

# EDITORIAL

IN reviewing last week MAURICE HEWLETT'S new book, *Gudrid the Fair*, we had occasion to quote from the preface certain lively remarks of Mr. HEWLETT defending his manner of dealing with Icelandic sagas.

Mr. HEWLETT said, in substance, that he cared infinitely less for the discovery of America by the Northmen, an incident of his novel, than for the people that did the discovering.

It was of more importance to him to know what sort of woman his heroine was, how she looked, what she thought, what she felt, than to know what she had to do with world history.

This intense preoccupation with people, Mr. HEWLETT insisted, must always be the novelist's chief business. History is for the broad sweep of affairs; the novel is for genre study.

Of course Mr. HEWLETT is right as right can be. A story that doesn't concern itself primarily with people isn't a novel, whatever else you may choose to call it. Literature is full of the grandiose failures of men who mistook a novel to be a collection of important events.

These writers are like the painters who have attempted huge canvases showing some earth shaking happening participated in by a collection of human shapes no better than lay figures.

Literature has also its triumphs gained by men who, while using a big canvas, never forgot that the supremely interesting thing was the vividness of a few men and women in the foreground of the picture.

## The Chronicler's Viewpoint.

The difference between a novelist and a chronicler or commentator is a difference in what is seen. Suppose a novelist and a chronicler and a miscellaneous lot of other men in a group present at the destruction of Pompeii and so placed as to be able to observe the tragedy in safety themselves.

The chronicler sees an awful disaster. A great city is being obliterated at a single stroke. So many thousand lives are being lost. Such and such property destruction is taking place.

The chronicler is thoroughly excited. His mind runs to the figures of losses, to comparisons with previous calamities of the kind, to speculation about the future.

Will the destruction be reparable? Can or will a new city be built? What will be the effect on the surrounding world, on history? All these are matters that engage the chronicler's interest to the exclusion of everything else.

The novelist is not unaware of the size of what is happening nor of the significance it may have for the world at large, but all the things which his companion is chattering about are, to the novelist, nothing but the broad and deep background for the effect on single lives.

## What the Novelist Sees.

The novelist looks at the fleeing people. He sees that old woman, crumpled up outside the city wall and crying in helpless terror.

He knows her! She is the mother of that beautiful girl who was such a sensation in Rome last summer. A flower seller—the girl. Yes, and there was a great scandal, but though the girl was the cause of it the business did not tarnish her. It disgraced one of the Senators and inspired eloquence in the Forum and odes at the banquet tables.

What became of that girl? How interesting it would be to know!

The novelist looks at the mother of that beauty, lying wretchedly in a heap, death raining down from the sky upon her, and he quivers all over with excitement—with pity, surprise, horror, and an eager speculation, a human curiosity.

What will become of that girl now? And what was the real story? Perhaps this old woman, her mother, was the only one who could have cleared up some things about it . . . and soon there will be no one. . . .

## What Everybody Cares About.

The novelist is just as upset as the chronicler, the commentator, the insurance agent, the investor, the banker, the business man, the contractor and the representative of the Red Cross who has hurried from headquarters on the Capitoline Hill and is sending couriers back to Rome with a list of supplies needed.

But the novelist is the only one of the whole collection of onlookers who sees and gets excited over the things which will interest all the others.

Each of the other onlookers sees certain things in which he—and others in his "line"—are profes-

sionally interested. But they are not things which stir the faintest spark of attention in any one else.

The historian gets a respectful hearing because humanity has need of his broad outlines of the event. But the novelist is listened to and enjoyed and praised and remembered just to the extent that he makes a few people live for us.

It is his thrilling task to show us what those few persons do, why they do it, and what comes of their behavior.

We all care intensely about a few people, care to know them through and through, because we see ourselves in the light of others. Put a man on a desert island without human companionship or with only the companionship of racial inferiors and he will not remain the man he was for long.

## People First!

This is splendidly brought out in E. L. GRANT WATSON'S first novel, *Where Bonds Are Loosed*, a book which deserves and will receive respectful attention because the author has a big point to make and has made it by simple and effective means.

The only way any one of us has of measuring himself, his gifts, his qualities, his powers and his accomplishment is by comparison with the folks about him. Take them away and he is lost.

He no longer sees himself mirrored with all his goodnesses and imperfections. Atavism sets in.

Let enough time elapse and the man loses the power of self-measurement and social conformity which the world gave him to fit him for a social existence. He is a beast.

And he can never come back.

JACK LONDON knew this and preached it. Let those whose too refined tastes rejected LONDON test this principle for themselves. Let them undergo some of the things LONDON underwent, look upon some of the sights CONRAD and McFEE have looked upon, visit some of the places GRANT WATSON has visited, meet some of the people who move through the pages of THOMAS BURKE'S *Limehouse Nights* and *Twinkletoes*. Let them!

They will find out speedily enough how infinitely dependent is the strongest and most cultivated mortal on earth upon the mechanism of society.

## Do You Read to Admire the Scenery?

Perhaps—to come back to the central discussion—perhaps there will be writers to the end of time who will think that their novels must be like these come and go dramas where the first act occurs in New York, the second in Paris, the third at a French bathing resort and the fourth in San Francisco.

We may pity them, but in self-defence we shall have, all of us, to pass them by.

One of the greatest novels in English—length has nothing to do with the definition of a novel—is *Ethan Frome*. A tiptop novel may have only two or three persons in it and may never take them beyond the confines of a wretched little village; and still it will be a tiptop novel because the people in it are important, worth knowing for our self-comparative purposes, understood and perfectly explained; people who act out their lives in accordance with their own characters and not in compliance with history or "a change of scene" or any other artificial notion of the author's.

## The Classic and the Best Seller.

This brings us to a last point. What is the difference between a novel like *Ethan Frome* and a best seller by ROBERT W. CHAMBERS? Mr. CHAMBERS puts his people first, understands them, lets them work themselves out, doesn't he?

Of course he does, mainly. He is a skilled and wise craftsman.

Well, then, why is not any one of a dozen of his books as perfect a novel as Mrs. WHARTON'S?

It is. They are. But—

Those who can get understanding from Mrs. WHARTON'S study of her few people can learn nothing from Mr. CHAMBERS'S heroes and heroines. The people Mr. CHAMBERS writes about have no self-comparative value for the readers and appreciators of *Ethan Frome*. In the same way the study of lives in Mrs. WHARTON'S book is valueless for Mr. CHAMBERS'S much larger body of readers.

In short, a few people can profit by the bare New England tale; many thousands are able to profit by the stories that Mr. CHAMBERS writes with such dexterity. As for the profit to the two sets of readers it is different, possibly, in degree, but not in kind.

The luckiest of us can know, personally, only a handful of persons well enough to institute comparisons of worth to himself and society.

The novel helps each of us to get under the skins of many more people than we could ever come to

know intimately in the flesh. By so much it enlarges our material for self-comparison. By so much it helps each of us to find his place and estimate his worth and fix his contribution to the unending and communal effort which all civilization rests upon.



This is how WILLIAM McFEE describes New York in *Aliens*:

For a moment I forgot that I was standing on the deck of a ship. From my lacustrine vantage the whole of the wide harbor lay in view, the more distant edge of Long Island forming an irregular and dusky line betwixt the blue waters and the bluer sky. In the middle distance stood the Statue of Liberty, islanded in the incoming tideway, while away beyond, rising in superb splendor from a pearly haze, the innumerable towers of Manhattan floated and gleamed before my eyes. Irresistibly there came to me a memory of Turner's Venetian masterpieces, and I knew that even that great magician would have seized upon the scene before me with avidity, would have delighted in the fairy-like threads of the bridges, the poetic groupings of the vast buildings, and the innumerable fenestrations of the campanili.

And this is how THOMAS BURKE describes a young girl in *Twinkletoes*:

Sailing toward Chinatown was a child as lovely and as insolently happy as a lyric. Torrents of bright curls foamed about her shoulders, and the black silk frock clung to her young beauty as though it loved her. The mirror-like candor of her face, undimmed by any breath of the world's abominations, reflected nothing but the serene joy of the moment. Remote seemed her glory from that mephitic chaos. Fimil as a wraith that may melt at a touch, she seemed too fragile even for childhood; and the mind shrank from the thought that the deflowering hand of man should rest upon this phantom of a dream.

So there you have the vision of New York as a Scotch steamship engineer saw it from a ship down Staten Island way. The other picture is of a young girl as THOMAS BURKE saw her tripping through the streets of London's Chinatown.

We shall be accused of unbounded enthusiasm and shall not mind it, of excessive praise and shall deny it, for what we are about to say.

Which is that in all the literature of description in English there are not two finer passages than these, from books a week old.

No! We are not forgetful of RUSKIN on St Mark's in Venice nor of KIPLING on the Jungle Folk nor of Sir THOMAS BROWNE, with his beautifully balanced "quietly rested under the drums and trappings of three conquests," nor of STEVENSON (somewhat too precious a good deal of the time), nor of any of the masters of the melodic curve and prose rhythms.

## Part of McFEE's Effect.

Read McFEE'S comparison of New York to Venice. Note the extremely beautiful effect of his undulating Latin derivatives—"lacustrine," "fenestrations"—and the bell-like Italian name of tall towers, "campanili." Hold your breath at BURKE'S picture of Monica Minasi, the dancer called *Twinkletoes*, as you would assuredly have held your breath had she floated before your unexpectant eyes gazing from the window of a public house near the East India Docks. BURKE is a greater poet than half the poets who write to-day, or ever assembled words in lines.

He tells us of the girl *Twinkletoes* at the age of 12 that she had nineteen golden curls and that her eyes were "like flowers that made a resting place for a thousand expressive butterflies." Sometimes the man gets his tremendous effect with a single word. "The lights of Chinatown across the way stammered through the dusk." What other word than "stammered," what single other word in the thousands that English offers, could so vividly convey the picture of those golden lights glimmering fitfully through the twilight, the somewhat thick and wavery atmosphere retarding their perfect luminescence?

## As to English "Style."

And people talk about style! And some of them with a touching faith in the past think there are no stylists nowadays! And schools and professors teach English literature and English style, or affect to, without the least notion that there are stylists among us as superb and skilled as any who have gone before. How many of their pupils, chancing to pick up *Aliens* or BURKE'S story of the little dancer, would recognize instantly such passages as these for the pure gold they are?

Why, the pleasure of life, the rarest thrill it can give, lies in the power to recognize and appreciate such things so soon as they come beneath your eye! Read McFEE and BURKE and thank your stars that English literature is still in the making!