In an article on ‘The General Post Office’ in George R. Sims’ compendious part-published collection Living London, Beckles Willson attests to the uncanny skills displayed by the employees of the ‘Blind’ Department, that section of London’s central post office in St Martin’s-le-Grand responsible for attempting to deduce the intended recipients of obscurely addressed letters. They managed to deliver correctly to a Mr J. White of Ludgate House, St Paul’s Churchyard, E.C. a letter addressed to ‘Mr Wite, J., Lead Gate, Senpoll’s, V.C.’, a relatively straightforward accomplishment, perhaps, when compared with some of their other inspired successes, such as the translation of ‘Santling’s, Hilewita’ into ‘St Helen’s, Isle of Wight’ or of ‘Obanvidock’ into ‘Holborn Viaduct’ (II.i.82). These impressive examples of postal applied linguistics had an echo in the fate of letters addressed eccentrically to George R. Sims himself: Beginning in 1877 and continuing for the next forty-five years, he wrote for the weekly Sunday Referee, under the pseudonym Dagonet, a popular column entitled ‘Mustard and Cress’.

As Arthur Calder-Marshall has recorded, this helped to bring him a degree of eminence that once allowed the successful delivery of a letter whose envelope was addressed only to ‘Mr with a drawing of a dagger and a lawn tennis net, London’. On another occasion, an envelope bearing only a caricature of his familiar face and the designation ‘Opposite the Ducks’ (a catch-phrase recurrently used in his column to indicate his fashionable home address at 12 Clarence Terrace, Regent’s

Park) also found its intended destination.²

A figure whose posthumous reputation has described a course seemingly in inverse relation to the path to eminence it took in his lifetime, Sims was an exemplar of that phenomenon more common in our own electronic, media-dominated age: the celebrity famous for being famous. In his case the fame was actually earned and accrued from an exceptionally diverse range of involvements in Victorian popular and middlebrow culture. According to the Dictionary of National Biography, these heterogeneous activities had by 1898 taken his income close to the remarkable sum of £150,000.³ He translated and adapted Continental plays for the London stage, sometimes at the rate of one a month. He wrote his own plays and revues, and collaborated with a number of the best known theatrical writers, entrepreneurs and critics of his time, among them Wilson Barrett, Sydney Grundy, Henry Pettitt, Clement Scott, and Arthur Shirley. The most famous of his plays, The Lights o’ London, provided him with a regular income for the rest of his life after Wilson Barrett, then manager at the Princess’s Theatre, had insisted on paying him a percentage of the profits rather than a flat fee.⁴ He wrote novels and short stories. He also wrote popular sentimental ballads (his only real, if also quite modest, source of enduring posthumous fame), collected as The Dagonet Ballads (1879) and Ballads of Babylon (1880). The best known of these, ‘In the Workhouse – Christmas Day’, has achieved iconic status, as much for its more parodiable qualities as for its genuinely poignant documentary power.⁵ Sims even achieved some notoriety as the marketer of a hair-

⁴ The Lights o’ London was first published in The Lights o’ London and Other Victorian Plays, ed. Michael R. Booth, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 103-70. For Sims’ own account of the success of The Lights o’ London, see George R. Sims, My Life: Sixty Years’ Recollections of Bohemian London, London: Eveleigh Nash, 1917, 126-31. The agreement with Barrett, on a sliding scale up to 10% of the gross receipts if weekly takings were over £800, held for three years after the play’s first production.
⁵ Its tale of a starving wife’s fatal refusal to enter the workhouse with her husband because of the rule requiring their separation into distinct men’s and women’s quarters may even have inspired Thomas Hardy’s ironic poem ‘The Curate’s Kindness’, in which a well-meaning curate unwittingly condemns a husband of forty years to ‘misery ... to the end!’ by persuading the Guardians to allow married couples to stay together: see The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy, ed. Samuel Hynes, Oxford: