strong). The doctor suffers from sudden swings of mood and fits of blues, and 'the tendency to melancholy is common to the majority of thinkers' (40); also, Nikola claims that his stepbrother sadistically loved to torture him (both physically and mentally) because he was a child of 'inordinate sensitiveness' (*Farewell*, 47), and 'it is proverbially said that to feel sorrow more than other men constitutes the crown of thorns of genius' (40). Nikola's megalomania and frequent boasting can be explained with the fact that in the man of genius 'the delirium of melancholia alternates with that of grandiose monomania' (45). The doctor is a solitary man and a misanthrope, who cannot even think of getting married, and 'it has been said of the man of genius that he is born and dies in isolation, cold and insensible to family affection and social conventions' (60).⁶⁴ Finally, Nikola's possible homosexuality squares with his portrayal as a man of genius. In fact, Lombroso claims that many great men 'showed anomalies of the reproductive function,' and he exemplifies this through Rousseau and Baudelaire's 'sexual perversion' (316), that is their homosexuality.

⁶³ Henceforward, reference to Lombroso's *The Man of Genius* in the above-mentioned edition is made in the main text by page number only.

⁶⁴ Lombroso quotes Lenau, who expressed a thought similar to Nikola's: 'I have the painful conviction that I am unsuitable for marriage.' LOMBROSO, 316.

3.4. THE THREAT VANISHES: THE MYTH OF NIKOLA

In the light of the incredible gap between Nikola's extraordinary power and Britain's extraordinary dullness, the greatest surprise in the series is that the doctor's threat does not ultimately materialize. Nikola's experiment on Don Miguel is unsuccessful, and a last experiment on himself backfires turning him into a very old man: the doctor's quest for immortality fails, and the world is at last rid of him. To the attentive reader, Nikola's debacle comes not unexpected. If the doctor is presented right from the start as a sort of almost omnipotent creature, signs of his human fallibility can be detected already in the first novel. As Boothby creates and fuels the Nikola myth, he also begins gradually to explode it. The myth and its explosion are inversely proportional to each other: the more the reader approaches Nikola, the less the doctor appears to be a superman. So, while the reader can find flattering remarks about Nikola all through the series, he can see, so to speak, "real-time" how they hardly match reality.

In *A Bid for Fortune*, it is enough to mention the name of Nikola to frighten Beckenham and Wetherell,⁶⁵ and China Pete, one of Nikola's former henchmen, warns the Colonel that people from all over the world 'know Dr. Nikola and his cat, and, take my word for it, they fear him' (*Bid*, 213). Yet, at the end of the story the party of goodies manage to save Phyllis from the doctor without giving him the Chinese stick that he required as the girl's ransom. If Nikola at last manages to get it, it is only by pure chance (cf. Appendix A – *A Bid for Fortune*), so his final warning – 'One last word of advice: pause a second time, I entreat, before you think of baulking Dr. Nikola' (*Bid*, 228) – sounds extravagant, if not comical. In the Chinese monastery he is at last discovered to be an impostor, and has to leave

⁶⁵ Hatteras says: 'Beckenham shuddered as I mentioned the Doctor's name' (*Bid*, 128); and he notes that after mentioning that name to Wetherell 'a greater effect of terror and consternation could not have been produced in the old gentleman's face than did those five simple words' (*Bid*, 141).

the place before all the secrets that he must learn for his quest are revealed to him. What is more, Bruce saves the doctor's life twice, and on one of these occasions, shockingly enough, Nikola risks being murdered because he was admittedly 'sleeping like a top' (*Nikola*, 77). In *The Lust of Hate* the great doctor is even swindled by a quite ordinary man like Pennethorne, who manages to escape from London, disregarding the doctor's summons. When Nikola, some months later, finds him in South Africa, it is only to discover that the Cornishman has donated the money the doctor wanted from him. Although the villain tries what he can to keep his proverbial composure, on learning the news his face gets 'paler' and his lips tremble 'perceptibly;' as Pennethorne observes, 'the man was visibly anxious' (*Lust*, 180). In his usual patronizing attitude, Nikola can only conclude, as he addresses Pennethorne: 'When you wish to be proud of yourself, try to remember that you have balked Dr. Nikola in one of his best-planned schemes. [...] Believe me, there are far cleverer men than you who have tried to outwit me and failed' (*Lust*, 181). It is hard to believe Nikola, as Pennethorne has done nothing exceptional – he simply fled from the doctor, – and one might wonder how Nikola's other schemes succeeded, considering that this was one of his best. In *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* it is Ingleby that saves the life of the doctor,⁶⁶ and the reader can even see the latter as he cowardly sneaks out of a window in order to escape from Quong Ma.⁶⁷ When Ingleby and he discover that the Chinese has been hiding in Nikola's castle, they resolve to scour the entire

⁶⁶ 'An inspiration, how or by what occasioned I shall never be able to understand, induced me to seize Nikola by the arm and to swing him behind me. It was well that I did so, for almost before we could realise what was happening, a knife was thrown, and stood imbedded a good three inches in the bulwark, exactly behind where Nikola had been standing an instant before' (*Experiment*, 72).

⁶⁷ "'Now, if only we can get out of this window and down to the Tyneside once more, without being seen, I think we may safely say we have given Quong Ma the slip for good and all.'" So saying he [i.e. Nikola] crossed the room and threw open the window. "We are both active men," Nikola continued, "and should experience small difficulty in dropping on to the roof of the outhouse below; thence we can make our way along the wall to the back. Are you ready?" (*Experiment*, 75-76).

palace. Although he is the owner of the castle, and should thus know its plan thoroughly, Nikola cannot figure out Quong Ma's hiding place and, evidently uneasy about it as any common man might be, shows to be annoyed by Ingleby's inquisitive remarks. Considering that it involves a purported genius, the scene is slightly comical:

'I cannot understand it,' said Nikola at last, and his voice echoed along the rocky passages. 'We have explored every room in the castle and every dungeon underneath it, and not a trace of the man can we discover. We have bricked up the opening into the chasm, and lifted that connects us with the outside world, and yet we cannot catch him. He must be here somewhere.'

'Exactly; but where?'

'If I knew, do you think I should be standing here?' Nikola replied sharply.

(*Experiment*, 142)

If Nikola is not the superman he claims to be, he is not even the inhumanly ruthless villain that the characters think he is. All through the series it is generally agreed that the doctor is the most cynical and cruellest man one could ever find (cf. Appendix B) – another myth that the doctor never loses a chance to fuel. However, contrary to expectation, Nikola never kills nor harms anybody, and (in spite of his professed belief in the *lex talionis*) is invariably merciful with his enemies, even when they attempt to murder him. He usually prefers only to scare those who opposed to (or even betrayed) him through his devilish looks and, at times, through a show of his preternatural abilities.⁶⁸ So when Bruce confesses

⁶⁸ On discovering that Wetherell has paid him fake money for Phyllis's ransom, the doctor increases the sum of £50,000, but eventually forfeits it. When his servant Laohwan fails to protect him from an attempted murder, Nikola tells him: 'You have failed in your duty, and that is a thing, as you know, I never forgive. But as you have been faithful in all else, I will not be too hard upon you. In an hour's time you will saddle your horse and go back to Tientsin, where you will seek out Mr. Williams and tell him that you are unsatisfactory, and that I have sent you back. You will remain with him till I communicate again.' (*Nikola*, 76). To the man that tried to kill him, Nikola orders to open his mouth, with the uncanny result that, no matter how hard he tries, the man cannot shut it again. Then the doctor makes him temporarily blind and dumb, after which he sends him away with a warning:

that he fears most to displease the doctor 'remembering how rigorously he had dealt with those who had offended him before' (*Nikola*, 161), he is clearly overrating the villain's acts. Indeed, besides being gentlemanly and chivalrous, Nikola at times even appears to be humane. Bruce notices the doctor's 'extreme fondness for children' (*Nikola*, 54), as he sees him play for hours with a child during their voyage to Tientsin. As the Englishman also observes, the doctor cures Gladys, who has just been harmed by a madding crowd, with 'a tenderness of which one would scarcely have believed him capable' (*Nikola*, 66). Similarly, Hatteras notes that Nikola assists Gertrude with total devotion: 'he remained there all night, passing hour after hour at the bedside, without, so my wife asserted, moving, save to give the medicine, and without apparently feeling the least fatigue' (*Farewell*, 114). In Venice the doctor consoles, 'with all the

'Try again what you have attempted tonight, and both sight and speech will be instantly taken from you and never again restored. Now go!' (*Nikola*, 76). When Nikola discovers that Mr. Edgehill has betrayed him, he sends him to Mr. Williams, where he has sent Laohwan, where he is supposed to stay one calendar month, and warns him not to displease him again (*Nikola*, 95). The Western man that tries to convince the Tibetan monks that Nikola, who is passing as the Great Priest of Hankow, is an impostor, is made, through Nikola's uncanny powers, to bend down and keep the position for an entire day – "Now leave this place," said Nikola, "and until this time tomorrow you cannot stand upright like your fellow-men" (*Nikola*, 123). On guessing that Nikola must be behind the series of crimes in London, Pennethorne instinctively tries to hit him. Nikola averts the attack, but eventually shows benevolence: 'So you would try and add me to your list, would you, Mr. Gilbert Pennethorne? Be thankful that I am mercifully inclined, and do not punish you as you deserve' (*Lust*, 64). Near the end of the story, the doctor discovers that Pennethorne has deceived him, but instead of punishing him, he graciously recognizes that he has been defeated and courteously takes his leave – 'I don't think I need trouble your hospitality any further' (*Lust*, 181). On learning that Ingleby has left Don Miguel unwatched, Nikola threatens him – 'Ingleby, you have been found wanting in your duty; you have checked the progress of the experiment, and if that old man had died' – here he took a step towards me, and his face suddenly became livid with passion – "as I live at this moment you would never have seen the light of day again. I swear I would have killed you with as little compunction as I would have destroyed a dog who had bitten me" (*Experiment*, 104). However, presently his attitude changes completely and even becomes apologetic: "My dear Ingleby," he said, patting me on the shoulder and speaking in quite a different tone, "we are wrangling like a pair of schoolboys. If I hurt your feelings just now, I hope you will forgive me and ascribe it to my anxiety" (*Experiment*, 105). In *Farewell*, Nikola, the doctor forgives an Italian police agent who tried to betray him – 'You know me and the power I control. You are aware that those who thwart me, or who interfere with me and my concerns, do so at their own risk. Since no harm has come of it, thanks to certain good friends, I will forgive on this occasion, but let it happen again and this is what your end will be' (*Farewell*, 51), – and he finally forgives even Don Martinos.

gentleness of a woman' (*Farewell*, 160), an old man whose son he has not been able to save; in Allerdeyne Castle he shows to be quite sorry for Doña Consuelo when her great-grandfather dies.⁶⁹

From the last part of *Dr. Nikola's Experiment* on, the supermanly figure of Nikola is irreversibly deflated. As Ingleby notes, as the story approaches its end, the doctor appears more and more to be a lonely man that 'with all his sternness, his self-denial, his genius and his failings, hungered for one thing, and that was to be loved' (*Experiment*, 134). The failure of the experiment throws off Nikola's mask for good; he is no more an imperturbable man, but only someone that has failed: 'Under the intensity of his emotion his voice broke, and something very like a sob burst from him. Never since I had known Nikola had I seen him as he was then. To all appearances he was well-nigh broken-hearted' (*Experiment*, 136). The *coup de grâce* to Nikola's myth is delivered in *Farewell, Nikola*, where the reader learns about the doctor's miserable childhood. In the most pathetic scene of the entire series, Hatteras tries to comfort Nikola, even advising him to live the quiet life of the married man, and the doctor pities his sad existence: 'I am lonely in the world, God knows how lonely, yet lonely I must be content to remain' (*Farewell*, 49). In a naive show of psychological explanation, Hatteras even explains to the doctor that he sees 'only the worst side of human life' and he would feel better if he lived 'only in the pure air of the commonplace everyday world' (*ibid.*). The doctor, Boothby seems to suggest, is not evil; only, his criminal side was developed in reaction to the shock and suffering he experienced as a child, and his megalomania is only a compensation for his inability to love. The

⁶⁹ "Ingleby," he said, speaking slowly and sadly, "I don't know whether you will believe me or not when I say how deeply I regret what has happened in this case. I would have given anything, my own life even, that things should not have fallen out in this way. And what is more, I do not say this for my own sake."

"You are thinking of Consuelo," I said.

"I am," he answered. "It is for her sake I feel regret. As a rule, I am not given to sentiment, but somehow this seems altogether different" (*Experiment*, 150).

great doctor is thus reduced to a pathological case; he is no longer someone to fear but to pity.

Disregarding the premisses (i.e. Britain's inability to face up to Nikola), Boothby concludes the Dr. Nikola series with a happy (or at least, reassuring) ending – in compliance with a paramount unwritten rule of popular fiction. He makes Nikola's threat vanish, or rather, reveals that it had never been "real" but just an illusion. Unlike much Victorian fiction, where in the end order and harmony are restored, in the Dr. Nikola series the reader is finally compelled to acknowledge that everything had always been "in order." Nikola's passage in the world hardly left any trace; the doctor threatened much, people around him blindly believed his words, but in the end he effected very little. In a conclusion that may even be defined reactionary, Boothby attempts to exorcize the fears and anxieties about the threatening modernity (embodied by Nikola) by simply revealing that they were ill-grounded. The villain, indeed, turns out to be not so evil as it was generally assumed, and even redeems himself – Nikola at last forgives Don Martinos, and in doing so he saves his own soul from damnation. Britain can return to his everyday life, and may even hope that in a not too distant future its internal problems will be solved – the series ends with Hatteras's return to England, where he can carry on his task of curing the British race of degeneration.

3.5. CONCLUSIONS

To the modern reader the outstanding success of the Dr. Nikola novels may appear surprising. Boothby could write no better than his contemporary colleagues, and, as has been seen, the author's helter-skelter working methods hardly make for quality. That he was a skilful craftsman who knew what his

readership wanted is beyond doubt. Also, the series was released in a particularly favourable time, just between Holmes's disappearance and reappearance, when a host of Holmes's fans were eager for new charismatic characters that might compensate for the loss. However, most of the many iconic heroes and villains that appeared in the 1890s could hardly make their creators as popular as Boothby, so it must be assumed that Dr. Nikola exerted an *extraordinary* appeal on the readership.

Nikola scared and fascinated, and thus elicited two conflicting feelings – fear and fascination – that Boothby's Britain, with its promise of 'limitless generative power' and 'fantasies of decay and degeneration,'⁷⁰ experienced in the wake of impending modernity. To Boothby's readers Nikola's quest for immortality was disturbing, and Boothby duly condemns it – he even suggests that it will backfire on those who undertake it. Yet, like Dr. Nikola, it does not have a totally negative connotation. Boothby suggests that the doctor might actually desire to achieve immortality (also) to benefit humankind, and the reader is invited to side with this gentlemanly and, after all, benevolent character in some novels of the series. Albeit within the conservative boundaries of popular fiction, Boothby prompts an ambivalent attitude towards his character, which was in tune with the *fin de siècle* ambivalent attitude towards modernity. *Farewell, Nikola* ends with Hatteras's recollection of the great doctor which sounds like an elegy.⁷¹ Nikola made Britain a more dangerous place to live, but certainly he also made it less dreary. Boothby resists change, but he is disillusioned about the optimistic view of progress shared by the advocates of the official science and the

⁷⁰ LEDGER and LUCKHURST, xiii.

⁷¹ 'When the window howls round the house at night and the world seems very lonely, I sometimes try to picture a monastery on a mountain-side, and then, in my fancy, I see a yellow-robed, mysterious figure, whose dark, searching eyes look into mine with a light that is no longer of this world. To him I cry:

"Farewell, Nikola!" (*Farewell*, 170).

supporters of the British Empire, which leaves too much behind (injustice, degradation, corruption) and shows its total inadequacy to face the unexplained. If, on one side, he condemns modernity, on the other he is rather sympathetic towards those who let themselves be fascinated by it. The main reason behind the outstanding success of the Dr. Nikola series in its transitional time may perhaps lie there.

APPENDIX A: THE STORY PLOTS

A BID FOR FORTUNE; OR, Dr. NIKOLA'S VENDETTA

In the Prologue, three gentlemen – Mr. Prendergast, Mr. Eastover, and Mr. Baxter – meet at the London *New Imperial Restaurant*, where a table has been booked for them some months in advance by a certain Dr. Nikola; the convener comes last to join them. The three guests work for the doctor, who instructs them about a mysterious plan that he wants to put into operation. Each man is allotted a destination: Eastover shall leave for Dover, Prendergast for Paris and then for London, Baxter for Bournemouth, working as tutor to the Marquis of Beckenham. The whole affair sounds criminal as Nikola apparently wants to hunt a man called Wetherell.

The story is narrated by Richard “Dick” Hatteras, an Australian middle-class man of English lineage, who is planning to visit England, his father’s motherland. In Sydney, some days before embarking, he rescues a beautiful lady named Phyllis Wetherell from some prowlers, and at once falls in love with her. Later he discovers that, by mere chance, the lady is going to take the same ship, and eventually spends most of the voyage in her company. Before getting to London, Phyllis falls in love with him and promises him to become his wife, despite the veto of her father, Mr. Wetherell, the Colonial Secretary of Australia. Wetherell dislikes the idea of his daughter getting married to a middle-class man, though Hatteras claims his right to become her husband on the ground that he is an honest and hard-working man.

Hatteras’s attitudes to London are ambivalent as he discovers that the “good” and the “bad” are ‘mixed up together in one jumble’ (29). The city, in fact, is both fascinating and squalid, luxurious and dirty. One day, in a French pub, he

meets an extraordinary man who seems to know him. The man, whom Hatteras will much later discover to be Dr. Nikola, seems a sort of conjurer or illusionist who can create images, or at least make people see them, just by using a plate and some drops of a mysterious liquid. Hatteras gets all the more bewildered when, in one of these images, he sees his beloved Phyllis calling his name in distress. Nikola vanishes before Hatteras can see the end of it. Meanwhile a message arrives from Phyllis informing him that something has unsettled her father, who has suddenly resolved to return to Australia at once. Since he can do nothing but wait and see, Hatteras leaves for Hampshire where he expects to find his only relative, his father's brother. The latter lives in a stately but run-down mansion in the English countryside and seems not altogether pleased to have visitors. Hatteras's uncle is a surly and covetous old man, and, quite predictably, he does not impress Hatteras favourably. Everything gets worse when the uncle introduces his 'beautiful daughter' (51), Gwendoline, a young woman who is so deformed that she hardly resembles a human being. At the uncle's request to give him £1,000 to cure her, Hatteras becomes outraged and eventually leaves the place. He presently discovers that the old man is actually a rich landowner who is too miserly to care for the appalling state of his daughter.

In order to forget about this most unpleasant encounter and assuage his anxieties about Phyllis, Hatteras sets for the lovely seaside resort of Bournemouth. There, while he is at sea, he rescues a young man from drowning. The latter is the Marquis of Beckenham, and the Australian is soon introduced to his tutor, Mr. Baxter. Beckenham's father is the Duke of Glenbarth, who shows to be exceedingly grateful to Hatteras for rescuing his only child. He has great plans for his son, and in order to make him a perfect gentleman he forces him to a life of seclusion from the "corrupting" outer world. Though Hatteras admires the Duke's good intentions, he ventures to suggest him to let his son, who seems

bored of his dull life, travel and see a bit of life. Mr. Baxter never lets the Marquis alone, and Hatteras becomes more and more diffident about him. He eventually discovers that the tutor has sent a telegram to a Dr. Nikola to inform him that 'a new element of danger has arisen' (70), and becomes all the more suspicious. However, he soon forgets about these strange circumstances and, after enjoying a brief boating tour with an old acquaintance, he returns to London. There, he enters a pub and finds Baxter and Dr. Nikola, whom he at last recognizes to be the man he had met earlier in the city. Hatteras is about to leave England for Australia, and, quite uncannily, Nikola appears to know it. The doctor tries to hypnotize him and persuade him not to leave, but to no avail. The Australian presently embarks and, with Glenbarth's consent, takes Beckenham with him, though the boy is accompanied by the ever-present Baxter.

During the voyage, the young man is seasick and spends most of his time bedridden, in a miserable state. However, when the ship puts in in Port Said, he feels strong enough to visit the city with Hatteras. In a mosque, the two men find a group of English tourists, who by refusing to take off their shoes arouse the fury of some Egyptians. Aiming to save their foolish compatriots from certain death, Hatteras and Beckenham help them escape, even putting their own life at stake. Some hours later, as they are being guided around the city by an Egyptian boy, they are stunned and taken prisoners. They revive in a dirty cell where they are confined for several days, and when they at last find a way to escape, they discover that their "warder" was no less than Dr. Nikola. They find him in his laboratory, a hideous place full of freaks, strange specimens and bizarre weapons, intent on dissecting something resembling a monkey. The doctor shows himself gentlemanly enough to release them, on condition that they let themselves be blindfolded as they are guided out of the place.

As soon as they are restored to liberty, the two lose no time and plan how to reach Australia as quickly as possible. However, they are presently informed that the “Marquis of Beckenham” has already sailed heading for there. It gradually becomes clear to them that Nikola must have performed some villainy, and that Baxter, who has meanwhile disappeared, must be the doctor’s henchman. For some unknown purposes, the two criminals have replaced the real with a fake Marquis and, as Hatteras and Beckenham learn on arriving in Australia, they have persuaded Mr. Wetherell to marry off his daughter to the marquis’s double, in spite of Phyllis’s remonstrance. No sooner does Hatteras discover this, that his mate and Phyllis suddenly disappear. The Australian has little doubt that behind it all there is Dr. Nikola, and reveals his suspicions to Wetherell and the local police – the party presently put themselves on the abductors’ trail. They find the real Beckenham, who recounts how Nikola lured and hypnotized him, but not Phyllis who, as a message by the villain reveals, has been taken to an island in South Australia. Meanwhile Hatteras learns that his English relatives have died, and he is the only inheritor of both his uncle’s wealth and baronetcy. Nikola sends a message to Wetherell: he will release Phyllis on condition that the nobleman surrenders a mysterious Chinese stick and pays him £100,000 in gold.

As Wetherell narrates, the stick belonged to a Chinese called China Pete, who had stolen it from a Tibetan sect on Nikola’s behalf, and had then kept it for himself. Then a barrister, Wetherell had pleaded Pete’s cause in a trial and the Chinese had given him the stick as a token of gratitude, asking him not to give it away to anyone, particularly to a Dr. Nikola. The latter then came and tried to buy and, eventually, steal it, always unsuccessfully. Wetherell had meanwhile escaped several attempted murders, which had been ordered not by Nikola but by the Tibetan sect.

Hatteras and Wetherell unsuccessfully try to deceive Nikola by filling some bags with fake money, with the result that the villain raises the ransom to £150,000. Finally, the goodies manage to find Phyllis, while Nikola gets the stick. Phyllis reveals that the fake Marquis of Beckenham was used as a mouse-trap to abduct her during a reception which she had been invited to. Mr. Wetherell is finally happy to let his daughter marry Hatteras, and the young lovers are left as happy as they can be. No news from Nikola, who once again has disappeared, except for a letter and a wonderful diamond necklace that the couple receive as a wedding present on the night before their wedding day.

DOCTOR NIKOLA

Wilfred Bruce, the narrator of the story, writes a short letter to a friend of his, where he informs him that he is living in a secret hiding place after living through a long and dangerous experience with Dr. Nikola, a man he has no wish to meet again.

Bruce, an Englishman fond of China and the East, is in Shangai and is beset with financial problems. A friend of his tells him that Dr. Nikola is looking for a companion for a most risky adventure in Tibet; he would like to meet Bruce since the man has the reputation of being able to pass for a Chinese without being discovered. Bruce meets the doctor, who offers him £10,000 to help him: Nikola means to enter a Chinese exoteric society to steal its secrets. Bruce is fascinated by the doctor (besides being tempted by the large sum of money), though Nikola is one of the most feared men in the world and strange rumours go round about him. He resolves to find a job and an alternative source of money to pay off his debts, but in vain, so he finally feels compelled to accept Nikola's proposal. Bruce is soon introduced to the doctor's "illusionistic" numbers and, just

before undertaking the enterprise, his loyalty and courage are tested. He is actually lured into a house where he is threatened with torture if he will not reveal what he knows about Dr. Nikola. Though quite scared, the man does not reveal anything, only to eventually find out that the Chinese that was interviewing him was Dr. Nikola in disguise. Bruce is made to disguise as a Chinese in turn and the pair gain access to the meeting of a secret society, passing as 'two merchants from Szechuen' (49). There Nikola deftly draws useful information for his enterprise, and the pair set for Tientsin, where Bruce saves a girl from lynching. She is called Gladys Mary Medwin, and a madding crowd has slightly wounded her and killed her father, an English clergyman – the reasons behind the act are unknown. Bruce takes her to Nikola, who successfully cures her, and then makes ready to leave on the following day for Peking, quite in love with the most beautiful and lovely girl he has ever met. The city is described, not unlike the other Eastern cities, as one of the dirtiest and most stinking places in the world. One night, a killer sneaks into Nikola's room and the doctor is saved by Bruce's timely intervention. Nikola punishes the man through a show of his uncanny powers: he orders him to shut his mouth and eyes, which the man instinctively does without being able to open them again; the doctor finally shows mercy to him and releases him. Laohwan, the servant that failed to protect Nikola from the attack, is spared, too, but the doctor dismisses him. Bruce confesses to feeling rather tired, and in a few hours he loses consciousness, only to revive, a week later, watched over by Gladys in her brother-in-law's house. It was Nikola who brought him there. The Englishman stays in the house for a few weeks, until he has regained his strength – in the meantime, he proffers the young woman his love. Though she reciprocates, her brother-in-law, who acts as her tutor, disapproves of the man and, above all, of his notorious companion. Bruce is most reluctant to leave the woman he loves, all the more so since he has little hope

that he will ever return alive. He and Nikola, however, leave on the following day, heading for the lamasery of 'Yung-Ho-Kung,' or 'the great Lama temple' (104, later referred to as the 'Llamaserai') where the doctor means to pass for the 'Chief Priest of Hankow,' a Chinese sage who has been recently assigned the one vacancy among the three sages (the 'Great Ones') of the Llamaserai. Prendergast, one of Nikola's henchmen, has meanwhile abducted the real priest and keeps him prisoner. Thanks to the stick he took from Wetherell, Nikola manages to enter the monastery and pass off Bruce as his assistant. However, a man of the sect recognizes Bruce, and informs the priests that he is a Western man. The man had once tried to violate Bruce's house and had wounded the Englishman in the ensuing scuffle – Bruce still bears a scar on his wrist. Nikola is presently asked to prove there and then that his companion is not a 'heathen' Englishman, but the doctor manages to postpone the trial until the following morning. Meanwhile he devises and puts into operation a complex plan in order not to be discovered. In the night-time, Bruce escapes from the monastery and rides to Peking, where he bribes a guardian and crosses the Great Wall. There he looks for Yoo Laoyeh, one of Nikola's helpmates, and secretly takes him to the Llamaserai, where the Chinese will replace him and play his part during the trial. A few hours later the trial takes place and every charge brought against Bruce is found to be false. The accuser is left to Nikola's will, but the doctor, after ordering the man to stoop down – which the man cannot help but do – and keep the position until the following day, only sends the man away. In the night, Yoo Laoyeh leaves the monastery in secret, and Bruce can put on his old disguise. Nikola manages to get information from the monks about the exact location of another temple, where he expects to find the secrets that he wants to learn, and on the following day the pair leave for Tibet. Meanwhile Prendergast informs Nikola that the real Priest of Hankow has corrupted Laoyeh and escaped,

heading for the Tibetan monastery. The two men reach an inn near the monastery, where, thanks to Bruce's cunning, they throw off the scent the men sent by the priest to unveil their trick. The last route to the monastery is quite hard, and everything is worsened by the falling snow; one by one Nikola's 'coolies' perish and the two men are left alone. They walk on steep and wild paths, and even have to climb down a cliff, but at last they get to the monastery. There Nikola acquires the greatest secrets of human knowledge and witnesses preternatural events, among which the miraculous healing of a paralytic man and a case of momentary resurrection. When the doctor is on the point of discovering the last secrets that he is seeking, the real Priest of Hankow gets to the monastery. Nikola is discovered and he and his mate are charged of being impostors and condemned to death. When they are about to be hurled down from a high cliff, Nikola manages to persuade the monks to postpone the execution, and in doing so he gains time enough to think about how to escape. Some hours later the two lure their warder into their cell and strike him, thus leaving him unconscious. The flight is not easy, and before getting out of the monastery they have to face its guardians. Everything is complicated by Nikola's stubborn resolution to steal some of the monastery's 'treasures,' among which a few magic implements and a precious book, before getting out of it. They are chased for some days and at one time their pursuers appear to be on the point of catching them. The last misadventure Bruce goes through is to fall into a raging torrent, from which he is eventually rescued by Nikola. He faints and wakes up some days later in 'the French mission at Ya-Chow-Fu' (196) where his mate has brought him. Before disappearing, the doctor has left him a letter to warn him against the revengeful sect that, he says, will not stop hunting him. Back to Shangai, Bruce meets Gladys and the two presently marry. However, wherever they go their lives are at stake, and they miraculously escape many attempted

murders by a half-eared Chinese called Quong Ma. In the end they are compelled to hide in a secret and remote place, where they run a factory and lead a secluded but serene life, jollied up by the birth of their first child.

THE LUST OF HATE

The Cornishman Gilbert Pennethorne narrates the last two adventurous years of his life, during which he met Dr. Nikola, a man he has 'no sort of desire ever to see or hear of [...] again' (2).

Pennethorne is an undistinguished and riotous student at Eton and then at Oxford, from which he is eventually expelled. After a quarrel with his father, whom he does not get along with, he leaves for Australia to seek his fortune. He lands in Melbourne where he works in a sheep station, which he later leaves, caught by the gold fever. His enterprises, however, are all unsuccessful, and during one of them, he is taken seriously ill. He is nursed and saved from certain death by a misanthropic and misogynous old miner called Ben Garman who takes him into his partnership. For three years they search for gold in vain and eventually they part. Pennethorne then finds a job as a storekeeper in the 'Markapurlie' station in Western Queensland, under the management of Bartrand, 'an upstart and a bully of the first water' (5). At the station, one day, he finds his old friend Ben lying on the ground and evidently ill. Though the man needs urgent treatment, Bartrand refuses to let him in the main building of the station. There follows a fierce argument and scuffle between the two men; Pennethorne knocks Bartrand down and eventually leaves the place carrying his friend with him. The man is nursed lovingly and at first seems to improve, but he finally dies. On his death-bed he reveals to his friend the location of a golden vein he had found some months earlier, but Pennethorne cannot head for it as he is caught ill a

second time. After being recovered, he sets for the place Garmand has indicated to him, but to his bitter disappointment he finds out that it has already been found and taken possession of by his former boss. The Cornishman has little doubt that Bartrand stole from him his secret while he was bedridden and delirious with fever, but cannot prove it. He develops an ever-increasing hate for Bartrand, and when the latter, now a rich man, leaves for London, he follows him to claim again his right on the mine.

The London winter is gloomy, and the city is full of beggars and poor people starving. Besides, news of a series of crimes involving aristocratic and noble victims can be frequently heard from the newsvendors on the streets. Pennethorne's hate grows day by day, to the extent that he turns into a cynical man. Once, while walking on the city's streets, he finds a poor man who begs some food for him and his wife; the Cornishman proposes to give him some money if he will consent to kill Bartrand. The poor man's soul is providentially saved by his wife, who prevents him from making what seems to her an actual pact with the devil. In London Pennethorne meets Dr. Nikola who, quite uncannily, seems to know everything about him, and offers to help him murder Bartrand on condition that, after laying his hands on his fortune, he pays him £50,000. Pennethorne is at first shocked, but his hate for Bartrand has reached its peak: he has become blinded with malice when he has seen him lead the life of the splendid and munificent London aristocrat with the money that should have been his. What is more, Nikola proves incredibly skilful at exasperating Pennethorne's spirit of revenge and the Cornishman, under his hypnotic influence, finally takes his advice. Nikola's plan is that Pennethorne should pretend to be the driver of a hansom cab that Bartrand will take. The vehicle has been designed by Nikola to release a poisonous gas inside the cab if only the driver presses an outer 'spring.' Eventually Pennethorne shall make away with

the man's body by pulling another lever which opens a trapdoor under the victim's feet. Pennethorne is still doubtful whether he should go on with Nikola's deadly plan, as he realizes that his own soul is at stake. Just before pressing the spring, he has a vision of a woman's face, gentle and sweet, that warns him of the danger he is running. He realises that he has been 'a coward and a would-be murderer' (60) and abandons his evil intentions, but it is too late – or so it seems. When he stops the cab aiming to confess to Bartrand his shameful plan, he is shocked to find the man already dead. Desperate and panicking, he abandons the corpse in a desert street and flies away. Only near the end of the story will he learn that Nikola had drugged Bartrand in advance to render him an even easier prey, and that the man was actually sleeping. Pennethorne now realises that Nikola is a devilish creature, and when he meets him again, he even tries to strike him, but the doctor easily averts the attack. Frightened at the prospect of being arrested and horrified at that of seeing Nikola again, Pennethorne embarks on the first ship leaving from England. He takes the *Fiji Princess*, heading for Cape Town, under the false name of Mr. Wrexford. There he meets a woman, Agnes Maybourne, whose face is quite similar to the one he saw during his vision. The woman falls overboard and Pennethorne rescues her, though the effort proves too much for him and he eventually faints. He soon recovers, but he is not at ease to be greeted by the passengers and the crew as a hero. Though he is proud of having saved such a beautiful and elegant woman, he is quite embarrassed when she expresses her gratitude to him. He feels 'unclean' as he talks to such a respectable woman. Agnes is profoundly religious and tries what she can to help him through his pain and encourage him, though the Cornishman never openly confesses his crime. When the man has at last been able to find a little relief to his misery, the ship is wrecked. The only survivors are Pennethorne, Agnes, who is once again rescued by the man, and a small child; the group

eventually reach a desert island. There the couple try desperately to save the child's life, but all in vain. Agnes proves herself to be a strong and pragmatic woman who can face the trials of life thanks to her unshakeable faith in God. Her angelic influence has the power to redeem the sinful Pennethorne, who more than once kneels down with her and prays. The two manage to build up a life-raft and leave the island, but they wander for days on end without ever spotting a ship. When their supplies and water have finished, and hope seems to fade, they are at last rescued by a passing-by ship, *The King of Carthage*. Pennethorne makes manifest his love for Agnes but also confesses to her that he is unworthy of her, though he does not favour her with any explanation. In Cape Town, the woman persuades him to go and see her father, Cornelius Maybourne, a well-known rich man in the mining business who may help him find a job. Pennethorne gets a job in one of Mr. Maybourne's South African mines, 'The Pride of the South,' quite in the outback, and leaves Agnes, who loves him and cannot figure out why he wants to escape from her. Six months later, Pennethorne is a relatively happy man, content with his job and almost forgetful of his misery, when Mr. Maybourne announces that he is coming to see the mine with his daughter. There Agnes deftly plays the indifferent with him, to the extent that the man feels that his love cannot be repressed any longer. He narrates his tragic story to her who, though shocked and scared, promises to love him come what may. Then something unexpected occurs: the Matabele tribe arise in rebellion and head for 'The Pride of the South.' Some days before, a man in the mine had warned Pennethorne about this danger, but the latter had dismissed the warning as nonsense. A battle is fought, and though the Matabele outnumber the white men, the latter can count on guns and a large quantity of ammunition. In the heat of the battle Pennethorne sees a rider making for the mine station. The horse is shot and the man eventually breaks his neck by falling into a hole.

Pennethorne instinctively feels that he must save the man only to eventually discover that the man is Bartrand. The Matabele are finally defeated, and Bartrand on his death-bed tells Pennethorne a most interesting story. He has repented for what he did to him, and has been looking for him for months; he wanted to donate him his wealth as a compensation for the damage done. His resolution was quickened by the fact that Dr. Nikola had brought him to exasperation, for the criminal wanted his money and had attempted to murder him several times. Pennethorne asks Bartrand to donate the money to the London hospitals, and the man accordingly signs a new testament just before dying. Presently Nikola reaches the mine claiming the money Pennethorne was supposed to give him, but a nasty surprise is awaiting him. 'Non-plussed' and 'visibly anxious' (180), the doctor however quickly regains his self-control and after claiming that with Pennethorne's money he would 'have worked out a scheme that would have paralyzed Europe' (181), he leaves the place and disappears again. In the end, Pennethorne and Agnes get married and settle in South Africa, happy and rich.

DR. NIKOLA'S EXPERIMENT

The only son of a country practitioner, Douglas Ingleby, under his father's insistence, becomes a surgery student. In his last academic years he is extravagant with his money, with the result that he becomes submerged in debt. Feeling hopeless that he will ever be able to redress the imbalance, he almost commits suicide by way of dropping from a London bridge, when his fellow student, Andrew Fairfax Kelleran, passes by. The young man is in the mood to talk and, quite to Ingleby's discomfort, insists to walk him home. In Ingleby's house, Kelleran finds some books which seem to interest him, and offers his

mate £150 for them. Ingleby is quite perplexed at the sum, as he knows that the entire lot is worth just a few pounds, but under the man's insistence he finally accepts it. This proves to be a godsend for his finances, and with it he can pay off almost all his debts. Deeply relieved and bent on sorting himself out, Ingleby becomes such a diligent student that he is eventually appointed 'to the position of House Surgeon' (11). Yet ill luck hunts him, and at his father's death he discovers that the man was full of debts and left him and his mother just money enough to pay his funeral. The shock proves too much for Ingleby's mother, who dies some months later. To cap it all, he is unjustly fired and cannot find another job. Thus he resolves to try his fortune in Australia, but to no avail. Back to London, he has become so poor and desperate that his only hope lies, again, in his old friend Kelleran. Accordingly he goes to visit him but only finds Kelleran's governess who informs him that the landlord is abroad. The governess is at first suspicious of the guest, but then proves herself solicitous enough to look after him when, worn out by a long fast, he suddenly faints. At his return, Kelleran is most happy to invite his former colleague to dinner, where, he anticipates, an extraordinary guest will join them: the scientist and surgeon Dr. Nikola. The dinner is excellent but Dr. Nikola almost makes Ingleby 'forget such mundane matters as mere eating and drinking' (22). The doctor fascinates him with the tale of his adventures around the world. Ingleby, in turn, entertains Kelleran and Nikola with an incredible story he once heard about a black man who was miraculously cured of the deadly sleeping sickness by a mysterious stranger – only to discover that, as Nikola reveals, the stranger was no less than the great doctor. To add to his guests' amazement, Nikola performs one of his "magic" turns: just by pouring some black powder into a dessert plate, he conjures an image taken from Ingleby's past life 'as if it had been a photograph taken on the spot' (28). After allowing himself a short reprimand on the 'doubtful world' (29) which rejects anything that it cannot

rationality explain, the doctor illustrates his quest and explains to his guests that he aims to create a man that may live up to one thousand years. Since he is looking for someone to assist him through the experiment, he offers Ingleby to join him under payment of a breathtaking sum. Ingleby gladly accepts and confesses to feel new life and strength in his veins at the prospect of taking part in such a fascinating enterprise. Some days later he meets Doña Consuelo and her great-grandfather, Don Miguel de Moreno, a former merchant of Cadiz, who will act as the unwitting cavy for the experiment. The Englishman falls in love at first sight with the young woman, whom he finds to be the most beautiful creature he has ever seen. Nikola has given Ingleby instructions to take the couple to Newcastle where he will meet them. The party will then leave for Allerdeyne Castle, in Northumberland, which Nikola has bought and converted into a laboratory. Don Miguel is quite old and Ingleby is warned to treat him with the greatest care: should the man be in peril of his life, Ingleby is expected to treat him with some special medicines. Doña Consuelo and her moribund and often unconscious relative know nothing about Nikola's experiment – she has only been told that the doctor wants to reinvigorate the old man and make him stronger. During the voyage to Newcastle, Don Miguel is accidentally left unwatched for some time and nearly dies – Ingleby is just in time to give him Nikola's miraculous medicines. Some days later a Chinese man with half an ear missing is espied aboard and Ingleby is put on the alert: before parting with him, Nikola had warned him about the possibility of encountering this dangerous man, who is no less than Nikola's old "acquaintance" Quong Ma. The ship is searched from stem to stern but no stowaway can be found. Presently, the doctor's box of medicines disappears and Ingleby suspects that it was stolen by Quong Ma. It adds to his suspicions that Consuelo claims to have seen the man in her cabin while she was half asleep. In Newcastle Nikola joins the party and Ingleby saves

him from an attempted murder; the killer, Quong Ma, eventually manages to escape and disappear. Though the two men are hunted down by the Chinese, they manage to reach the castle and safely take Doña Consuelo and Don Miguel with them. There the woman is hosted in a private room and is informed, to her chagrin, that she shall not be allowed to see her relative until the experiment is over. Don Miguel is brought into a futuristic laboratory where he is exposed to electricity and watched all the time. Doña Consuelo grows more and more anxious about his old relative and trusts Nikola less and less. Several times she implores Ingleby to save her and her great-grandfather from the doctor, and the Englishman tries what he can to comfort her. However, he seems to grow more and more scared of Nikola in turn, and he is even horrified when he discovers the doctor's laboratory, where his freaks are kept. What is unacceptable to him is that Nikola is quite at ease among his weird 'patients,' who even seem fond of him. Now he also begins to have doubts about the moral legitimacy of the experiment and wonders whether its success will prove a blessing or a curse for the world.

The experiment almost fails when Consuelo accidentally discovers Nikola's laboratory and its monstrous inhabitants. Her horrified scream draws Ingleby's attention and makes him abandon his working-place, thus leaving Don Miguel unwatched. Nikola struggles to keep the old man alive and is eventually successful, but the risk has been quite high and Ingleby has to face the doctor's fury. Nikola becomes so devilish that Ingleby is even led to believe that the man might be a lunatic. However, just a few minutes later the doctor returns to his former affability and the experiment can go on. Finally, to the doctor's bitterness, the experiment fails, as Don Miguel is turned into a young man but reverts to an idiot. Nikola could rejuvenate the old man's body but could not master the effects of the experiment on his brain. To make everything worse, Quong Ma is hidden somewhere in the castle, evidently waiting for an opportunity to murder the

doctor, and Nikola's faithful servant, Ah-Win, is actually found with his throat torn open. In the denouement, a berserk Don Miguel escapes from his room and dies falling from the castle's battlements with the Chinese intruder, whom he had engaged in hand-to-hand combat with. At last Consuelo is informed about the sad end of his relative, and the couple eventually leave the castle as Nikola greets them from the battlements. As Ingleby claims, they prepare to face a life of poverty, which seems to indicate that Nikola has not paid him the sum he had promised him.

FAREWELL, NIKOLA

Sir Richard Hatteras is in Venice on a holiday with his wife Phyllis and her friend Gertrude Trevor, the only daughter of the Dean of Bedminster. They are sitting in a café in St. Mark's Square when an old acquaintance joins them: it is Dr. Nikola, whom they have not seen for five years. Hatteras is not at all pleased to see him, and Gertrude, usually a lively and communicative girl, seems to become uneasy. Nikola is staying at 'Palace Revecce,' a building he owns in Venice, and invite them to his house whenever they feel like visiting him. Gertrude, who has been silent all the time, confesses that Nikola's face and 'terrible eyes' (8) haunt her. Presently, the former Marquis of Beckenham, now Duke of Glenbarth, arrives in Venice and joins his old friend, who brings his encounter with Nikola to his notice. The Duke becomes uneasy on hearing the news, and confesses to have been haunted by the memory of Nikola since he last saw him. Hatteras, Phyllis and Glenbarth know that Nikola must have some reason for being in Venice; although they think that he probably has no bad intentions towards them, they do not feel altogether safe with him around. When Nikola invites Hatteras and Glenbarth to his house just to 'have a chat upon bygone days' (18), they accept and set for

Palace Revecce. The gondolier that takes them to Nikola's house seems scared; he will not wait for them outside, whatever they try. Nikola welcomes them heartily, and entertains them by narrating the story of the Revecce family, the ancient owners of the palace.

Francesco del Revecce was a great sailor and commander of a Venetian fleet. After defeating the 'Duke of Levano' during the War of the League of Cambrai ('Camberi,' in the book), he married the Duke's daughter, who did not love him. In fact, she secretly loved Andrea Bunopelli, the painter Francesco had commissioned to fresco the palace. While Francesco was far from home, fighting against the French army, the couple conspired to have him disgraced and sentenced to death as a traitor of the Republic. Francesco, however, returned to Venice in secret and unveiled the plot. Andrea and his lover were found guilty and left to Francesco's mercy. The outraged husband acted most cruelly: his wife's tongue was torn out and she was imprisoned in a room of Palace Revecce, while Andrea was locked in a trap-door cell located just under the room. The man was starved to death, while his lover had to hear his sufferings without being able to help him.

His story ended, Nikola invites the whole party for a night trip around Venice, and the two men leave the palace still wondering how a man may possibly live in such a nightmarish place. Gertrude and Phyllis accept Nikola's invitation, and on the following day the group is guided through Venice by the doctor. They have a great time and find Nikola to be a very congenial guest; they also notice that he is 'known, feared and respected' (37) everywhere in the city. Hatteras is puzzled at Nikola's ambivalent character: he is the brightest and most pleasant companion one may desire; at the same time, however, he is a gloomy man, quite happy and even well-pleased to live in a place where bloody facts occurred. One week later Hatteras is invited to Palace Revecce to discuss about

'a certain important matter' (42). Despite Phyllis's opposition and Glenbarth's perplexity, Hatteras accepts Nikola's invitation. He eventually discovers, however, that Nikola only wished that he listened to the story of his sad life.

Nikola's mother was a Venetian noblewoman of an ancient but impoverished family – quite probably, the Revecce family. She married a man much older than her whom she did not love. The man died and left her alone with a child, i.e. Nikola, to face the trials of life. Then she met a Spaniard, fell in love with him and married him, only to discover that the man, who had meanwhile grown tired of her and had left her for another woman, was already married. Some months later she was taken seriously ill and died, leaving her child an orphan. The latter was taken under the care of an old couple who loved him, and the old man, a great scholar, taught him everything he knew. Seven years later the couple died and the boy was given to the 'Governor of the Spanish Islands off the American Coast,' actually the former "husband" of Nikola's mother. When the man realised who the child was, he ill-treated him and let his son abuse and torture him 'like a slave' (47). Here the story ends, and Hatteras is left to imagine the development.

Hatteras understands that Nikola must have suffered a lot in his life, and tries to persuade him to leave his gloomy plans and get married to a good woman. Nikola, however, confesses that a woman's love is not for him (49) and he must remain alone and lonely in the world. Meanwhile Hatteras has another chance to see Nikola in action, when the doctor "warns" an Italian police agent who has tried to oppose him. Through his illusionistic abilities, Nikola makes his victim see how he might be punished should he try again to displease him; the man leaves the place quite shocked and frightened. Nikola can foresee the future and even make people travel in time, and gives Hatteras a unique opportunity to discover how his future will be, but the man resolutely declines the offer. On the

point of leaving, Hatteras is emphatically asked by Nikola to send his love to Gertrude. This sounds ominous to the Australian. Nikola enigmatically explains to him that he has always known that Gertrude's fate and his were meant to cross. Hatteras leaves Palace Revece fearing that the doctor might have taken a fancy to the girl.

Hatteras receives a letter from an acquaintance, George Anstruther, asking him to accept Don José de Martinos, a dear friend of his, in his circle, and the party prepare to welcome the Spaniard. Meanwhile Glenbarth has confessed his love for Gertrude to his friend and seems unhappy of Don Martinos's arrival, as he dislikes the Spaniard instinctively, and accordingly behaves discourteously to him. Hatteras is suspicious about the new guest, though he must admit that he seems only an inoffensive, lively fellow. Nikola meets Don Martinos, and invites him and the rest of the party to his house for dinner. In the meantime Gertrude has grown weaker and weaker; she complains that she cannot sleep well at night and seems strangely sensitive to Nikola's presence. At Nikola's home, the doctor gives a show of his uncanny abilities: his guests are made to plunge into the past as if they were 'Spirits in a Spirit World' (92), and become the invisible guests of Francesco del Revece's marriage and witness the conspiracy against him. In the following days Gertrude is taken ill, though no explanation for her illness can be found. Her father is called and doctors are summoned, but to no real avail. At last Hatteras calls in Dr. Nikola, whose medical knowledge is enormous. The doctor nurses his patient with the utmost dedication and she seems to improve, though she always feels drowsy. Meanwhile Glenbarth's jealousy has reached its peak, as he has discovered that Don Martinos has taken a fancy to Gertrude. The Spaniard offends the Duke and accordingly goes out of favour with both Gertrude and her friends. Hatteras presently discovers that the two suitors have resolved to challenge each other in a duel to the death, and asks Nikola to stop them. It

soon becomes clear that Glenbarth is going to succumb; the arbiter of the duel is hand-in-glove with Don Martinos, and he will let him shoot before time. The doctor stops the duel and is persuasive enough to make the two rivals exchange apologies. The quartet of friends and Gertrude's father leave Venice for Rome, and no news of Nikola or Don Martinos reach them. As soon as they leave the city, Gertrude seems to return to her older self, and in Rome the Duke finds the courage to propose to her. The proposal is accepted, to the happiness and pride of the Dean.

Some weeks later, on returning to Venice, Hatteras discovers that Dr. Nikola has made Don Martinos revert to the condition of a beast, and keeps him "prisoner" in Palace Revecce. The doctor evidently means to torture and eventually kill the Spaniard. The latter becomes a shadow of his former self and seems to have no longer a will of his own. It becomes quite clear to Hatteras that Don Martinos must be Nikola's stepbrother. The Australian entreats the doctor to let his victim go, but to no avail. Meanwhile Gertrude has turned uneasy and restless again, and though Venice seems to have a nefarious effect on her, she does not want to leave: she claims that she feels she must stay. One night she sleepwalks, shadowed by Hatteras, to Palace Revecce and there she implores Nikola to spare Don Martinos and forgive him. She is anxious for Nikola's soul which, according to her, is at stake; for her sake, Nikola complies with her request. On the following day, Gertrude remembers nothing about the previous night. The doctor leaves Venice for good, and the party sets for Paris. Gertrude is day by day in higher spirits though she is still haunted by Nikola's memory. During a revelatory dream she sees Nikola in a 'great building on a mountain-side' (169), dressed like a Buddhist priest and looking very old and worn-out. The doctor had actually declared to Hatteras that he intended to reach a lonely monastery in the Far East, where he would work out his destiny. The Duke and

Getrude get married, and the Earl of Sellingbourne invite them to his new Venice residence: Palace Revecce! Of course, the couple courteously opposes a refusal. Hatteras concludes his narrative with a last thought on Nikola: he imagines him in a far and lonely monastery, dressed like a monk, and with a light in his eyes 'that is no longer of this world' (170).

APPENDIX B: THE CHARACTER OF Dr. NIKOLA

Antonio¹ (*Lust*, 44) Nikola was born from a Venetian noblewoman, ‘the last of an impoverished but ancient family’ (*Farewell*, 46), who had married a much older man who died when Nikola was three years old. The woman then got married again to a Spaniard, who later abandoned her and revealed to her that their marriage had been a farce, as he was already married to another woman. Shocked and wounded, Nikola’s mother was taken ill and presently died, and the child was adopted by a loving former Oxford don and his wife. When the couple died in turn, a few years later, he was entrusted to the care of his Spanish stepfather, who did not love him and let his son cruelly abuse him. As soon as he grew up to a young man, Nikola escaped from his house, travelled the world and acquired its knowledge, and soon became one of the most cunning criminals and feared men in the world (*Farewell*, 46-47).

In spite of his Italian origins, Nikola is never recognized to be Italian. To some he looks a stranger – ‘slightly foreign in appearance’ (*Bid*, 157) – but he is as often taken to be English,² maybe due to his excellent knowledge and pronunciation of the English language (*Bid*, 36). Although the doctor’s first name may traditionally be Italian, Spanish or Portuguese, his surname is East European.³ Boothby clearly wanted his “hero” to be a veritable “citizen of the world,” and did not bother about inconsistently assembling stereotypes taken

¹ The sources from which the information has been taken are given in brackets throughout.

² When Bruce revives at ‘the French mission at Ya-Chow-Fu,’ he learns by a priest that he was brought there ‘by an Englishman’ (*Nikola*, 196), actually Nikola.

³ Note that the name could be Italian if only the ‘c’ replaced the ‘k’ – ‘Nicola’ – and the stress fell on the second, not the first syllable (cf. also Introduction). Boothby claimed that the villain’s name had been inspired to him by that of the famous scientist Nikola Tesla, whom he erroneously considered to be Italian (may this throw further light on his choice to make his Dr. Nikola Italian?) – ‘The name [...] was suggested to me one day in the train by seeing the name of Nicolo [*sic!*] Tesla, the Italian electrician, in a public print.’ Cf. HYDE. ‘The Creator of “Dr. Nikola,” 131.

from different nationalities. That the doctor is Italian must be due mainly to the fact that Italy has always been used in fiction as a land that breeds villains – one may think of many eighteenth-century gothic novels, or, just to give a famous nineteenth-century instance, the memorable Count Fosco of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859).⁴ Similarly, the name 'Nikola' exploited the stereotype of East Europe as a wild and dangerous land, which was famously used by Bram Stoker to create his *Dracula*.

The age of the doctor is uncertain. In *A Bid for Fortune* the anonymous narrator of the Prologue claims that he is thirty-three (*Bid*, 7), and in *Doctor Nikola* Bruce discovers that he is 'barely thirty-eight' (*Nikola*, 15). However, in the series information about time is often contradictory (cf. 2.3), and this makes it impossible even to guess Nikola's real age.

Nikola is often described as tall or of middle height (*Bid*, 7, 215; *Lust*, 35), slim (*Bid*, 7) – or 'very slim' (*Bid*, 178) – and 'most slenderly built' (*Nikola*, 12). Of 'elegant proportions' (*Lust*, 35) and with broad shoulders (*Bid*, 7; *Lust*, 35), he possesses 'enormous strength' (*Bid*, 35; *Lust*, 35) and a 'constitution of iron' (*Experiment*, 90), despite he seems to scarcely eat and drink.⁵ His oval head, 'admirably shaped' (*Experiment*, 31) and 'phrenologically speaking magnificent' (*Bid*, 35), is covered with a profusion of hair as black as night, which harmonizes well with his 'piercing black eyes' (*Experiment*, 21). Always clean shaven, his face is of a 'dark olive hue' (*Bid*, 7, 35; *Lust*, 35), though, quite inconsistently, it is

⁴ 'In Britain, at the turn of the century there was an abundance of Italian master villains, most notably Guy Boothby's Dr. Nikola, and Italians were associated with the old stereotypes of secret societies, unusual methods of poisoning, the sorcery of Cagliostro, and Machiavellian cunning.' Dorothea FISCHER-HORNUNG and Monika MUELLER, Eds. *Sleuthing Ethnicity: The Detective in Multiethnic Crime Fiction*. Madison and London: Farleigh Dickinson UP and Associated UP 2003, 23.

⁵ Hatteras notes that Nikola, after nursing Getrude for many hours, only drinks a cup of black coffee, and he comments: 'For my part I have never yet been able to discover how Nikola managed to keep body and soul together on his frugal fare' (*Farewell*, 114). The doctor may be able to sustain himself through some peculiar tonic that he brews, as is suggested by Hatteras's remark that in the cup of coffee Nikola adds 'some curious decoction of his own' (*ibid.*).

often described as ‘sallow,’ and as often claimed to turn pallid and even deathly white.⁶ Short (*Bid*, 37) pearly (*Bid*, 7, 178) teeth and chiselled nostrils complement the image of a harmonic and handsome face. Nikola’s hands are small (*Bid*, 7, 157) with ‘long slim fingers’ (*Bid*, 8), and are as cold as ice at the touch. His feet are small, too (*Bid*, 157). He is always impeccably dressed ‘with a neatness that border[s] on the puritanical’ (*Bid*, 7). He is the portrait of the perfect gentleman: well-mannered, learned (he discusses on modern literature, cf. *Farewell*, 80; and can speak excellently at least three languages: English, Chinese and Italian⁷), ‘invariably courteous and kind’ (*Bid*, 232), and even chivalrous.⁸ Sometimes his manners turn from suave to languid, and his voice, which can be ‘clean cut as chiselled silver’ (*Bid*, 8), becomes soft and musical (*Bid*, 8; *Lust*, 32). His smiles always strike his guests as ‘curious’ (*Bid*, 7), ‘indescribable’ (*Nikola*, 92), ‘queer’ (*Lust*, 35), and ‘peculiar’ (*Experiment*, 92). ‘Fascinating’ (*Bid*, 166) and ‘terrible’ (*Bid*, 167; *Farewell*, 8), his eyes often glare and shine, and are so penetrating that they seem to ‘look [you] through and through’ (*Experiment*, 22) as if they wanted to guess your mind (*Experiment*, 21). His face is usually imperturbable, even in the most dangerous and unexpected situations,⁹ though at times it may display a wide range of expressions:

⁶ Ingleby once remarks that Nikola’s ‘usual pale face was now ghastly in its whiteness’ (*Experiment*, 140). After Nikola has told him the story of his life, Hatteras notes that his face is ‘deathly pale’ (*Farewell*, 47) and his skin of a ‘ghastly pallor’ (*Farewell*, 48).

⁷ Nikola’s knowledge of Chinese language and culture is so good that, as narrated in *Doctor Nikola*, he can even pass off as the Chief Priest of Hankow. In Venice, the doctor speaks to a gondolier in Italian (*Farewell*, 34), and a Russian expatriate addresses him in his native tongue, which may indicate that the doctor can at least understand Russian (*Farewell*, 35).

⁸ In Port Said, after abducting Hatteras and Beckenham, Nikola releases them although he knows that they will try to thwart his plans. When Phyllis is rescued by Hatteras and is asked how the doctor treated her, she replies: ‘A more admirable host no one could desire. I had but to express a wish and it was instantly gratified’ (*Bid*, 232).

⁹ Bruce significantly claims: ‘I believe if Nikola were to fall by accident into the Pit of Tophet, and by the exercise of superhuman ingenuity succeeded in scrambling out again, he would calmly seat himself on the brink of the crater and set to work to discover of what chemical substance the scum upon his garments was composed! I can assert with truth

eagerness (*Bid*, 215), surprise (*Bid*, 216; *Lust*, 180), sadness (*Experiment*, 149, 150), anxiety (*Lust*, 180), triumph (*Bid*, 228), excitement (*Experiment*, 68; *Farewell*, 45), anger (*Bid*, 216), bewilderment (*Experiment*, 142), annoyance (*Experiment*, 142), and even horror (*Experiment*, 133).

Boothby depicts Nikola as an effeminate.¹⁰ Oval head, pallid hue, short and pearly teeth, small hands and feet, slimly-built body, are all traditional signs of feminine beauty (cf. 2.5.3). Also, languid manners and voice do not usually indicate masculinity and, on at least one occasion, Nikola's manners are directly associated to women, i.e. when Hatteras notes that, while sitting, the doctor folds his hands in his lap 'after the manner of a demure spinster' (*Bid*, 37). The doctor is the only male character who falls into 'a fit of the blue,' as Bruce twice notes (*Nikola*, 54, 129), without an apparent reason for it; sudden swings of mood have always been traditionally associated to women.

Nikola considers himself 'a doctor by profession, a scientist by choice' (*Lust*, 32), who also experiments on animals and human beings¹¹ with the ultimate aim to discover the secret of immortality.¹² The doctor seems to have absorbed the knowledge of the entire world, including the occult sciences of the Far East. In his laboratory in Port Said, besides an international array of weapons, Hatteras finds also 'implements for every sort of wizardry known to the

that in the whole of my experience of him I never once saw him really disconcerted' (*Nikola*, 149).

¹⁰ This might make the doctor a homosexual – a possibility that is explored in 3.3.5.

¹¹ In Nikola's laboratory in Port Said, Hatteras catches him in the act of dissecting an animal 'strangely resembling a monkey' (*Bid*, 120), and in Allerdayne Castle, the doctor openly admits that he experiments on human freaks to further his scientific knowledge (*Experiment*, 92). There, he also performs his last experiment on Don Miguel.

¹² According to Peter Haining, Dr. Nikola 'was allegedly based on a real man, Dr. McGregor Reed, who had stood unsuccessfully for election to both the United States Senate and the House of Commons and lived to be 91.' Reed's longevity might have suggested to Boothby the theme of immortality. Unfortunately, I could not find evidence to endorse Haining's claim. Peter HAINING. *A Sherlock Holmes Compendium*, 140.

superstitious; from old-fashioned English love charms to African Obi sticks, from spiritualistic planchettes to the most horrible of Fijian death potions' (*Bid*, 119). As Nikola reveals, it was the retired Oxford don that initiated him to the 'study of the occult sciences' (*Farewell*, 46), and the doctor seems to have gone a long way by the time Boothby introduces him to his readers. In fact, besides extraordinary mimetic,¹³ deductive¹⁴ and hypnotic abilities,¹⁵ he seems to possess preternatural powers such as thought-reading¹⁶ and prophecy.¹⁷ His most frequent "magic" turn

¹³ In *Doctor Nikola*, a group of Chinese men kidnap Bruce, and one of them interrogates him, under threat of torture, about Dr. Nikola and his plans. At the end of it, Bruce shockingly discovers that the man was Dr. Nikola in disguise (*Nikola*, 46).

¹⁴ A good instance of Nikola's deductive reasoning is when, in Kelleran's home, Ingleby is first introduced to him:

"This gentleman, my dear Kelleran," he began, after they had shaken hands, and without waiting for me to be introduced to him, "should be your friend Ingleby, of whom you have so often spoken to me. How do you do, Mr. Ingleby? I don't think there is much doubt but that we shall work admirably together. You have lately been in Ashanti, I perceive."

I admitted that I had, and went on to inquire how he had become aware of it; for as Kelleran had not known it until a few minutes before, I did not see how he could be acquainted with the fact.

"It is not a very difficult thing to tell," he answered, with a smile at my astonishment, "seeing that you carry about with you the mark of a Gwato spear. If it were necessary I could tell you some more things that would surprise you: for instance, I could tell you that the man who cut the said spear out for you was an amateur at his work, that he was left-handed, that he was short-sighted, and that he was recovering from malaria at the time. All this is plain to the eye; but I see our friend Kelleran fancies his dinner is getting cold, so we had better postpone our investigations for a more convenient opportunity" (*Experiment*, 22).

¹⁵ Incited by the doctor to kill Bartrand, Pennethorne realises that 'I no longer had any will of my own' (*Lust*, 47), and that he 'must obey Nikola in all he had told me to do' (*Lust*, 49). After much thinking over his (failed) murder, the Cornishman concludes: 'That I was doing all this under Nikola's hypnotic influence I now feel certain' (*Lust*, 49).

¹⁶ All through the series, Nikola appears to steal information right from the people's minds. Just for an instance, Nikola understands Mr. Edgehill's betrayal only by looking at him. The man, in fact, is positively amazed when the doctor addresses him, out of the blue, in the following terms: "And so, Mr. Edgehill, after my repeated warnings you have informed your Chinese friends that you have a visitor?" The man stepped back as if he had received a blow, his face flushed crimson and immediately afterwards became deathly pale. He put out his hand to the wall behind him as if for support; I also noticed that he drew such deep breaths that the glasses on the sideboard beside him rattled against each other.' The doctor significantly concludes: "'You pitiful hound! So you thought you could play Judas with me, did you? How little you know Dr. Nikola after all'" (*Nikola*, 95).

¹⁷ Nikola can see the future, if what he reveals to Hatteras can be trusted. After healing Gertrude from her uncanny illness, the doctor claims: 'I knew that Miss Trevor would come into my life; I knew also that it would be my lot also to save her from death' (*Farewell*, 116).

is to conjure in a pool of liquid an image that always shocks his guests, as it represents a scene taken from their own lives.¹⁸ He can also travel, and make people travel, back in time, as when he plunges himself and his guests in the Renaissance Venice to witness the marriage between the purportedly historical Francesco del Revecce and the Duke of Levano's daughter (*Farewell*, 92).

Nikola lives out of a suitcase, often accompanied by a faithful Chinese servant called Ah-Win and a big, dark cat called Apollyon.¹⁹ He is known and feared all around the world and seems to be the individual that can most inspire awe in his fellow men. Legends have grown about him,²⁰ and those who have met him fear most to displease him. In Shanghai, Mr. Williams warns Bruce to be extremely careful to mix with Nikola, and adds: 'I confess I would rather deal with the Government of China and the millions of the society than disobey him in one single particular' (*Nikola*, 62). By the end of his adventure, Bruce will share a similar belief: 'From what I've seen of Nikola's character, I can say that I would rather quarrel with any other half dozen people in the world, whoever they might be, than risk his displeasure' (*Nikola*, 135). Indeed, as Nikola himself warns, a certain Hanotat even 'preferred to blow his brains out rather than fight [him] further' (*Nikola*, 95). He is often described as almost omnipotent – Hatteras once remarks: 'we had had sufficient experience of Nikola to teach us not to consider anything impossible for him to do' (*Bid*, 134) – unpredictable, revengeful and as

¹⁸ In the conjured images, Hatteras sees Phyllis in distress calling his name (*Bid*, 39), Ingleby, a room in Africa where, a few years before, he had been convalescent for a while (*Experiment*, 26-27).

¹⁹ As Depasquale notes, Boothby had a penchant for villains sided by pets. For instance, *The Beautiful White Devil* (1897) features Alie, a she-villain, 'a female Nikola,' with a white bulldog, and in *Pharos the Egyptian* (1899), a sensational thriller ending with a devastating epidemic of a plague across Europe, the villainous Pharos is always followed by a monkey. DEPASQUALE. *Guy Boothby*, 33-39.

²⁰ The doctor is often the first to create and fuel his own myth. He candidly admits to Bruce: 'though Nikola often boasts, you must admit he seldom fails to do what he undertakes' (*Nikola*, 184).

cruel as the devil himself – Hatteras claims: ‘I thought of Mephistopheles as I looked at him’ (*Farewell*, 33); and Pennethorne: ‘He stood at the corner of the Square, and watched me till I had turned the corner, as cool and diabolical a figure as the Author of all Evil himself’ (*Lust*, 64). A subversive thinker and a megalomaniac whose ultimate desire is to dominate the world, he works tirelessly and with the greatest dedication to achieve his aims.²¹ Purposeful and persevering, he is a believer in the theory that man can achieve anything if only he wants it (*Nikola*, 101), and accordingly hates the word ‘impossible’ (*Nikola*, 112). Pragmatic and gifted with infinite patience, he believes that ‘whatever is worth doing is worth doing well’ (*Nikola*, 127). Brave and self-confident to a degree, he hardly feels any fear, and even when his face shows any sign of it, it is only for a few moments. Though he does not let himself be laid low and is usually an optimist (*Experiment*, 108), he leaves nothing to chance and shows to be a ‘born planner’ (*Nikola*, 126). From his collaborators he requires total dedication and loyalty, and is willing to play fair with the ones who play fair with him (*Nikola*, 31). Usually a misanthropic and solitary figure – ‘I am hermit-like in my habit so far as meals are concerned’ (*Farewell*, 27), – at times he nevertheless enjoys the company of his acquaintances and even seeks it (*Farewell*, 54). He is a pleasant and amiable companion (*Bid*, 232; *Lust*, 178), ever ready to entertain and amuse his guests. In South Africa, Nikola can arouse

²¹ Dr. Ingleby, who has the chance to watch him closely at work on Don Miguel, is bewildered by the doctor’s extraordinary professionalism: ‘Nikola himself, though one would scarcely have thought it from his appearance, must have possessed a constitution of iron, for he seemed as fresh as when I had first seen him at Kelleran’s house in London. There was a vitality about him, a briskness, and, if I may so express it, an enjoyment of labour for its own sake, that I do not remember ever to have found in another man. As I was soon to discover, my description of him was not very wide of the mark. He would do the work of half a dozen men, and at the end be ready, and not only ready but eager, for more. In addition to this, I noticed another peculiarity about him. Unlike most people who are fond of work, he possessed an infinite fund of patience; could wait for an issue, whatever it might be, to develop itself naturally, and, unlike so many experimentalists, betrayed no desire to hurry it by the employment of extraneous means’ (*Experiment*, 90).

the sympathy of Pennethorne (and his guests), in spite of the hate and horror that the Cornishman feels for him – ‘During the meal Nikola exerted all his talents to please. And such was his devilish – I can only call it by that name – cleverness, that by the time we rose from the meal he had put himself on the best of terms with everyone’ (*Lust*, 178); in Kelleran’s house, Ingleby listens to the doctor’s tales with rapture – ‘there was something in this man that made me forget such mundane matters as eating and drinking’ (*Experiment*, 22); – as the doctor cicerones Hatteras and his friends around Venice, the Australian is fascinated by his narrative skills – ‘He could rouse in our hearts such emotions as he pleased; could induce us to pity at one moment, and to loathing at the next; could make us see the city with his eyes, and in a measure to love it with his own love’ (*Farewell*, 34). He is a fatalist and believes that ‘what must be, must’ (*Farewell*, 54), and, somewhat unexpectedly, he seems to be a believer in God – near the end of *Farewell*, Nikola, he claims: ‘[...] if I have sinned, be sure I shall receive my punishment at those hands that alone can bestow it’ (*Farewell*, 157).

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