

Truman Capote's Trilby: The Facts

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I have never been a great lover of hats. For one thing they tend to crush one's hair and leave it looking like sweaty straw. For another, individual hats are never thoroughly in fashion these days and wearers are considered faintly eccentric. Even in the city they draw the occasional amused smile or nudge, unless seen on the head of someone stepping out of a Rolls Royce. Of course, there are places where a hat is completely acceptable, such as at sporting events - Ascot, or the boat race - but for people like me, on a modest income, buying a hat for a single occasion is an extravagance. Finally, I think my head is the wrong shape for most hats. Its supports headgear which moulds itself to the skull, like a ski hat, but tends to reshape less obsequious millinery into something almost grotesque in outward appearance.

It was, therefore, with some surprise that I found myself staring at the trilby in the window of Donne's of Oxford Street.

Purchasing a trilby requires special nerve and should really only be undertaken by a person with a charisma impossible to influence, like Bogart or the Orson Welles of *The Third Man*. The trilby has a personality, an ego, all of its own. If the wearer is not strong enough to resist alteration, it is better to steer clear of such forceful dominant items, the demi-gods and despots of hatlands and the high country.

In any case, the trilby has a dubious history, which is difficult to deny. It flaunts an ancestry which most of us would prefer to keep locked in a cupboard with all the other skeletons: forefathers that witnessed - let's not mince words - *took part in* such infamous deeds as the St Valentine's Day Massacre, and later attended the funerals without so much as a droop of

the brim. The Roaring Twenties and the trilby are inseparable. A gangster's hat. Phillip Marlowe gave it back some fictional respectability, but the taint remains. Of course, women too have worn the trilby, but since women tend to be promiscuous in the use of headwear we can assume that any honour regained from that quarter is open to question. In the forties, again, its reputation sank to a very dark level when the Gestapo adopted it (along with its constant companion, the trench coat) as part of their uni-form, not to mention its sinister association with Papa Doc's Haitian secret police, the terrible *Tontons Macoute*. So, the trilby is not exactly a gentleman's hat, its motives are ques-tionable to say the least, and it often ends its days perched on the back of an Australian head in some sweltering out-back creek, keeping off the flies.

It is a hat given to swaggering gestures and sloping cuteness, famed for its slouch.

Consequently, when I saw this particular trilby in the shop window, and felt a strong urge to buy it, I tried to allow my intellect to govern my emotions. I was shocked by the strength of those emotions. They produced fantasies the kind I used to have in my youth. I saw myself travelling on the Paris metro, men staring at me in envy and women attempting to attract my attention. These pretty pictures used to preceed a lot of purchases as a young man. Appar-ently they were still powerful enough to rule my head, because I found myself in the shop, self-consciously trying on the trilby. I left the place wearing it.

The effect on the city's populace was not startling, but I felt rather good just the same. The hat seemed a natural part of me, and I wondered, even after those first few paces along the pavement, how I had ever managed without it. Con-fidence entered my bones: my step was light. I passed a group of Italians, sitting outside the Café Munchen drinking beer. One of them pointed with his chin, the way Latins do, and the others looked and nodded gravely. They approved. Italians are known to have good dress sense, so this increased my feeling of well-being.

Once on the tube, if the women did not exactly jostle each other for a better view of my new hat, they certainly gave it second glances. My self-consciousness evaporated almost completely. In the shop the sales assistant had placed the hat on my head in a conventional position. I now tipped it at a rakish angle, emphasising, I was sure, my angular jaw. The world grew lighter.

Back at my two-roomed flat, I took the trilby and placed it where I could see it, on the dresser which also served as a desk. This piece of

furniture stood exactly opposite the doorway between my kitchen-diner and the bedroom, and I made a meal then sat and studied the article from my position at the table. It was grey with a dark grey band. Not immediately exciting in its aspect, but there was a certain charm which gave me a possessive glow of satisfaction. This was *my* hat no one else's. Also, there was an independence about this trilby which enhanced my feeling of ownership. This self-possessed hat had chosen *me*.

That evening I took the hat to see Harrison Ford's rugged-looking trilby in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. We both admired the way it managed to remain on Ford's head, even during the most frantic stunts. Towards the end of the performance we were asked to leave because a woman sitting behind us could not see the screen, but by that time most of the best scenes were over.

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The next morning I wore it to work. The journey was delightful, but on reaching the office in Theobald's Road, I arrived at the same time as Jason Rachman, one of the company's high-fliers.

"Nice lid," he said with a smirk, as we went through the double-doors together.

"It's a trilby," I said, "not a *lid*."

He stopped, looking taken aback. I had never spoken to him as firmly as that before, and I think he was shocked at my assertiveness. He looked slightly confused for a moment, then said, "No, no - I'm serious. It suits you. I've often thought of buying a trilby myself - never had the nerve. Perhaps now that you've got one, I'll have a go. So long as you don't mind me copying..."

I was feeling magnanimous.

"Not at all," and I gave him the address of the shop. No one has ever asked me such things before.

At first I placed the hat on my desk, within reach, but one of the managers passed by and told me to put it on the hat rack at the entrance to the office. I had no choice.

The following Saturday I made a terrible mistake. I don't know what

made me do it. I suppose, after one has taken a tremendous new step, a giant stride, the temptation to go much further is very strong. I remember as a younger man I went on a youth hostel tour of the Scottish Highlands, and it was so successful I considered a trip to Tibet. Of course, the latter would have been a disaster. I'm not equipped, mentally or physically, for scaling the Himalayas, but the bug had got me and I felt that I could take on anything that mountain ranges had to offer. Fortunately finances prevented me from making a complete idiot of myself.

Not so on Saturday. On Saturday I went the whole hog. I bought a fresh band for the crown of my trilby, a Big White Hunter thing that screamed at people from fifty yards away. A leopardskin band. How crass. How *stupid!* How kitsch. Who did I think I was? Hemingway?

The hat hated it of course. I wore the band for one morning only and then replaced it with the old grey ribbon. The leopardskin attracted the wrong sort of attention and made me feel vulnerable once more. After that experience, I never tried changing the hat again, and accepted it for what it was.

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We settled into certain behaviour patterns, the trilby and I. One thing I learned was that it needed to be treated with respect and care. It was not a hat to be skimmed, James Stewart style, across the room, aimed at a peg or chair. Such undignified methods of removal were not to its liking, and I had not the lean grace of Mr Stewart to enable me to bring the action off with the same aplomb. Also, contrary to Gene Kelly's doctrine, it did not improve for being danced through the streets in a downpour. Nor did it enjoy being crushed in a Cagney grip, or being battered into a shape reminiscent of Bogart's face. It was best placed, not tossed or jammed. It liked light, airy spaces, not dark corners. It enjoyed attention, but only for itself, not because of the angle at which it was worn, or how much of my brow showed beneath the brim.

We got on fine together, for several months. So well, in fact, that I began to take it for granted.

We made lots of new friends, who would call at the flat, or telephone to arrange an evening out: friends of both sexes. Although no really special relationship developed, these newcomers in my life became important to me.

There was Tag, a West Indian with a stylish beret; and Jake, a young

Lancastrian who sported one of those colour-ful knitted caps. Then of course there was Beatrice, who always wore nice curled-brim bowlers: the kind of hat you often see on Cheltenham young ladies. Finally, there was Mona. Mona had seen *Annie Hall* six times and had consequently purchased a hat the twin of that cute, lopsided affair worn in the film by Diane Keaton.

Mona was my favourite. We once spent the night together and she put her Annie Hall hat under my trilby, so that they fitted snugly, one in the other.

“For company,” she said.

Following in my footsteps, so to speak, Jason Rachman bought a trilby too, which he wore to the office, but I felt it was inferior to my own hat. It lacked refinement. Oh, it had a little panache and a certain sardonic humour, but its charm could not make up for its lack of sophistication, and it really was a rather shallow piece of headgear. Jason knew this, but he defended his trilby with a shrug and a smile, which was only right and proper.

As I said before, I began to take my trilby for granted, and that’s when things started to go wrong between us.

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Looking back on it, I suppose it was my fault. Things began to get pretty hectic at the office, especially after my promotion. I hardly had a minute to myself. My social life too, was a whirl of activity. Everything was done at a run, and, to my eternal shame, I forgot my trilby one eve-ning, leaving it behind at the office.

The following morning I remembered it at about ten o’clock, but it was gone from its usual place on the rack. It eventually turned up behind someone’s desk, dusty and covered in fluff. Anyway it was in a sorry state. I sent it to the cleaners and what with one thing and another was unable to retrieve it for two weeks.

Then I left it at home, several days running, simply forgetting to wear it. Unforgivable, but there it is: you don’t realise the importance of these things at the time. Finally, the last straw was when I took Jason’s trilby in mistake for my own. The next day, when we exchanged, correcting the error, I could see the experience had clearly upset my trilby quite badly. Jason had gone downhill a little since he had been passed over on the

promotion ladder and tended to frequent bars and dives until the early hours of the morning. There were small stains on the brim and crown of my trilby and it had lost its shape in some steamy atmosphere.

That same evening, as I stepped out of the tube station at Tottenham Court Road, the hat blew off my head, sailed along Charing Cross Road, and got taken by a side-draught down Denmark Street. I ran after it, past the music shops and a rather sinister looking bookshop, but it had disappeared from the scene. I stood there for a while, by the small church on the corner, searching crannies and railings, but my hat had gone.

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At first I tried to shrug it off. After all, it was only a hat, and there were plenty more of those to be had. Not that I actually *wanted* another hat (I told myself) since I seemed to have outgrown the need. I was more mature, more self-assured, and no longer concerned by the world and its ways. There were plenty of friends to visit and go out with, to the cinema or theatre. In fact a hat was rather an encumbrance. One had to find places to put it, or carry it in one's hand. Being without it was a kind of freedom. It had done me a favour, blowing away like that. I was free to go where I wished, with whom I wished, whether they were bare headed or not. Liberty is a heady tranquilizer, after a loss.

Unfortunately, my new friends did not turn out to be the kind of people I had previously thought. There were excuses and evasions, and they fell away from me with mumbled apologies. Even Mona. She told me one evening that we had better not see one another again, since she did not (after all) feel we were suited.

"It was fun," she said, "but our worlds are too far apart."

I think she felt embarrassed, walking along The Strand with a hatless man, because she remained a good two feet away and kept glancing down at the pavement, as if afraid of being recognised by someone she knew. She refused the offer to take her for a drink, saying she was on the wagon, and later that week I saw her in the company of a flat-capped fellow with a Plebeian brow. She cut me dead, in the street.

Anyway, all of my so-called new friends went the same way: towards the exit. I can't say it didn't upset me, because it did. I was terribly depressed. It was all so unfair.

There were problems at work, too. Some Japanese busi-nessmen

visited the firm and they were left in my hands. I was so distracted by the decline of my social life however, I unwittingly neglected them and the result was a reprimand from one of our directors.

“And do something about your appearance,” said my boss afterwards. “You seem to have gone to seed lately. This company depends upon smart executives to give it a good image. A haircut would make a difference...”

After a week of sleepless nights, I reluctantly went looking for my lost trilby. I suppose I had hoped that it would turn up on its own, without effort on my part. Although I hadn't marked the leather headband, I had written my name and address on a piece of paper and tucked it inside. I scoured the found ads and rang various lost property offices, without success. Finally, I took to wandering the streets after work, searching the alleys. Once, I snatched the headgear off an old tramp, thinking it was my trilby, but I had made a mistake and had to apologise while the old fellow remonstrated with me, using the most obnoxious language. It took five pounds to get rid of him.

There was a period when I saw the trilby everywhere: on the tube, outside a cinema, going to work. But always, on closer inspection, it turned out to be a stranger which just happened to resemble my trilby superficially. Having once made an error in recognition, I was most careful not to handle these look-alikes, but the wearers often resented my staring, even from a distance, hurrying away into the crowd, or turning to glare at me.

Shortly after this period I lost my job through non-attendance at work. I didn't care any more. I began to hit the bottle.

Miserably, as the weeks went by, I toured the London streets, extending my area of search, and growing more despondent, and, yes, more resentful towards my erstwhile headwear. There were several million hats in London. What chance did I stand of finding one particular hat? The weeks crept into months, and gradually my frustration turned to anger, my anger to hatred. I convinced myself that my trilby was deliberately avoiding me. There were still times when I got morose and maudlin - when I missed it dreadfully - but many hours were spent over a glass bitterly regretting wasted dreams and shattered hopes. It seemed so silly - one breeze, one single breeze, and we had parted forever. My hatred bred a rage within me which was beyond my control. I told myself I would not be responsible for my actions, should I ever lay hands on that hat again. I bought myself another, a Sherlock Holmes deerstalker, and though we were not entirely compatible we were tolerant with one another, hoping to grow closer

together as the relationship matured.

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One day in October, when I was least expecting an encounter, I finally saw my old trilby plastered against a fence by the wind. I knew it instantly, though it had aged dramatically since I had last seen it. I went to it, picked it up, dusted it off - and rammed it into the nearest waste bin amongst some discarded Coke cans and cigarette packets! Remembering I had the trilby's replacement on my head I tipped my new deerstalker contemptuously at my ex, and hoped the humiliation was complete. I went home, determined to forget our association.

Six nights later the police came to my flat.

They questioned me concerning my whereabouts on an evening two nights previously. Eventually, they took me away, and in the presence of a lawyer, charged me with the murder of a woman whose corpse had been found near the Thames, close to Waterloo Bridge. A trilby - my hat, with name and address still inside the band - had been found pinned beneath her body. They later produced this item of clothing in court. Since it was associated with me it had gained the same sort of notoriety and attention from the gutter press as myself. However, it was its role as principal witness for the prosecution that seemed to suit it best. Like I said earlier, the trilby has a bad track record: you can't trust a trilby. When the prosecuting counsel pushed it in front of me, his accusations tying me in knots, it didn't help my case any when I threw lighter fuel on the brim and tried to set light to it.

However, at the last hour my own counsel called a witness to the stand who had seen the woman earlier the same evening that she died, and he stated that she 'had the face of a suicide'. (This remark was subsequently stricken from the record, but not from the minds of the jury). Coupled with this was a statement from a medical consultant who had independently examined the body. In his professional opinion the police doctor was mistaken. He himself was convinced that the dead woman could have sustained such injuries as a result of a fall, say from a bridge parapet onto concrete.

Despite the controversy which raged in the press, I was acquitted and walked from the courts 'a sadder but wiser man', though not without a stain on my character. There were those who were still convinced of my guilt, not least among them the police.

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I never saw my hat again. The last I heard, it went on the stage. Someone had written a play around my court case, and the exhibit used in the actual court room where the trial took place was considered the main crowd puller at the theatre. My ex was a box office success, right from the opening night.

Since then a certain tabloid has fostered the tale that the hat was privately purchased by Truman Capote, shortly before his death: that it attended wild New York parties and was passed around superstars and celebrities. This is an extravagant claim, to which I give little credence. To my knowledge Mr Capote preferred a more flamboyant form of headwear, such as a panama - certainly not second-hand grey trilbies, no matter how colourful their histories. Never-theless, to most people my hat has become 'Truman Capote's trilby', for which unlikely title I should be grateful. My connection with the item has almost been forgotten: over-shadowed by the charismatic influence of the famous author's name.

Good luck to it. I know one thing. I shall never trust a trilby again, as long as I live. They're not worth it. They use you up and then they blow away. And when they've had enough of the street life, they have the audacity to expect to be taken back again, no questions asked. They want the magic to last forever, and as everyone knows, things don't work out like that. Magical relationships grow into ordinary lives, sooner or later.