The Graven Image

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INTRODUCTION

MOST OF THE MAJOR NOVELISTS of the nineteenth century, such as Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and Trollope, left behind an uncompleted book at the end of their lives. Jane Austen, who preceded them, left two. But it can be argued that Ernest William Hornung (1866–1921), an unassuming competitor among the crowded ranks of their aspirant successors, did manage to excel them in one unique respect: he left four. One of them, His Brother’s Blood, on which he was working at the time of his death, has already been published in the British Authors series. A second, The Graven Image, is reproduced in the pages which follow. They are separated, therefore, by a period of thirty years, although they have at least one intriguing plot device in common. (The two intervening novels were Goddesses Three, drafted in the mid-1890s, and An International Reputation, which took shape in 1913–1914.)

This is not the place in which to supply a potted account of Hornung’s life and activities, but there were several autobiographical strands woven into The Graven Image. These will be noted in “Afterword,” which it is hoped the reader will refrain from perusing until the text of The Graven Image
has been assimilated. Suffice to say, at this point, that young “Willie” Hornung returned home to England in 1886, after two semi-recuperative years in Australia, to find the family fortunes in what were apparently dire straits. Notions of a clerical career were, of necessity, abandoned and he set to work to support his mother and sister in the only way he knew how—by writing for magazines and newspapers. A stream of short stories and articles poured out effortlessly from his pen in an astonishingly short space of time and he drew heavily on his Australian experiences in the process. The beguiling nature of his plots, with their freshness and originality, and the quality of his writing, speedily attracted attention. Richard Dowling, a well-known but not a resoundingly successful novelist, twenty years his senior, took him under his wing and delivered much sage advice. It was probably Dowling who secured him an excellent literary agent at the very outset of his career and this gentleman ensured that his work was published in Australia and the United States as well as in Britain. His first published novel, *A Bride from the Bush*, came out in 1890 and proved hugely popular, but was predated by an adventure yarn of greater length, *At Large*, which was serialised in 1891 (and eventually appeared between hard covers in 1902).

It is difficult to say precisely when *The Graven Image* materialised. The surname of its hero, David Auburn, had featured in a short story published in 1888, but Hornung tended to recycle certain names which took his fancy. In the top
left-hand corner of the manuscript he wrote his name and address, as he did on most of his other manuscripts. In this case the address was “49 Waldegrave Park, Twickenham, SW.” The family were still living there in the spring of 1891 but later that year Hornung moved to Kensington. On this basis, the tale could have been written at any point between 1887 and, say, the summer of 1891. The actual composition of The Graven Image would have occupied, perhaps, a period of five to six weeks or even less: one has the strong impression of a pen flying effortlessly over 257 pages of manuscript with scarcely a pause for breath and very few amendments. (Whether it was the upheaval resulting from the move to a different address, or illness or other factors, which brought the creative process to a sudden halt will be considered in the “Afterword.”)

I must again record my indebtedness to the Cadbury Research Library of the University of Birmingham, in very kindly allowing me access to the Hornung papers, and to Bernard Hornung, acting on behalf of the Hornung family, for granting me permission to reproduce his great-great-uncle’s handiwork and for his keen encouragement in this ongoing enterprise. (It is hoped that, in due course, it will prove possible to fully satisfy him—and many others—in following it up with a matching volume entitled Goddesses Three and Others—but that’s very much another story.)

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NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. “A Spoilt Negative,” published in the March 1888 issue of *Belgravia*. (The Christian name, on that occasion, had been “Dick.”)

2. Hornung took a close interest in the career of Oscar Wilde. It is conceivable, therefore, that the character of the opening chapter, with its intense focus on a portrait, was inspired by “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” a short story which had appeared in July 1890.

3. The Library’s catalogue number for *The Graven Image* is MS 127/A/2/1/2.