

THE POPULAR VERDICT AND SOME RECENT NOVELS*



It is generally conceded that of all literary forms the novel stands nearest to the drama in its dependence upon popular favour. As with the drama, its legitimate purpose is neither to teach nor to preach, but to entertain. It may, of course, incidentally accomplish many other things besides. It may, on occasion, stir us to noble impulses and righteous indignation; it may propound some of the weightiest problems of human life and point a way to their solution; it may strip the veil from hideous social evils and kindle a sweeping fire of reform. But unless it possesses the initial gift of entertaining, it courts defeat at the outset; for whatever people may do with sermons and essays and text-books, it is quite certain that they will refuse to read a novel that bores them. Accordingly it is well-nigh axiomatic that a novelist, like a playwright, must catch and hold the interest of his audience. What the nature of his audience shall be is one of the questions he is privileged to answer for himself. He may write for the many or for the few; for the wise or the foolish; for the reverend senior or the matinee girl. But having chosen his public, he must give them entertainment, or else own himself ignorant of the first principles of his art.

Now, since the purpose of all fiction, of whatever degree of ambition and achievement, is to present a series of imagined

incidents in such a way as to produce the maximum impression of reality, it would seem to be a perfectly reasonable and legitimate question to ask why the popular verdict on a novel is not the decisive verdict—in other words, why the novel that reaches the widest audience is not artistically as well as commercially the best novel? For the art of fiction is different from the other arts, in that it does not afford a conscious enjoyment, for its own sake, excepting in rare, individual cases. None but the trained critic takes pleasure, as he reads a story, in the cleverness of its technique, the symmetry of its structure, the effective tricks of rhythm and assonance, because in the technique of fiction the best art lies in most subtly concealing it; it is not something to be enjoyed for its own sake, as in music or painting. And so, if the aim of all novelists is essentially the same—namely, to interpret life in the most graphic, effective and convincing way at their command—then it would seem that the test of a novelist's ability, like that of a great actor, should lie in the size of his audience, the number of people whom his genius has the power to hold spellbound.

In point of fact, there are a sufficient number of cases in which the popular verdict and the verdict of authoritative criticism have coincided, to give a sort of fallacious justification to this doctrine that a novelist's greatness is in direct ratio to his popularity. Scott and Dickens and Thackeray, Stevenson and Kipling, Dumas and Balzac and Zola, are familiar instances of great writers who could hold and sway a great audience. But they were able to do this because of the breadth of their sympathies with human life, the universality of their themes, the gift of touching certain common chords of human nature, that set all classes of readers vibrating in response. This power different writers have to a varying degree; Dickens, for instance, to a greater extent than Thackeray—and therefore, while Thackeray is the finer

*Antonio. By Ernest Oldmeadow. New York: The Century Company.

Idolatry. By Alice Perrin. New York: Duffield and Company.

Salvator. By Percival Gibbon. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

Peter-Peter. By Maude Radford Warren. New York: Harper and Brothers.

The Whips of Time. By Arabella Kenealy. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

The Black Flier. By Edith Macvane. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company.

The Half Moon. By Ford Madox Hueffer. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

artist, Dickens gathers around him a more motley audience and wins by popular verdict. So long as a novelist confines himself to themes that possess this universal appeal; themes dealing with such primitive, basic emotions that they are as intelligible to the ploughman as to the man of letters; themes as single-minded as Othello's jealousy or Macbeth's ambition, just so long will his true worth be roughly measured by the size of his audience.

It is, of course, one form of genius to be able to choose themes that will thus reach the public at large and make the whole world feel the thrill of kinship. But it is not one of the indispensable factors of great fiction, because greatness lies in the way a story is told, rather than in the story itself. It depends upon the degree of an author's ability to tell the truth about life, rather than upon the particular truth that he has undertaken to tell, and if he succeeds greatly, the absolute value of his achievement remains the same, whether a million readers or only a score possess the intimate knowledge of life that is necessary to a complete understanding of what he has done.

It follows that while many of the greatest novels ever written belong, and rightly, too, to the general public, many other novels, equally great, must remain caviare to the general. The general public will continue to yawn over the novel that deals with problems too subtle for it to understand; and it will continue to read and admire writers whose ignorance of life it is itself too ignorant to detect. There are just a few peculiarly gifted writers who achieve that seemingly impossible task of simultaneously appealing to the child and the adult, by means of an *Alice in Wonderland* or a *Jungle Tale*. But the mere fact that books like these augment their possible audience by the sum total of the nation's childhood, does not make them greater in literary value than, let us say, *Vanity Fair* or *Pere Goriot*, which must remain content without a juvenile audience. A certain portion of the general public are at best only children of a larger growth; and while certain masters of fiction succeed in writing down to their level, it would be folly to claim for these a higher degree of

merit than for other writers who frankly choose to write for a limited public possessed of a special culture, an exceptional maturity. The fact that three generations have wept over the death of little Nell does not alter the fact that *The Old Curiosity Shop* lies considerably lower in the scale of art than, for example, *The Golden Bowl* of Henry James, whose very meaning would persistently elude ninety per cent. of the sum total of Dickens's readers.

For these reasons it should be remembered that there are few tests so fallacious as the popular verdict on books of fiction. As against the one time when the public may possibly be right, there will be ten times when it will be plainly, if not grotesquely wrong. It will look askance at the really promising work of an author's youth, and then end by absurdly overrating the mediocre productions of his middle age. And this is not surprising, because mediocrity is itself one of the notes that awaken a ready response from the world at large.

And yet the Popular Verdict is a factor which it has become impossible to overlook in the criticism of modern fiction because of the easily understood and somewhat deplorable reason that it is the factor which largely explains why so many mediocre books are published—and also why many a book containing the promise of better things is deliberately warped and cheapened and spoiled. A casual glance over a shelf full of so-called "summer novels" is in these days rather disheartening, not because a light little story skilfully told is in itself an unworthy achievement, but because in so much of our current fiction it is unpleasantly evident that the author has had his eye at least two-thirds of the time upon his audience, rather than on his work.

Accordingly, when we come across a book that evidently has been written for its own sake, without any thought of popular acclaim, there is a temptation to give it almost too much praise; to shut our eyes to its defects and exalt its worthy qualities beyond the bounds of strict impartiality. Such a book is *Antonio*, by Ernest Oldmeadow. Obviously,

the story has numerous faults; it is somewhat too long drawn out for what the author has to tell; it is wearisome in spots, and the conversation is here and there distinctly crude. Yet these objections are more than counterbalanced by the welcome fact that here is a book not written in accord with any of the popular formulas; a book which appears to say to the general public, "Take me or leave me as you please. I am written for my own sake and not for yours. I have nothing in common with the average parody upon reality that is called a novel. I am the record of the struggle of a human soul." Obviously, then, *Antonio* is not a book destined to receive the popular vote. It is the story of a young Benedictine monk who finds himself, with the rest of his brethren, ejected from the monastery at the time when Portugal, after the close of the Napoleonic wars, confiscated the possessions of the Order and drove the monks out into the world. All the other monks of this particular monastery are old and near to death; but Antonio is young and strong and full of zeal; and in him, if anywhere, lies the one hope of some time restoring the brotherhood. How he accomplishes this task is the central theme of Mr. Oldmeadow's strong and unusual story. He shows us this young priest, inexperienced and untrained to face the world, starting forth penniless, laying aside his monastic garb, and beginning life as a simple citizen, obtaining employment, first of all, as an expert judge of wines. How he rises step by step in the confidence of the wine merchant who employs him, how he takes a cargo of rare old wines to England, and reaps an ample harvest for himself and his employer; how he returns and with his savings buys the vineyards adjoining the old monastery, so that he may be on hand to watch and protect it day by day; how night after night he creeps through an underground passage into the old abandoned chapel to kneel in the old stall and offer up prayers for his absent brethren—all this forms the very warp and woof of the vivid verbal tapestry into which is worked a romance of turbulent fashion, self-abnegation and protracted struggle, ending in a final and lasting peace. The spirit of

faith and devotion is admirably sustained, and the colouring throughout the book exhibits a softened and mellow richness suggestive of the glow of sunlight through old stained glass.

Religious fervour forms the keynote to another book of the month, *Idolatry*, by Alice Perrin. Like this author's previous volumes, it is a story of British India, and pictures with a good deal

of vividness the motley and teeming life of the East, the startling contrasts of manners and customs, the clash between Eastern and Western philosophies and faiths. The immediate atmosphere of the story is that of a colony of English missionaries, one of whom, in sharp contrast to the conservatism of his brethren, asks himself frankly whether the methods that the church is pursuing are not, after all, a waste of time and energy; whether in order to reach and hold the Hindoo the missionary must not make more obvious and radical sacrifices than in the past; whether, in short, it is not necessary for Christianity in India to adopt in a measure the poverty and self-abnegation of the Brahmin and the Buddhist. The character of this man, animated by the spirit of a great martyrdom, we get not directly for the most part, but through the eyes of a young Englishwoman, a vain, self-seeking, unscrupulous young woman who, having refused to marry a British officer who loves her, afterward learns that he has come into a fortune and promptly follows him to India with the deliberate intention of marrying him for his money; but in India she forms the acquaintance of this ardent, almost fanatical young missionary, learns to love him, learns to see life through his eyes, and by doing so learns how mean and contemptible have been all her past plans and motives. There can be nothing for the future between her and the missionary, because, although he loves her, his one dominating motive is sacrifice. But, having known him, she realises that it has become impossible to marry another man whom she does not love, and that the only honest thing left for her to do is to tell this other man the truth and give

up the fortune already in her grasp. There is a tendency in the book toward exaggeration, verging upon religious sentimentality, yet, taken as a whole, it is a careful piece of work that succeeds in holding the reader's interest.

A book which comes exasperatingly near to being a worthy piece of work is

"Salvator" *Salvator*, by Percival Gibbon. The author had all the material for a story at once dramatic, instructive and full of popular appeal, and he has just missed his goal through sheer lack of technical skill. He starts with the advantage of a picturesque and unhackneyed setting, the island of Mozambique—a setting which, for the moment, we do not remember to have come across in any novel other than Dolf Wyllarde's *Uriah, the Hittite*. He has made us see the life on the island, with its motley hordes of negroes, Portuguese, and the scum and riff-raff of all the nations of Europe as a sort of hotbed of treachery and crime, a filthy breeding place of corruption and treason. He has conceived the idea of flinging into the midst of this political anarchy a dreamer, a quixotic and visionary reformer, a man of mixed blood combining the obstinacy of the Anglo-Saxon with the sentimentality of the German. This man *Salvator* undertakes single-handed, and with the courage of a colossal ignorance, to clean up the government of the island, to effect a reform that does not hesitate at a revolution, to make himself, if need be, the dictator—not for personal gain, but in a spirit of self-sacrifice. This theme might be handled a dozen different ways. It is rich in possibilities of satire, of burlesque, of grim tragedy—and, of course, it can end only in one way, the defeat and annihilation of the would-be reformer. But no matter in what key the author chooses to write it, the essential thing is to keep *Salvator* in the centre of the picture; to make us see behind him, and surrounding him, and hedging him in, an intricate network of conspiracy, a secret, remorseless invincible treachery; to give us everywhere the impression of lurking dangers, hidden ambuscades, smiling hypocrisy; to let us

see, in all its details, the drama of a gigantic fiasco. The reason why *Salvator* is a book full of interesting promise is that at times it almost achieves some of these results. The reason why it is nothing more than a book of promise is because it injects into the central plot a number of irrelevant and unimportant side issues, a quantity of characters who do not really count, a young Englishwoman who does not know her own mind for two consecutive chapters, and a young Englishman who is held up as a model of courtesy to men and chivalry to women when, as a matter of fact, he is neither the one thing nor the other—and even if he were, has no right, according to the accepted principles of technique, actually to elbow the hero more than once out of the centre of the story. And yet the chances are that, because of some clever writing and novel situations, the popular verdict will place *Salvator* distinctly higher than it deserves.

A story which, in sharp contrast to *Salvator*, contains no possibilities for

"Peter-Peter" making anything better or cleverer than the author has made is *Peter-Peter*, by Maude Radford Warren. It is a book

carefully and successfully written, with the purpose of satisfying a quite legitimate popular demand for stories of the fluffy, harmless sort, depicting, with a certain tender lightness of touch, a highly idealised variety of love in a cottage, where nothing happens as it does in real life—where tempers are never ruffled, adversity never brings discouragement, and friends are always loyal, and babies are impossibly cherubic. In short, *Peter-Peter* is the history of a young married couple who, having been bred in luxury, suddenly find their entire fortune swept away, and retire to the only refuge left them, a tumble-down barn on the farm which was the husband's birthplace. Here, for a year, they struggle blithely with poverty. Here for a while he does the cooking and dish-washing, while she gives lessons in French and music. Here the twins are born, and inspire the father to write wonderful verses about them, and to draw marvellously varied pictures of

babyhood in all its phases, and here they are still living when the joyful news comes that the quaint and inimitable book made from these pictures and verses has caught the public taste and become the foundation stone of a new fortune. Such is *Peter-Peter*, a book destined to a popularity quite beyond its real merit, a book that with all its tenderness, its humour, its reverence of home and love and motherhood, remains, when all is said, essentially and preposterously unreal.

The Whips of Time, by Arabella Kenealy, belongs to the class of books

“The Whips of Time”

that make no pretensions to high literary value, and are accepted at their face value by the general public, whose

verdict is therefore just about commensurate with their real worth. In other words, it is a story written frankly not as a study of life or of character, but solely for the sake of an exciting and original development of plot—the sort of story which in its highest development is exemplified by James Payne and Wilkie Collins. *The Whips of Time* takes its start from a heartless experiment by an English physician for the purpose of deciding the vexed question of the part played by heredity in the development of character. The physician in question is a disbeliever in heredity, and he proposes to make a test by secretly exchanging two babies born at the same time in a private sanitarium—one of them the child of the leading family of a small English town, the other the child of a condemned murderess who has confessed to having poisoned a score of victims. The story opens twenty years later than the prelude, and is seen through the eyes of another physician who shared the confidence of the doctor responsible for the exchange, but has never known the details of it. Coming for a season to the small town in question, the doctor discovers that instead of one there are two leading families, and in each of them there is a son and heir born by curious coincidence in his friend's sanitarium, and at about the same time that the child of the murderess was born. One or the other of

these two young men, so the physician assumes, somewhat hastily, must be the child of the murderess. The only problem to his mind is which of the two has the probable inheritance of a criminal nature. And as the story progresses; as we watch from day to day the lives of these two young men; see their hearts awakening and their interests definitely centring upon certain young women, we see them constantly through the eyes of this doctor, we hear constantly the insistent question, Which of these two is destined to make a woman miserable. It does not occur to the good doctor, and therefore it does not occur to us, that the sex of the murderess's child is one of the details which his brother practitioner never mentioned to him, and that is why the outcome of the story, when we finally get it, comes with the startling suddenness of the cracking of a whip.

So long as the automobile fad endures, it is likely that almost any story in which

“The Black Flier”

the characters are hurled madly through town and country at law-breaking speed, undergoing adventures that defy all

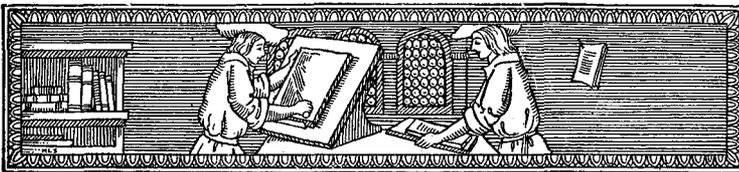
rules of probability, will receive a favourable verdict from the general public. *The Black Flier*, by Edith Macvane, adds one more to the already lengthy list. As for the likelihood of the incidents which in this particular case are supposed to have happened to the man and woman mainly concerned, the simplest method is to detail them briefly and without comment, leaving the reader to judge for himself. A young American, about to marry an English girl at her own home, discovers half an hour before the appointed time that there is a blunder of names in the marriage license. He hastens across the fields by a short cut to the register's office, has an ugly fall in attempting to jump a hedge, and lands in the road, his wedding garments in ruins and his leg crippled from an ugly twist. An approaching motor car seems to solve his difficulty. At a signal it stops, a young woman, addressing him in French, assists him to his feet and into the car, then puts on full speed, and in spite of all his expostulations, drives

blindly onward until at nightfall they stop at a strange and isolated inn just over the Scottish border. This unaccountable young woman who has thus kidnapped him enters their names as husband and wife, and the man, not wishing to expose her to scandal, and unversed in Scottish law, refrains from contradicting her. Who and what she is he is not told; but he gathers that she is fleeing from some great danger; and her youth and beauty awake his chivalry and sympathy. The next morning he discovers that the lady has flown, her pursuers having overtaken her and spirited her away. He himself is left with her motor car on his hands, and is promptly arrested on the charge of having stolen it. Within twenty-four hours, Fate has willed it that he should desert a bride at the altar, elope with a strange woman, be charged with a felony and under Scottish law have presumably and quite against his will contracted a marriage. To contrive an explanation of these various happenings, and an escape from their consequences that will satisfy even the rudimentary demands of plausibility, is a task that might well dismay even a veteran concocter of mystery stories, and probably few could do much better than Edith Macvane has succeeded in doing. Nevertheless, the book does not carry conviction with it; we know all the time that things don't and couldn't have happened that way for the simple and all sufficient reason, to quote the immortal words of Assessor Brack, "People don't do such things!" Nevertheless, *The Black Flier* is destined to be widely read and popularly enjoyed, because it does give an exhilarating illusion of the rush and swirl of a mad flight, the breathless onward plunge through space, the fascination of limitless and lawless speed.

The Half Moon, by Ford Madox Hueffer, belongs to that better sort of historical novel that refuses to purchase popularity at the cost of honest narrative and careful style. The date of the

story is in the early years of the reign of King James the first. The scene of action for the English portion of the story is the town of Rye, one of the Cinque ports which had, till then, their own laws, rights and nobility, quite apart from those of the rest of England; and for the rest of the book, the action takes places on board the *Half Moon*, the ship in which Hendrick Hudson first came to the Island of Manhattan. It is, however, in no sense a colonial novel, for the plot concerns a certain Edward Coleman who, contrary to English law, has been exporting wool to Holland. He is betrayed by Anne Jeal, daughter of the mayor of Rye, out of revenge because he has scorned her beauty, and has chosen to marry a Dutch woman. Coleman, with the death penalty hanging over him, flees to Holland, and thence ships with Hudson to the New World, where, as tradition tells us, he was the first white man to die in the new Dutch colony. In itself the plot sounds thin and unpromising, but it has been used by Mr. Hueffer as the framework for a careful and very vivid picture of seventeenth-century bigotry, ignorance, and superstition; of the final struggle between mediævalism and modernity; and of the desperate lengths to which a proud, powerful, and undisciplined woman will go in her attempt to avenge the wrongs of her slighted beauty. It is a pity that there are not more stories of the historical novel class written in this same careful and conscientious way.

Frederic Taber Cooper.

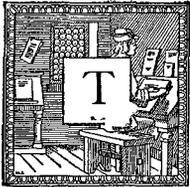


“DIAMOND CUT PASTE”

BY AGNES AND EGERTON CASTLE

BOOK II—A WEEK'S CHRONICLE

CHAPTER IX



HE door between the orangery—which gave its name to the house—and the inner drawing-room was open, a fact Coralie was not aware of until the sound of voices reached her in her retreat among the fragrant trees. She had discovered this haven with all the joy of the Southerner finding a bit of home in a far-off land. The breath of the blossoms, the warmth of the atmosphere, the feeling of the rocking-chair under her lissom body, of the tiles under her feet, brought her back to her childhood and its early surroundings with a rush of that joy tinged with pathos with which a happy woman can afford to look back upon her happy past. In lazy luxuriance she rocked herself and dreamed, a smile on her lips, and almost, but not quite, a tear in her eye.

“My! those were good days, too,” she said to herself. “I’ll have to make Ernest take me back to the old folk before long.”

Then, instead of the past, she began to consider the future—how mother would look when she saw her child again, and how proud the child would be to show the mother to the husband . . . ! If ever there was a lovely woman—Into this agreeable day-dream certain voices penetrated, at first vaguely, then so insistently, almost disagreeably, that Coralie ceased rocking herself to listen. Those were Norah’s tones, uplifted, shrill, furiously complaining.

Good heavens! the girl was crying! And the other voice—that sweet, false, insinuating note—well she ought to know it by this time; how many an hour it had exasperated her almost beyond endurance during the last year . . . ! What mischief was Emerald Fanny concocting now?

“I’m going to listen,” said Coralie determinedly to herself, clenching her hand.

“I stole on the highway yesterday; I’m not going to be squeamish about a trifle of eavesdropping to-day. Every one sees his duty in his own way. I hope I know mine when I meet it.”

So, virtuously, she listened.

“I won’t stand it!” Norah was sobbing. “Mamma has no right to interfere with my life. I know she said something to Enn in order to put him off coming any more. He used to be always dead keen on having me with him.”

“I am sure he was,” insinuated the sweet voice.

“He did care for me,” the passionate complaint proceeded. “Why, he would hardly let a day pass without coming up on some pretext or other, or writing, or phoning. He did care for me.”

“Indeed he was watching you with his eyes the whole time. I saw him, little Norah, that first night.”

“And mamma is going to spoil all; to break my heart and ruin my life! Mamma always wants to manage everybody. She said she wouldn’t have me going out with him any more; that I was too old for that sort of thing . . . and in the same breath she tells me that I’m a school-girl. I feel sure she said something beastly to him and hurt his feelings. Enn has got those kinds of feelings.”

“Oh, it would be such a pity,” sighed the widow. “People do make such dreadful mischief without meaning it! If mothers would only understand that their daughters grow up!” Emerald’s voice took an even more delicate silkiness. “You must try and make allowances for your dear mother, darling. It is hard on a young-looking and handsome woman to have a grown-up daughter.”

“Oh, the cat, the cat!” cried Coralie to herself in burning indignation, and almost burst from her eavesdropping seclusion to fulminate the mischief-maker. But she restrained herself; she waited for Norah’s outcry. Surely the girl, however deep under the spell of the