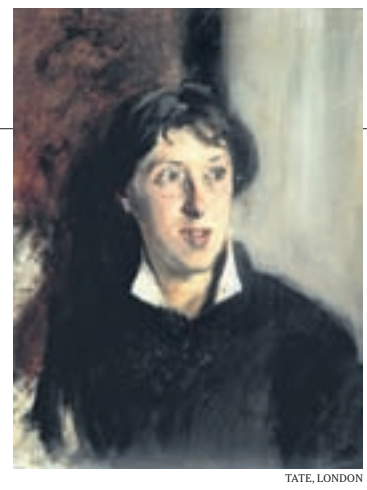
Culture

PRIVATE COLLECTION



TATE, LONDON

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

Clockwise from top center: Portraits of Vernon Lee and Henry James by John Singer Sargent; ''Ladies in a Garden'' by the same artist. Henry James captured the 19th-century American expatriate experience of Italy so masterfully in his writing that it is now almost impossible to see it other than through his eyes.

ROYAL ACADEMY, LONDON

Above, ''The Hotel Room,'' a painting done by John Singer Sargent. At right, a self-portrait by the artist. He was born in Florence, in 1856, and remained deeply attached to the city, getting to know local Italian arts figures, something other Americans rarely did.

UFFIZI, FLORENCE

American dreamers in Florence

FLORENCE

City held Old World lure for scores of restless U.S. artists in 19th century

BY RODERICK CONWAY MORRIS

Henry James had youthful aspirations to become a painter and went with his brother William to William Morris Hunt's art school in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1860. But he soon found his true vocation as a writer.

ART REVIEW

James captured the 19th-century American expatriate experience of Italy so masterfully that it is now almost impossible to see it other than through the author's eyes. No artist, not even John Singer Sargent, who was born in Florence, in 1856, and remained deeply attached to the city, ever came to provide a visual equivalent of the Florence immortalized in James's novels and Italian essays.

Scores of American painters were attracted to Florence during this period, and they are now the subject of ''Americans in Florence: Sargent and the American Impressionists,'' curated by Francesco Bardazzi and Carlo Sisi.

The exhibition opens with Sargent's ''Hotel Room,'' a wonderful evocation of the pleasures of arrival in these sunny Mediterranean climes.

In the next room, featuring ''Americans in Florence,'' we encounter Sargent's self-portrait, donated to the Uffizi in 1906, his no less famous portrait of his friend Henry James, and his likeness of the (English) writer Vernon Lee, a long-term resident of Florence and friend of both the painter and James.

Among other self-portraits and portraits of visitors who spent varying lengths of time in Florence and Italy are those of Frank Duveneck and William Merritt Chase. Both Duveneck and Chase had studied in Munich in the 1870s. Duveneck spent periods in Florence when he brought his ''Duveneck boys'' to the city. This group of American art students had its origins in Munich and Duveneck also took them on tours to France, Spain and England. Chase, too, brought groups of American students to Florence between 1907 and 1913.

Sargent was interested in contemporary Italian painting and keen, for example, to meet Telemaco Signorini, whose works he admired. This introduction was made through Vernon Lee, who played a lively part in the local cultural scene. But most of the visiting American artists in Florence, and even the longer-term expatriates among them, seem to have kept to their own community and had little contact with Italian artists and local artistic developments.

An exception was Elihu Vedder, who was born in New York in 1836 and died in Rome in 1923. Arriving in Florence in 1857, he fell in with the local Macchiaioli, a proto-Impressionist group of painters in Tuscany that included the Florentine Signorini and artists from other parts of Italy. Their excursions into the countryside produced some of the freshest and most original landscape painting of the era and Vedder came strongly under their influence, as evidenced here by five of his paintings, which along with Sargent's are among the most striking in the exhibition.

Another more integrated figure was Egisto Fabbri, who was born in New York in 1886 of an Italian father and American mother and to whom a section entitled ''The Circle of Egisto Fabbri: Scholars and Painters'' is devoted. In 1885 he made Florence his home. An accomplished artist, as the examples of his work here demonstrate, he nevertheless gave up painting and devoted himself to collecting. The story of this pioneering purchaser of Cézanne was told in detail in a previous show at Palazzo Strozzi in 2007.

Fabbri was not the only painter who decided that collecting would be more rewarding than painting. Francis Alexander was a poor Connecticut farm boy turned artist, who saved enough to make the journey to Italy, where he met a Boston heiress whom he later married. After settling with her in Florence in 1853, he turned to collecting early Renaissance masters, observing: ''What's the use of painting, when I can buy a better picture for a dollar and a half than I can paint myself?''

The remaining rooms of the exhibition bring together a miscellany of portraits, domestic scenes, landscapes, views of Florence and Tuscany and still lifes, by various American and Italian artists, many little known today, which is unsurprising in view of the mediocrity of their works on display. If Henry James had stuck to painting, we are left wondering, would he have ended up no more than a member of this undistinguished, forgotten fraternity?

The essential problem with this exhibition is that, for all the diligent research by the curators and other contributors to the catalog, it fails to find a sufficiently strong narrative thread and its ''American Impressionists'' subtitle is applicable to hardly any of the works on show.

The effect of Impressionism on America was relatively slight, despite exhibitions of Impressionists in the United States and the exposure of teachers and students to their works on visits to Paris. There are two pictures here by Mary Cassatt, portraits of her mother and her brother Alexander and his young son, both in Parisian settings. Cassatt was the only American Impressionist of international renown, and though she did visit Italy, she spent most of her life in France.

In parallel with the Strozzi's ''Americans in Florence,'' the Center for Contemporary Culture Strozzina, in the vaulted cellars of the Palazzo, surveys some of the latest works of 11 American artists in ''American Dreamers: Reality and Imagination in Contemporary American Art,'' curated by Bartholomew Bland.

Adrien Broom is unusual in her bio-

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Channeling a misogynist tyrant on vacation

The Dictator. Directed by Larry Charles.

BY A.O. SCOTT

As you may already know — since most of the prerelease publicity has been done in character — Sacha Baron Cohen's latest comic avatar is Admiral General Aladeen, despot of Wadiya, a fictitious North African country, and the subject of

REVIEW

''The Dictator.'' Aladeen, whose desert nation is a gilded monument to his own vanity, is a (perhaps only slightly) exaggerated cartoon of strongmen like Muammar el-Qaddafi and Saddam Hussein, but with certain identifying features strategically blurred.

''I am not an Arab,'' he says at one point, and ''The Dictator,'' directed by Larry Charles, carefully avoids references to Islam. Is this precaution enough to prevent the movie from giving offense? Probably not. But it may be enough to turn the tables on anyone who decides to take offense, which is really the point.

There is nothing especially outrageous here. The movie's blend of self-aware insult humor, self-indulgent grossness, celebrity cameos and strenuous whimsy represents a fairly standard recipe for sketch-comedy-derived feature films. Mr. Baron Cohen, a nimble performer, long of face and limb, is like a cross between a camel and a chameleon. He seems capable of an almost infinite range of voices and appearances, all of them outlandish, and all of them at least potentially funny.

That potential is mostly squandered in ''The Dictator,'' which gestures half-heartedly toward topicality and, with equal lack of conviction, toward pure, anarchic silliness. Aladeen, having alarmed the world with his human-rights abuses and his nuclear ambitions, is summoned to New York to address the United Nations.

There, thanks to the scheming of his Uncle Tamir (Ben Kingsley) and the ministrations of an American agent (an uncredited John C. Reilly), he finds himself replaced by a moronic double (also Mr. Baron Cohen) and forced to wander the streets like an ordinary nobody. He meets a wide-eyed activist named Zoey (Anna Faris), who gives him a job at her food co-op, and finds a sidekick (Jason Mantzoukas), who used to be one of Wadiya's top scientists.

All of which would be fine if the jokes were better. There are a few good ones, but many more that feel half-baked and rehashed. There is, for example, a long scene in a restaurant frequented by Wadiyan refugees in which Aladeen, hoping not to be recognized, invents a series of false names for himself.

Each name is a crazy mispronunciation of a sign in the restaurant — ''Ladies' Wash Room,'' and the like — and every time he comes up with a new one, the camera pans over to the sign, just to make sure we understand what's going on. And in case we're slow on the uptake, the waiter (Fred Armisen) keeps insisting, ''That's a made-up name.'' The joke is repeated at least four times.

Either this is the kind of meta-gag that tries to milk a laugh out of its own failure, or it represents a profound lack of confidence in both the material and the audience. Either way: So what?

Occasional attempts at post-Sept. 11 political satire fall just as flat, and supplying Aladeen with a love interest forces Mr. Baron Cohen to try sincerity, something for which he has no particular aptitude. Since women in his comic universe exist to be made fun of, rather than to be funny, Ms. Faris's talents are

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MELINDA SUE GORDON/PARAMOUNT PICTURES

Mr. Baron Cohen, center, as Admiral General Aladeen, with Ben Kingsley, left, as his uncle, and John C. Reilly, right, as an American agent.

Can Lindsay Lohan play Liz Taylor?

LOS ANGELES

Producer defends choice to cast troubled actress in TV biopic 'Liz & Dick'

BY MICHAEL CIEPLY

Nobody, Larry A. Thompson says, should have to endure the e-mails that he has gotten since deciding last month to cast Lindsay Lohan as Elizabeth Taylor in a television film for the Lifetime cable channel.

Some, he acknowledges, are supportive.

But others — from friends of Taylor, people who claim to have known her and the public at large — are less kind.

''I'm an idiot'' is one theme, said Mr. Thompson, who spoke in an interview this week at his home along the fairways of the Los Angeles Country Club.

''How dare you?'' is another. And some of the correspondence asks, ''Why are you rewarding Lindsay Lohan?''

His answer is simple: ''I am a producer.'' It is a way of saying that Mr. Thompson knows when a whole lot of attention is worth a little risk, and that in a cluttered media world, attention may be the most valuable commodity of all.

Something of a fixture in Hollywood, Mr. Thompson speaks with a Southern lilt that has become no less pronounced since he left the Cotton Belt town of Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1968. On Aug. 23 of that year, he landed on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street — and wept on arrival, he said — in a classic quest for movieland glamour.

His mother, Ann, a grocer's wife and an avid reader of Photoplay magazine, had bought a red dress in Memphis and put it under her bed, according to Mr. Thompson. She swore never to wear it until he went to Hollywood and invited her out to the Academy Awards.

He did not get her to the Oscars. But Ms. Thompson wore her dress in 1986 to the dedication of a Larry Thompson Center for Fine Arts in Clarksdale, in what used to be the Paramount Theater.

Mr. Thompson, meanwhile, had worked his way into show business, first as a lawyer for Capitol Records, then as a manager and confidant of television and recording stars like Jim Nabors and Sonny Bono. Later he was an executive with, and major shareholder in, an independent studio called New World Entertainment.

Though never a major presence in the movie world — his best-remembered film credit may be ''Crimes of Passion,'' a steamy thriller directed by Ken Russell in 1984 — Mr. Thompson eventually became a prolific producer of television films, with a particular weakness for celebrities of the old school.

His first notable biopic, ''The Woman He Loved,'' which CBS broadcast in 1988, cast Jane Seymour as Wallis Simpson. It was partly inspired, Mr. Thompson recalled, by memories of his mother berating his father, Angelo, for his reluctance to fetch her a Coke.

''Edward gave up the throne of England for the one he loved,'' he recalled her saying. ''You'd think that you could get me a Coca-Cola.''

Mr. Thompson has often made films without the permission of a subject. Within a day or so of Lucille Ball's death in 1989, he got on the line to CBS and successfully pitched what became ''Lucy & Desi: Before the Laughter,'' he said, by humming the first few bars of the ''I Love Lucy'' theme song.

That picture, with its portrayal of a stormy relationship, sufficiently annoyed Ball's daughter, Lucie Arnaz, that she later produced a documentary, ''Lucy and Desi: A Home Movie.'' It presented a more loving view of the Ball-Arnaz home life and won an Emmy after running on NBC in 1993.

As for Taylor, Mr. Thompson reckons that he met her only twice, in some business dealings years ago. But he said he conceived of making a film about her famous love affair with Richard Burton — whom she married and divorced twice — some months before her death at 79 last year.

At the Emmy ceremony the August before she died, Mr. Thompson asked Christopher Monger, nominated as a writer of ''Temple Grandin,'' to consider writing ''Liz & Dick,'' which he is financing as an independent production and licensing for distribution in the United States by Lifetime. Mr. Monger's father, it turned out, had long ago given Mr. Burton his start as a stage actor in Wales, so he was in.

But casting Elizabeth Taylor was more difficult.

Megan Fox, Olivia Wilde, Kate Beckinsale and Jennifer Connelly were on Mr. Thompson's list, but none quite worked out.

Ms. Lohan, he noted, looked credible when she posed as Taylor on a 2006 cover of Interview magazine. But when Mr. Thompson met her at the Polo Lounge earlier this year — and this is complicated — she was still on supervised probation for an earlier probation violation after pleading no contest to the theft of a necklace and to a probation violation that stemmed from earlier legal problems involving drugs and alcohol.

''Elizabeth had her struggles, as well,'' noted David Cooley, founder of a bar, the Abbey, in West Hollywood, that is known as a gathering point for Taylor fans (and the occasional Taylor impersonator). He described himself as ''a drinking buddy'' of Taylor's during her visits in recent years to the bar. And he argued, like Mr. Thompson, that Ms. Lohan would nail the portrayal.

''You hear of lot of people question it,'' Mr. Cooley acknowledged.

Through her publicist, Steve Honig, Ms. Lohan declined to discuss her reasons for taking the role or any steps to prepare for it.

Taylor, like Ms. Lohan, was in and out of the Betty Ford Center as she contended with drug and alcohol addiction. Both were child stars: Taylor had her film debut at 9, in ''There's One Born Every Minute''; Ms. Lohan at 12, in ''The Parent Trap.'' As a young woman, each had her brushes with the paparazzi.

Indeed, that general term for celebrity photographers was coined, Mr. Thompson maintained, after Federico Fellini watched shutter bugs in Rome buzz around Taylor in her prime.

It is a story point in ''Liz & Dick,'' which will begin shooting here on June 4, with the first showing planned for Nov. 3.

But that assumes that Mr. Thompson can find his Richard Burton.

In casting a wide net for that role, Mr. Thompson said, he is looking for someone perhaps less famous but more like the ''working thespian'' he will portray.

''We're looking for someone to balance Lindsay Lohan, in a way,'' he said.

ONLINE: **MEDIA DECODER BLOG**
Looking behind the screens and between the lines. **mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com**

Florence as magnet for scores of U.S. artists

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graphical notes in recording time spent studying in Europe, in Florence and London in 2006. Her large photographs of female figures in billowing drapery floating ethereally in air and water in states of dream-like weightlessness bring to mind references as diverse as ''Ophelia'' by the Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais, Baroque sculpture and the fin-de-siècle Symbolists.

But she is not the only artist here to find inspiration in European art of the past. Will Cotton's hyperrealist paintings draw on the rococo extravagances of Boucher, Fragonard and Tiepolo and the 20th-century pin-up artist Alberto Varga. Cotton's luscious semi-nude starlets floating on clouds of pink and white cotton candy, are simultaneously parodies of commercialism and enticing invitations to buy the product (the artist's ''Cotton Candy Katy'' here provided the image for the singer Katy Perry's ''Teenage Dream'' album).

Nick Cave's ''Soundsuits,'' costumes made from old fabrics, crotched mats, knitted blankets, buttons, tin toys and other discarded materials, that create diverse noises as the wearer moves about in them, revisit the outlandish stage costumes of the Italian Futurists and Picasso's designs for ''Parade,'' staged by Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

Laborious hand-crafting and recycling of materials play a central role in the works of other artists here. Kirsten Hassenfeld makes complex hanging geometrical sculptures out of drinking straws and old gift-wrapping paper. Mandy Greer constructs fantastical forests from festoons of soft fabrics, encrusted with beads and buttons. Christy Rupp's ''Extinct Birds Previously Consumed by Humans'' are skeletons of dodos, Great Auks and moas composed of thousands of chicken and Turkey bones gathered from friends and fast-food joints.

Both Thomas Doyle and Patrick Jacops use meticulous modeling skills to conjure up engrossing worlds in miniature. Doyle's world features traditional American clapboard houses imprisoned in glass spheres and domes, with weird apocalyptic things happening to them. And Jacobs's tiny dioramas offer viewers visions of minute parallel universes of mushroom clusters, a fairy grass ring and a Lilliputian urban apartment with views not of city streets but of an ideal, tranquil landscape of tall trees and a winding river.

''Americans in Florence: Sargent and the American Impressionists.'' Palazzo Strozzi. **''American Dreamers: Reality and Imagination in Contemporary American Art.''** *Center for Contemporary Culture Strozzina. Both through July 15.*

Channeling a tyrant on vacation

DICTATOR, FROM PAGE 12

pretty much wasted. Zoey is the target of Aladeen's abuse, and also of the film's scattershot misogyny, which is, like the dictator himself, conveniently disguised. When Aladeen calls her a ''lesbian Hobbit'' or recoils at the sight of her unshaved armpits, we're really laughing at what a jerk he is. Aren't we? Sure we are.

Unlike his precursors Brüno, Borat and Ali G, Admiral General Aladeen is not meant to fool anyone into thinking that he is real, so viewers are denied the full measure of smugness that is Mr. Baron Cohen's special gift to bestow. In the earlier projects (''Da Ali G Show'' and the movies ''Borat'' and ''Brüno''), viewers were invited to chuckle at the appalling idiocy of Mr. Baron Cohen's characters and at the stupidity of the suckers who took his buffoonery at face value.

When Borat, the cretin of Kazakhstan, carried a bag of his own feces to the table at a genteel dinner party, the joke lay both in the outrageousness of his behavior and, somehow, in the dismayed — yet still curiously polite — reaction of his American hosts. We could laugh at his grossness, secure in the knowledge that we weren't really xenophobic because we were also sneering at the fools falling for the trick. Dumb hicks. Dumb foreigners. Thank goodness we're not bigots like them!

As repellent as this logic may be in retrospect, it at least provided a queasy jolt of excitement. Something — sensitivity, good taste, the nonaggression pact between comedians and the public — was being put at risk. And there was, beyond the nervy displays of satirical hostility, a dimension of goofy absurdism that sometimes (more in ''Borat'' than in ''Brüno'') approached the level of sublimity. Very little of that happens here, and the main insult of ''The Dictator'' is how lazy it is.

ONLINE: **Q&A WITH GENERAL ALADEEN**
An interview's Mr. Baron Cohen in character. **artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com**

PEOPLE

With strong ticket sales, eight Tony Award nominations and good reviews and word of mouth among theater-goers, the new Disney musical ''Newsies'' will plunge ahead with an open-ended run on Broadway rather than close Aug. 19, the producers of the show announced. The August closing date had been something of a spurious notion ever since ''Newsies'' — about a group of New York City newspaper hawkers on strike against a media baron at the turn of the 20th century — started setting box-office records in April at the Nederlander Theater.

The architect ***FRANK GEHRY*** has refined his design for a memorial to ***DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER*** on the Washington Mall in response to concerns from the Eisenhower family and historians that a youthful statue failed to represent the former president's significant achievements. Mr. Gehry outlined his changes to the design in a letter to the Eisenhower Memorial Commission. Yet the changes mainly affect the memorial's bas-relief sculptures — changing them to three-dimensional statues — and did not alter the most controversial element. ''I still believe that the sculpture of Eisenhower as a young man looking out on his future accomplishments is a powerful image,'' Mr. Gehry wrote.

The British actor ***ALAN RICKMAN*** has agreed to play Hilly Kristal, the founder of the famous East Village punk-rock club CBGB, in a biographical film to be shot this summer, the filmmakers ***JODY SAVIN*** and ***RANDALL MILLER*** said. The project has been in development for several years, but filming is now set to begin on June 25, with Mr. Rickman taking on the part of the iconoclastic bearded, flannel-wearing bar owner who played a key role in the birth of punk and new wave music in the 1970s, providing the scarred stage where the ***RAMONES***, ***TELEVISION***, ***TALKING HEADS***, ***BLONDIE*** and other seminal groups got their starts. Mr. Kristal died of cancer in 2007, a year after he closed the club because of a long-running dispute over back rent with the landlord.

Alas, there will be no joyous reconciliation for the band that sang of evil women, war pigs, the hand of doom and killing yourself to live. ***BILL WARD***, the original drummer for the heavy-metal group ***BLACK SABBATH***, said he would not join his former bandmates ***OZZY OSBOURNE***, ***TONY IOMMI*** and ***GEEZER BUTLER*** for any of the reassembled act's three scheduled performances this year because he was disappointed with the amount of involvement he was offered, The Guardian reported.

In a statement posted on his Web site, Mr. Ward said he had ''been asked to

Biography of a first-class bamboozler

A Disposition to Be Rich. By Geoffrey C. Ward. *Illustrated. 418 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. $28.95.*

BY JANET MASLIN

BOOK REVIEW

After Ferdinand De Wilton Ward Jr. became notorious as a Gilded Age financial schemer of rare weaselly ingenuity, his picture appeared in a manual of phrenology. The shape of his ''low-top head, very broad from side to side,'' was said to explain why Ward had shown the ''Secretiveness, Cunning, Acquisitiveness, Destructiveness'' to bilk investors, shame and bankrupt a former president and try to kidnap his own son.

Within the large Ward clan Ferdinand remains ''the family sociopath,'' though each of his parents was a candidate for that distinction. It took a great-grandson of Ferdinand's, the prize-winning historian Geoffrey C. Ward, to write the scandal-filled but eminently fair book that airs this dirty laundry.

Geoffrey Ward has reason for backhanded pride when it comes to his great-grandfather's malfeasance. Ferdinand was not just any crook; he created a Ponzi scheme before Charles Ponzi was even born. He can legitimately be called the Bernard Madoff of his time, and he had the public infamy and prison sentence to prove it.

Before the arrival of this book, which takes its title from Ferd's mother's excuse for his problems, not much was written directly about Ward's chicanery. There are several reasons. His illicit financial dealings were best known as a sad footnote to the Ulysses S. Grant story, since Grant became Ward's woefully ill-informed partner in the firm of Grant & Ward. (Specialty: securities rehypothecating, or ''pledging the same paper over and over again to borrow money, paying the interest on one loan out of the principal for the next, hoping that things would somehow balance out one day.''

And the Panic of 1884, which was prompted in part by the collapse of banks exploited by Grant & Ward, had other causes, among them the depletion of European gold reserves. The eloquent bursts of fury at Grant & Ward from Mark Twain, Grant's friend and protector, are better remembered than the misdeeds that provoked them. Twain spoke of cursing Ward ''with all the profanity known to the one language I am acquainted with,'' as well as ''odds and ends of profanity drawn from the other two languages of which I have a limited knowledge.''

Ferdinand was not just any crook; he created a Ponzi scheme before Charles Ponzi was even born.

Finally there was little firsthand evidence of the Ward story. A trunk full of Ferd's Sing Sing papers has been in Geoffrey Ward's possession since 1965, but it took him years to examine the letters and family memorabilia inside. Mr. Ward has been understandably slow to tackle this subject.

But ''A Disposition to Be Rich'' is a special accomplishment. It is a most peculiar labor of love. It begins by describing the fractious lives of Ferd's parents, the chronically embattled clergyman Ferdinand De Wilton Ward Sr. and his gloomy wife, Jane Shaw Ward. First as missionaries in India, then as part of a combative Presbyterian faction in Geneseo, New York, these parents helped set the stage for their youngest son's misdeeds.

Ferd's father seems never to have gracefully given up on a feud if he could keep fighting. His mother rued the fact that she had ever borne children and specialized in writing guilt-provoking letters about her impecuniousness. As for these parents' attitude toward Ferd, ''both were right to be worried about his conscience,'' Mr. Ward writes in this book. ''It would eventually become clear that he had none.''

Born in 1851, Ferd grew up in his mother's depressive shadow. Later he developed such fine penmanship that he became a secretary to S. Hastings Grant. This opened the door to a business relationship with the Grant family and then to the general. And at 26 he approached James D. Fish, president of the Marine Bank, an institution that Ferd's dishonest borrowing would later destroy. Ferd solicited Fish's help as a mentor and collaborator.

Ferd projected signs of great prosperity, used his extravagance as a lure for investors and had the charm to keep them from withdrawing funds. Once, an investor tried to withdraw $50,000 from Ferd's firm, only to have Ferd offer him $250,000, claiming that the man's money had quintupled in the space of six months. The man was mollified and the nonexistent $250,000 was reinvested. Grant & Ward could then continue to bamboozle.

Geoffrey Ward cuts his great-grandfather no slack. He describes a whiny, bullying, self-pitying narcissist who, once caught, didn't even try to justify his behavior. Yet, somehow, ''A Disposition to Be Rich'' is written without malice. Every page attests to a sane streak in the Ward family — Ferd's best effort notwithstanding. As George Bernard Shaw said, ''If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance.''

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