

CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

By ARTHUR
BARTLETT MAURICE

MR. THOMAS L. MASSON, for many years the editor of *Life*, has written a book called "Our American Humorists" (Moffat, Yard & Co.). In a "foreword" he emphasizes the importance of the "column" in our daily newspaper pabulum, and places upon Ben Franklin the responsibility for the institution. "Poor Richard's Almanac," according to Mr. Masson, is the North American progenitor of the "column," and from Franklin's time the columnist has always flourished in American newspapers. "Artemus Ward might be called a sort of traveling columnist. He exhibited on his own account. His 'column' was a separate affair, conducted by himself independently." Then came Bill Nye, who, at the high water mark of his affluence, received the then unheard of sum of \$200 a week for his "letters." "I happen to know this," writes Mr. Masson, "for at that time I was a young cub editor, and his beautifully written copy passed through my hands and thence on to the syndicate of papers." But it was not many years later that Peter Finley Dunne was receiving over a thousand dollars a week for his "Dooley" letters.

MR. MASSON has a high opinion of the work of Eugene Field. "He had all the qualities of a columnist, and more. He had genuine pathos and genuine humor. And, in addition, he had a touch of genuine comedy, which is, I think, the rarest trait in the world. At least we are entitled to think so when we consider how few in all the history of the world have possessed it. You ask me what comedy is, in contrast to humor, and my reply is that it would take too long to explain, and even then my explanation would be mysterious and probably inadequate. I can only refer you to George Meredith's essay on the subject. Comedy, to my mind, is essentially Greek in its origin: it is paganism with an aura. Whatever it is, Gene Field undoubtedly had it. His verses—many of them exquisite in their admirable fooling—still linger with us." Then in turn Mr. Masson pays his tribute to Bert Leston Taylor, the columnist of the *Chicago Tribune*, and what he calls "the big bow-wow humorists," such as George Ade, Ring Lardner and Irvin Cobb.

MARK TWAIN, according to Mr. Masson, was all right until he began wearing those white flannel suits. Then he degenerated as a humorist because he had become self-conscious, whereas previously his very innocence had made him effective. Says Mr. Masson: "And I must interrupt the proceedings to tell a story about him. I hope it is true. You know that, at one of the most distressing periods of his life—when he had financially failed—his friend Rogers came to his rescue, straightened out his accounts and put him on his feet generally. Both Mr. and Mrs. Rogers naturally came to be very fond of Mark. He visited them in their Adirondack camp. On one occasion he dolled himself up in a white flannel suit. Mrs. Rogers, seeing him thus accoutered for the first time, complimented him on his appearance. Mark was very vain. 'You like me in it?' he asked. 'You never looked better.' 'Then I shall always wear it.' And so his white suits became historic."

IN one of his chapters Mr. Masson recalls the several attempts—long before the days of *Life*, *Puck* and *Judge*—to start American comic journals in the spirit of London *Punch*, which Mr. Masson considers "the most solidly established comic paper in the world." *Punch* was founded in 1841, and half a dozen years later appeared the American imitation called *Yankee Doodle*. In his

"Fable for Critics" James Russell Lowell had a couplet about *Yankee Doodle*:

That American "Punch," like the English,
no doubt,
Just the sugar and lemons and spirit left
out.

The life of *Yankee Doodle* was a brief one, and in 1852 John Brougham started *Diogenes hys Lanterne*. For eighteen months the lantern glimmered dimly and then flickered entirely out. The third attempt was *Vanity Fair*, no relation to the present journal of the name. That began in January, 1859, and did not succumb until 1863, when Artemus Ward

well worth the attention of those who have "arrived" as well. It is essentially a fair book, being neither a brief for the author on the one hand nor for the publisher and editor on the other. Such a book is needed. There is entirely too much misconception of the ethics governing the relations between the man who writes to sell and the man who buys. In all politeness, the Authors League of America, admirable institution as it is, has occasionally given the impression of being inclined to see only one side of the case. The author, no matter how eminent he may be or how obscure he may be, is entitled to courtesy, consideration and fairness. But also the right kind of author never forgets to be punctilious in himself showing courtesy, consideration and fairness.

AFTER all, it is the little things that count, and there is a great deal more in the trivial matter of inclosing return postage in sending an unsolicited



THOMAS L. MASSON.
From a drawing by
James Montgomery Flagg.

was its editor. He is said to have remarked: "They told me I could write comic copy; I wrote a lot of it—and the paper died."

ONCE upon a time men of letters took themselves and their trade seriously, and other persons accorded them rather more consideration than in these days of literary commercialism and the lecture platform. Thackeray, in the first chapter of "The Newcomes"—yes, it was just before the paragraph that contained the words: "When Washington was leading the American rebels with a courage worthy of a better cause," which so stirred up our countrymen in the eighteen fifties—recalled the golden days of yore when "to see Mr. Brown, the author of the latest romance, in the flesh, walking in the park with his umbrella and Mrs. Brown, was an event perfectly to be remembered till the end of time." To realize that that spirit is not entirely gone turn in "Our American Humorists" to the chapter on Ellis Parker Butler, who, whatever else he may write, will never live down "Pigs Is Pigs." Thus Mr. Butler is quoted: "I would rather be George Ade than Rockefeller, and Napoleon has never seemed to me worth one of Bunner's short stories. I would rather see Booth Tarkington from across a wide street than spend a month with President Harding as a guest of honor."

MR. MASSON'S book tells the story of those who have decidedly "arrived." "The Business of Writing" (George H. Doran Company), by Robert Cortes Holliday and Alexander Van Rensselaer, is designed primarily for those who hope some day to "arrive," but it contains some very sound information

manuscript than appears on the surface. All that "The Business of Writing" has to say about the case is the bracketed (provided return postage has been inclosed with it). But what the inexperienced writer sometimes does not understand is that the insistence on return postage is not an expression of meanness but a demand for fair dealing. That is something that the writer who has been found worth while never forgets. For example, merely for the sake of illustration, suppose Mr. Booth Tarkington were to send a story to a magazine without any previous understanding. He will know perfectly well that the opening of the envelope will bring a thrill in the magazine office, yet you may be perfectly sure that the envelope will enclose stamps for return, as well as a letter that will be very polite and will take nothing for granted. To be even more concrete, Mr. Masson, whose book has just been under discussion, has from time to time been a contributor to this section. He knows just how welcome any article from him will be, yet no article of his has ever reached this office without the inclosed stamped envelope.

A NOTHER little point of good manners with which "The Business of Writing" deals is the chapter "Approaching the Modern Editor." Every magazine editor has encountered the would-be contributor who says: "Tell me the kind of stories and articles you want. I haven't had time to read your publication." A form of approach which is obviously neither diplomatic nor fair. The advice of Messrs. Holliday and Van Rensselaer is: "Do not send manuscripts to a magazine until you have an idea of the kind of thing that magazine uses." A note

something like this turns up every once in a while in a publishing office: "This is the first fiction story I have ever finished up and made a definite effort to sell. I have submitted it to *Metropolitan* and *Everybody's*, for which I realize it is entirely unfitted." What a confusion of objectives is revealed in another letter! It begins: "I inclose herewith an article entitled 'The Unknown Soldier.' I have sent it to the *Atlantic*, *Judge*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, all of which publications have declined to accept it."

THE chapter "Why Be an Author?" throws light in a general way on the earnings of men and women of letters, a subject always of interest both to the professional and the amateur. Advertisements proclaiming that there are thousands of dollars to be made by writing stories, the authors of "The Business of Writing" point out, put very false notions in the heads of many people. The relatively few authors of great popularity do, of course, receive very substantial incomes from their work, "but the income derived from the writing of numerous authors of very fair popularity is not sufficient for their needs. . . . In fact the payment for writing in general is ridiculously small. Five cents a word is high pay indeed for a writer with more or less of a name. Anything over two cents a word is doing pretty well. Many magazines pay one cent a word or less. Some actual prices paid by well known publications are here given: Twelve dollars for a 2,500 word story; twelve dollars for a 1,200 word story, paid on publication; ten dollars for a 4,000 word story that had been rejected by more than a score of editors; twenty-five dollars for a 4,000 word story."

THEN the simple facts about the return that a published book brings to its author. Here again there is very general misconception. Messrs. Holliday and Van Rensselaer sum up the matter as follows: "The price of a novel to-day is about two dollars. Usually the author receives a royalty of about twenty cents a copy on the first two thousand copies sold and perhaps thirty cents on each copy thereafter. A novel which sold upward of fifty thousand copies would then bring the author something like \$14,000. Many men make as much as \$14,000 by a year's work at some other business or profession than authorship. But authors who make that amount in a year, or anything near that amount, are exceedingly rare. A book is regarded by the publisher as highly successful if it sells from five to ten thousand copies. Far and away the greater number of books published do not sell as many as fifteen hundred copies. Many far less. A recently published book which received a very cordial 'press' has had an uncommon amount of publicity, and the advertisements of which announce that it is in its 'fourth printing,' has after about half a year earned for its author perhaps a thousand dollars."

ACCORDING to the monthly score in the January *Bookman* the novels most in demand are:

1. "This Freedom," Hutchinson.
 2. "Babbitt," Lewis.
 3. "The Breaking Point," Rinehart.
 4. "Robin," Burnett.
 5. "The Glimpses of the Moon," Wharton.
 6. "If Winter Comes," Hutchinson.
 7. "Certain People of Importance," Norris.
 8. "One of Ours," Cather.
 9. "Charles Rex," Dell.
 10. "The Country Beyond," Curwood.
- Works of non-fiction in demand are:
1. "The Outline of History," Wells.
 2. "The Story of Mankind," Van Loon.
 3. "The Mind in the Making," Robinson.
 4. "The Outline of Science," Thomson.
 5. "The Americanization of Edward Bok," Bok.
 6. "Self Mastery Through Autosuggestion," Coué.
 7. "Outwitting Our Nerves," Jackson and Salisbury.
 8. "The Conquest of Fear," King.
 9. "The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page," Hendrick.
 10. "Queen Victoria," Strachey.