GEORGE WALTER LIONEL

A NOVELIST ON NOVELS

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Содержание

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A Deceptive Dedication

I

I have shown the manuscript of this book to a well-known author. One of those staid, established authors whose venom has been extracted by the mellow years. My author is beyond rancour and exploit; he has earned the right to bask in his own celebrity, and needs to judge no more, because no longer does he fear judgment. He is like a motorist who has sowed his wild petrol. He said to me: 'You are very, very unwise. I never criticise my contemporaries, and, believe me, it doesn't pay.' Well, I am unwise; I always was unwise, and this has paid in a coin not always recognised, but precious to a man's spiritual pride. Why should I not criticise my contemporaries? It is not a merit to be a contemporary. Also, they can return the compliment; some of them, if I may venture upon a turn of phrase proper for Mr Tim Healy, have returned the compliment before they got it. It may be unwise, but I join with Voltaire in thanking God that he gave us folly. So I will affront the condemnatory vagueness of wool

and fleecy cloud, be content to think that nobody will care where I praise, that everybody will think me impertinent where I judge. I will be content to believe that the well-known author will not mind if I criticise him, and that the others will not mind either. I will hope, though something of a Sadducee, that there is an angel in their hearts.

I want to criticise them and their works because I think the novel, this latest born of literature, immensely interesting and important. It is interesting because, more faithfully than any other form, it expresses the mind of man, his pains that pass, his hopes that fade and are born again, his discontent pregnant with energy, the unrulinesses in which he misspends his vigour, the patiences that fit him to endure all things even though he dare them not. In this, all other forms fail: history, because it chronicles battles and dates, yet not the great movements of the peoples; economics, because in their view all men are vile; biography, because it leads the victim to the altar, but never sacrifices it. Even poetry fails; I do not try to shock, but I doubt whether the poetic is equal to the prose form.

I do not want to fall into the popular fallacy that prose and poetry each have their own field, strictly preserved, for prose is not always prosy, nor poetry always poetic; prose may contain poetry, poetry cannot contain prose, just as some gentlemen are bounders, but no bounders are gentlemen. But the admiration many people feel for poetry derives from a lack of intelligence rather than from an excess of emotion, and they would be cured

if, instead of admiring, they read. Some subjects and ideas naturally fall into poetry, mainly the lyric ideas; 'To Anthea,' and 'The Skylark' would, in prose, lie broken-pinioned upon the ground, but the exquisiteness of poetry, when it conveys the ultimate aspiration of man, defines its limitations. Poetry is child of the austerity of literature by the sensuality of music. Thus it is more and less than its forbears; speaking for myself alone, I feel that 'Epipsychidion' and the 'Grecian Urn' are just a little less than the Kreutzer Sonata, that Browning and Whitman might have written better in prose, though they might thus have been less quoted. For poetry is too often *schwaermerei*, a thing of lilts; when it conveys philosophical ideas, as in Browning and in that prose writer gone astray, Shakespeare, it suffers the agonising pains of constriction. Rhyme and scansion tend to limit and hamper it; everything can be said in prose, but not in poetry; to prose no licence need be granted, while poetry must use and abuse it, for prose is free, poetry shackled by its form. No doubt that is why poetry causes so much stir, for it surmounts extraordinary difficulties, and men gape as at a tenor who attains a top note. However exquisite, the scope of poetry is smaller than that of prose, and if any doubt it let him open at random an English Bible and say if Milton can out-thunder Job, or Swinburne outcloy the sweetness of Solomon's Song.

More than interesting, the novel is important because, low as its status may be, it does day by day express mankind, and mankind in the making. Sometimes it is the architect that places

yet another brick upon the palace of the future. Always it is the showman of life. I think of 'serious books,' of the incredible heaps of memoirs, works on finance, strategy, psychology, sociology, biology, omniology … that fall every day like manna (unless from another region they rise as fumes) into the baskets of the reviewers. All this paper … they dance their little dance to four hundred readers and a great number of second-hand booksellers, and lo! the dust of their decay is on their brow. They live a little longer than an article by Mr T. P. O'Connor, and live a little less.

The novel, too, does not live long, but I have known one break up a happy home, and another teach revolt to several daughters; can we give greater praise? Has so much been achieved by any work entitled *The Foundations of the Century*, or something of that sort? The novel, despised buffoon that it is, pours out its poison and its pearls within reach of every lip; its heroes and heroines offer examples to the reader and make him say: 'That bold, bad man … you wouldn't think it to look at me, who'm a linen-draper, but it's me.' If, in this preface, I may introduce a personal reminiscence, I can strengthen my point by saying that after publishing *The Second Blooming* I received five letters from women I did not know, who wholly recognised themselves in my principal heroine, of course the regrettable one.

The novel moulds by precept and example, and therefore we modern jesters, inky troubadours, are responsible for the gray power which we wield behind the throne. Given this

responsibility, it is a pity there should be so many novels, for the reader is distracted with various examples, and painfully hesitates between the career of Raffles and that of John Inglesant. Thus the novel fires many a sanctimoniousness, makes lurid many a hesitating life. If only we could endow it! But we cannot, for the old saying can be garbled: call no novelist famous until he is dead.

It is a fascinating idea, this one of endowing the novel. In principle it is not difficult, only we must assume our capable committee and that is quite as difficult as ignoring the weight of the elephant. I wonder what would happen if an Act of Parliament were to endow genius! I wonder who would sit on the sub-committee appointed by the British Government to endow literature. I do not wonder, I know. There would be Professor Saintsbury, Mr Austin Dobson, Professor Walter Raleigh, Sir Sidney Lee, Professor Gollancz, all the academics, all the people drier than the drought, who, whether the god of literature find himself in the car or in the cart, never fail to get into the dickey. I should not even wonder if, by request of the municipality of Burton-on-Trent, it were found desirable to infuse a democratic element into the sub-committee by adding the manager of the Army and Navy Stores and, of course, Mr Bottomley. Do not protest: Mr Bottomley has recently passed embittered judgments, under the characteristic heading 'Dam-Nation,' on Mr Alec Waugh, who ventured, in a literary sketch, to show English soldiers going over the top with oaths upon their lips and the courage born of fear in their hearts. I think Mr

Bottomley would like to have Mr Waugh shot, and the editor of *The Nation* confined for seven days in the Press Bureau, for having told the truth in literary form. I do not impugn his judgment of what it feels like to go over the top, for he has had long experience of keeping strictly on the surface.

No, our sub-committee would be appointed without the help of Thalia and Calliope. It would register judgments such as those of the famous sub-committee that grants the Nobel Prizes. That committee, during its short life, has managed to reward Sully-Prudhomme and to leave out Swinburne, to give a prize to Sienkewicz, whom a rather more recent generation has found so suitable for the cinema. It has even given a prize to Mr Rudyard Kipling, but whether in memory of literature or dynamite is not known.

So literary genius must, as before, look for its endowment in the somewhat barren heart of man, and continue to shed a hundred seeds in its stony places, in the forlorn hope that the fowls of the air may not devour them all, and that a single ear of corn may wilt and wither its way into another dawn.

II

The reading of most men and women provides distressing lists. So far as I can gather from his conversation, the ordinary, busy man, concerned with his work, finds his mental sustenance in the newspapers, particularly in *Punch*, in the illustrated

weeklies and in the journals that deal with his trade; as for imaginative literature, he seems to confine himself to Mr Nat Gould, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mr W. W. Jacobs, Mr Mason, and such like, who certainly do not strain his imaginative powers; he is greatly addicted to humour of the coarser kind, and he dissipates many of his complexes by means of vile stories which he exchanges with his fellows; these do not at all represent his kindliness and his respectability. Sometimes he reads a shocker, the sort that is known as 'railway literature,' presumably because it cannot hold the attention for more than the time that elapses between two stops.

The more serious and scholarly man, who abounds in every club, is addicted to the monthly reviews, (price two-and-six; he does not like the shilling ones), to the *Times*, to the *Spectator*; that kind of man is definitely stodgy and prides himself upon being sound. He is fond of memoirs, rather sodden accounts of aristocrats and politicians, of the dull, ordinary lives of dull, ordinary people; when he has done with the book it goes to the pulping machine, but some of the pulp gets into that man's brain. ('Ashes to ashes, pulp to pulp.') He likes books of travel, biographies, solid French books (strictly by academicians), political works, economic works. His conversation sounds like it, and that is why his wife is so bored; his emotions are reflex and run only round the objects he can see; art cannot touch him, and no feather ever falls upon his brow from an airy wing. He commonly tells you that good novels are not written nowadays; he

must be excused that opinion, for he never tries to read them. The only novels with which the weary Titan refreshes his mind are those of Thackeray, sometimes of Trollope; the more frivolous sometimes go so far as to sip a little of the honey that falls from the mellifluous lips of Mr A. C. Benson.

The condition of women is different. They care for little that ends in 'ic,' and so their consumption of novels is enormous. The commonplace woman is attracted by the illustrated dailies and weeklies, but she also needs large and continuous doses of religious sentimentality, of papier maché romance, briefly, of novels described in literary circles as 'bilge,' such as the works of Mr Hall Caine, Mrs Barclay, Miss E. M. Dell, and a great many more; if she is of the slightly faster kind that gives smart lunch parties at the Strand Corner House, her diet is sometimes a little stronger; she takes to novels of the orchid house and the tiger's lair, to the artless erotics of Miss Elinor Glyn, Mr Hubert Wales, and Miss Victoria Cross. She likes memoirs too, memoirs of vague Bourbons and salacious Bonapartes; she takes great pleasure in the historical irregularities of cardinals. She likes poetry too as conveyed by Miss Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

If that type of woman were not a woman the arts could base as few hopes on her as they do on men, but the most stupid woman is better ground than the average man, because she is open, while he is smug. So it is no wonder that among the millions of women who mess and muddle their way through the conservatories and pigsties of literature, should be found the true reading public,

the women who are worth writing for, who read the best English novels, who are in touch with French and Russian literature, who reads plays, and even essays, ancient and modern. Hail Mary, mother of mankind; but for these the arts must starve!

That fine public cannot carry us very far. They are not enough to keep literature vigorous by giving it what it needs: a consciousness of fellowship with many readers. If literature is to flourish (of which I am not sure, though endure in some form it will), the general public taste must be raised. I feel that taste can be raised and cultivated, and many have felt that too. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, and especially since 1870, an ascending effort has been made to stimulate the taste of the rising artisan. Books like Lord Avebury's *Pleasures of Life*, like *Sesame and Lilies*, collections such as the *Hundred Best Books* and the *Hundred Best Pictures*, have all been attuned to that key. The only pity is that the selections, nearly all of them excellent, were immeasurably above the heads of the public for which they were meant. Two recent instances are worth analysing. One of them is *A Library for Five Pounds* by Sir William Robertson Nicoll, (whom Mr Arnold Bennett delighteth to revile), the other *Literary Taste and How to Form It*, by Mr Bennett himself. Now Sir William Robertson Nicoll's book is much more sensible than the funereal lists available at most polytechnics. The author does not pretend that one should read Plato in one's bath; he seems to realise the state of mind of the ordinary, fairly busy, fairly willing, fairly intelligent person. A

sign of it is that he selects only sixty-one works, and out of those allows twenty-seven novels. Of the rest, most are readable, except *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Origin of Species*, a touching couple. The list is by far the best guide I have ever seen, but … there is not a living author in it. It is not a library, it is a necropolis. The novelists that Sir William Robertson Nicoll recommends are Scott, Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Hawthorne, Trollope, Blackmore, Defoe, and Swift. All their books are readable, but they do not take by the hand the person who has thought wrong or not thought at all. When you want to teach a child history you do not dump upon its desk Hume and Smollett, in forty volumes; you lead it by degrees, by means of text-books, that is *according to plan*. That is how I conceive literary education, but before suggesting a list, let us glance at *Literary Taste and How to Form It*. In this book the author shows himself much more unpractical and much less sympathetic than Sir William Robertson Nicoll (whom Mr Bennett delighteth to revile). The book itself is very interesting; it is bright, intelligent; it teaches you how to read, and how to make allowances for the classics; it tells you how you may woo your way to Milton, but, after all, when you have done, you find that you have not wooed your way an inch nearer. That is because Mr Arnold Bennett takes up to his public an attitude more highbrowed than I could imagine if I were writing a skit on his book. Mr Bennett's idea of a list for the aspirant to letters is to throw the London Library at his head; he lays

before us a stodgy lump of two or three hundred volumes, many of them excellent, and many more absolutely penal. It is enough to say that he seriously starts his list with the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Bede! the dimmest, most distant of English chroniclers, who depicts the dimmest and most distant period of English history; once, in an A.B.C., I saw a shopman reading *Tono-Bungay*, which was propped against the cruet. Does Mr Bennett imagine that man dropping the tear of emotion and the gravy of excitement upon the Venerable Bede? And if one goes on with the list and discovers the *Autobiography of Lord Herbert of Cherbury*, *Religio Medici*, Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Reynold's *Discourses on Art*, the works of Pope, *Voyage of the Beagle* … one comes to understand how such readers may have been made by such masters. From the beginning to the end of that list my mind is obsessed by the word 'stodge,' and the novels do not relieve it much. There are a good many, but they comprise the usual Thackeray, Scott, Dickens … need I go on? Relief is found only in Fielding, Sterne, and in one book each of Marryat, Lever, Kingsley, and Gissing. These authors are admitted presumably because they are dead.

In all this, where is hope? How many green daffodil heads, trying to burst their painful way through the heavy earth of a dull life, has Mr Bennett trampled on? Is it impossible to find some one who is (as Mr Bennett certainly is), capable of the highest artistic appreciation and of high literary achievement, and who will, for a moment, put himself in the place of the people he is

addressing? Is it impossible for an adult to remember that as a boy he hated the classics? Has he forgotten that as a young man he could be charmed, but educated only by means of a machine like the one they use for stuffing geese? The people we want to introduce to literature are, nearly all of them, people who work; some earn thirty shillings a week, and ponder a great deal on how to live on it; some earn hundreds a year and are not much better off; all are occupied with material cares, their work, their games, their gardens, their loves; nearly all are short of time, and expend on work, transit, and meals, ten to twelve hours a day. They read in tubes and omnibuses, in the midst of awful disturbance and overcrowding; also they are deeply corrupted by the daily papers, where nothing over a column is ever printed, where the news are conveyed in paragraphs and headlines, so that they never have to concentrate, and find it difficult to do so; they are corrupted too by the vulgarity and sensationalism which are the bones and blood of the magazines, until they become unable to think without stimulants.

It is no use saying those people are lost. They are not lost, but they have gone astray, or rather, nobody has ever tried to turn their faces the right way. Certainly Mr Arnold Bennett does nothing for them. If they could read *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* they would, but they cannot. People cannot plunge into old language, old atmospheres; they have no links with these things; their imagination is not trained to take a leap; many try, and nearly all fail because their literary leaders go to

sleep, or march them into bogs. No crude mind can jump into ancient literature; modern literature alone can help it, namely cleanse its *nearest* section, and prepare it for further strain. The limits of literary taste can, in each person, be carried as far as that person's intellectual capacity goes, but only *by degrees*. In other words, limit your objective instead of failing at a large operation.

I am not prepared to lay down a complete list, but I am prepared to hint at one. If I had to help a crude but willing taste, I would handle its reading as follows: —

First Period

Reading made up exclusively of recent novels, good, well-written, thoughtful novels, not too startling in form or contents. I would begin on novels because anybody can read a novel, and because the first cleansing operation is to induce the subject to read good novels instead of bad ones. Here is a preliminary list: —

Tony-Bungay (Wells)
Kipps (Wells)
The Custom of the Country (Wharton)
The Old Wives' Tale (Bennett)
The Man of Property (Galsworthy)
Jude the Obscure (Hardy)
Tess of the D'Urbervilles (Hardy)
Sussex Gorse (Kaye-Smith)

and say twenty or thirty more of this type, all published in the last dozen years. It is, of course, assumed that interest would be

maintained by conversation.

Second Period

After the subject (victim, if you like) had read say thirty of the best solid novels of the twentieth century, I think I should draw him to the more abstruse modern novels and stories. In the first period he would come in contact with a general criticism of life. In the second period he would read novels of a more iconoclastic and constructive kind, such as: —

The Island Pharisees (Galsworthy)
The New Machiavelli (Wells)
Sinister Street (Mackenzie)
The Celestial Omnibus (Forster)
The Longest Journey (Forster)
Sons and Lovers (Lawrence)
The White Peacock (Lawrence)
Ethan Frome (Wharton)
Round the Corner (Cannan)

Briefly, the more ambitious kind of novel, say thirty or forty altogether. At that time, I should induce the subject to browse occasionally in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*.

Third Period

Now only would I come to the older novels, because, by then, the mind should be supple enough to stand their congestion of detail, their tendency to caricature, their stilted phrasing, and yet recognise their qualities. Here are some: —

The Rise of Silas Lapham (Howells)

Vanity Fair (Thackeray)
The Vicar of Wakefield (Goldsmith)
The Way of All Flesh (Butler)
Quentin Durward (Scott)
Guy Mannering (Scott)

Briefly, the bulk of the works of Thackeray, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. 'Barry Lyndon' twice, and Trollope never. Here, at last, the solid curriculum, but only, you will observe, when a little of the mud of the magazines had been cleaned off. Rather more verse too, beginning with Tennyson and Henley, passing on to Rossetti and perhaps to Swinburne. Verse, however, should not be pressed. But I think I should propose modern plays of the lighter kind, Mr Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* and *John Bull's Other Island*, for instance. One could pass by degrees to the less obvious plays of Mr Shaw, certainly to those of St John Hankin, and perhaps to *The Madras House*. I think also a start might be made on foreign works, but these would develop mainly in the

Fourth Period

Good translations being available, I would suggest notably: —
Madame Bovary (Flaubert)
Resurrection (Tolstoi)
Fathers and Children (Turgenev)
Various short stories of Tchekoff.
And then, *if the subject seemed to enjoy these works*,
L'Education Sentimentale (Flaubert)

Le Rouge et le Noir (Stendhal)

The Brothers Karamazov (Dostoievsky)

Mark this well, if the subject seemed to enjoy them. If there is any strain, any boredom, there is lack of continuity, and a chance of losing the subject's interest altogether. I think the motto should be 'Don't press'; that is accepted when it comes to golf; why has it never been accepted when it affects man? This period would, I think, end with the lighter plays of Shakespeare, such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and perhaps *Hamlet*. I think modern essays should also come in *via* Mr E. V. Lucas, Mr Belloc, and Mr Street; also I would suggest Synge's travels in Wicklow, Connemara, and the Arran Islands; this would counteract the excessive fictional quality of the foregoing.

Fifth Period

I submit that, by that time, if the subject had a good average mind, he would be prepared by habit to read older works related with the best modern works. The essays of Mr Lucas would prepare him for the works of Lamb; those of Mr Belloc, for the essays of Carlyle and Bacon. Thus would I lead back to the heavier Victorian novels, to the older ones of Fielding and Sterne. If any taste for plays has been developed by Shakespeare, it might be turned to Marlowe, Congreve, and Sheridan. The drift of my argument is: read the easiest first; do not strain; do not try to 'improve your mind,' but try to enjoy yourself. Than books there is no better company, but it is no use approaching them as

dour pedagogues. Proceed as a snob climbing the social ladder, namely, know the best people in the neighbourhood, then the best people they know. The end is not that of snobbery, but an eternal treasure.

I think that my subject, if capable of developing taste, would find his way to the easier classic works, such as Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, perhaps even to Wesley's *Journal*. But at that stage the subject would have to be dismissed to live or die. Enough would have been done to lead him away from boredom, from dull solemnity and false training, to purify his taste and make it of some use. The day is light and the past is dark; all eyes can see the day and find it splendid, but eyes that would pierce the darkness of the past must grow familiar with lighter mists; to every man the life of the world about him is that man's youth, while old age is ill to apprehend.

Litany of the Novelist

There are times when one wearies of literature; when one reads over one's first book, reflects how good it was, and how greatly one was misunderstood; when one considers the perils and misadventures of so accidental a life and likens oneself to those dogs described by Pliny who run fast as they drink from the Nile for fear they should be seized by the crocodiles; when one tires of following Mr Ford Madox Hueffer's advice, 'to sit down in the back garden with pen, ink, and paper, to put vine leaves in one's hair and to write'; when one remembers that in Flaubert's view the literary man's was a dog's life (metaphors about authors lead you back to the dog) but that none other was worth living. In those moods, one does not agree with Flaubert; rather, one agrees with Butler: —

> '… those that write in rhyme still make
> The one verse for the other's sake;
> For one for sense and one for rhyme,
> I think's sufficient at one time.'

One sees life like Mr Polly, as 'a rotten, beastly thing.' One sighs for adventure, to become a tramp or an expert witness. One knows that one will never be so popular as Beecham's pills; thence is but a step to picture oneself as less worthy.

We novelists are the showmen of life. We hold up its mirror, and, if it look at us at all, it mostly makes faces at us. Indeed a writer might have with impunity sliced Medusa's head: she would never have noticed him. The truth is that the novelist is a despised creature. At moments, when, say, a learned professor has devoted five columns to showing that a particular novelist is one of the pests of society, the writer feels exalted. But as society shows no signs of wanting to be rid of the pest, the novelist begins to doubt his own pestilency. He is wrong. In a way, society knows of our existence, but does not worry; it shows this in a curiously large number of ways, more than can be enumerated here. It sees the novelist as a man apart; as a creature fraught with venom, and, paradoxically, a creature of singularly lamb-like and unpractical temperament.

Consider, indeed, the painful position of a respectable family whose sons make for Threadneedle Street every day, its daughters for Bond Street and fashion, or for the East End, good works, and social advancement. Imagine that family, who enjoys a steady income, shall we say in the neighbourhood of £5000 a year, enough to keep it in modest comfort, confronted with the sudden infatuation of one of its daughters for an unnamed person, met presumably in the East End where he was collecting copy. You can imagine the conversation after dinner: —

Angeline: 'What does he do, father? Oh, well! he's a novelist.'

Father: … What! a novelist! One of those long-haired, sloppy-collared ragamuffins without any soles to their boots! Do you

think that because I've given you a motor-car I'm going to treat you to a husband? A bar loafer … (we are always intemperate) … A man whom your mother and sisters … (our morals are atrocious) … I should not wonder if the police … (we are all dishonest, and yet we never have any money) … I was talking to the Bishop … (we practise no religion, except that occasionally we are Mormons)…

And so on, and so on. Father won't have it, and if in the end Father does have it he finds that Angeline's eyes are *not* blacked, but that Angeline's husband's boots *are* blacked, that the wretched fellow keeps a balance at the bank, can ride a horse, push a perambulator, drive a nail; but he does not believe it for a long time. For it is, if not against all experience, at any rate against all theory that a novelist should be eligible. The bank clerk is eligible, the novelist is not; we are not 'safe,' we are adventurers, we have theories, and sometimes the audacity to live up to them. We are often poor, which happens to other men, and this is always our own fault, while it is often their misfortune. Of late years, we have grown still more respectable than our forefathers, who were painfully such: Dickens lived comfortably in Marylebone; Thackeray reigned in a luxurious house near Kensington Square and in several first-class clubs; Walter Scott reached a terrible extreme of respectability; he went bankrupt, but later on paid his debts in full. Yet we never seem quite respectable, perhaps because respectability is so thin a varnish. Even the unfortunate girls whom we 'entice away from good

homes' into the squalor of the arts, do not think us respectable. For them half the thrill of marrying a novelist consists in the horror of the family which must receive him; it is like marrying a quicksand, and the idea is so bitter that a novelist who wears his hair long might do well to marry a girl who wears hers short. He will not find her in the bourgeoisie.

The novelist is despised because he produces a commodity not recognised as 'useful.' There is no definition of usefulness, yet everybody is clear that the butcher, the railway porter, the stock jobber are useful; that they fulfil a function necessary for the maintenance of the State. The pugilist, the dancer, the music hall actor, the novelist, produce nothing material, while the butcher does. To live, one wants meat, but not novels. We need not pursue this too far and ask the solid classes to imagine a world without arts, presumably they could not. It is enough to point the difference, and to suggest that we are deeply enthralled by the Puritan tradition which calls pleasure, if not noxious, at any rate unimportant; the maintenance of life is looked upon as more essential than the enjoyment thereof, so that many people picture an ideal world as a spreading cornfield dotted with cities that pay good rents, connected by railways which pay good dividends. They resemble the revolutionary, who on the steps of the guillotine said to Lavoisier: '*La Republique n'a pas besoin de savants.*' This is obvious when the average man (which includes many women) alludes to the personality of some well-known writer. One he has come to respect: Mr Hall Caine, because

popular report says that his latest novel brought him in about a hundred thousand pounds, but those such as Mr Arnold Bennett and Mr H. G. Wells leave strange shadows upon his memory. Of Mr Bennett he says: 'Oh, yes, he writes about the North Country, doesn't he? Or is it the West Country? Tried one of his books once. I forget its name, and now I come to think of it, it may have been by somebody else. He must be a dreary sort of chap, anyhow, sort of methodist.'

Mr H. G. Wells is more clearly pictured: 'Wells? the fellow who writes about flying machines and men in the moon. Jules Verne sort of stuff, isn't it? He's a Socialist.'

And so out with Mr Bennett, one of our best modern stylists, who in spite of an occasional crowding of the canvas has somehow fixed for us the singular and ferocious tribe from which he springs; so out with Mr Wells, with his restless, impulsive, combative, infinitely audacious mind. The average man says: 'Flying machines,' and the passion of Mr Wells for a beautiful, if somewhat over-hygienic world is swept away. Those are leading instances. Others, such as Mr Conrad, Miss Edith Wharton, O. Henry, Mr Galsworthy, are not mentioned at all; if the name of Mr Henry James is spoken, it leads up to a gibe at long sentences.

The attitude is simple; we are not taken seriously. Novelists have to take mankind seriously because they want to understand it; mankind is exempt from the obligation because it does not conceive the desire. We are not people who take degrees, who can be scheduled and classified. We are not Doctors of Science,

Licentiates of Music Schools. We are just men and women of some slight independence, therefore criminals, men who want to observe and not men who want to do, therefore incredible. And so, because we cannot fall into the classes made for those who can be classified, we are outside class, below class. We are the mistletoe on the social oak.

It is perhaps in search of dignity and status that the modern novelist has taken to journalism. Journalism raises a novelist's status, for a view expressed by a fictitious character is not taken seriously, while the same view fastened to an event of the day acquires importance, satisfies the specific function of the press, which is more and more that of a champion of found causes. The newspaper is a better jumping-off ground than the pulpit or the professorial chair; it enjoys a vast circulation, which the novel does not; it conveys an idea to millions of people who would never think of buying a newspaper for the sake of an idea, but who buy it for news, murder cases or corn market reports; it is a place where a writer may be serious, *because the newspaper is labelled as serious, while the novel is labelled as frivolous*.

This is vital to the proposition, and explains why so many novelists have sought refuge in the press. It is not exactly a question of money. Journalism rewards a successful novelist better than does the novel, though successful novelists make very good incomes; they often earn as much as the red-nosed comedian with the baggy trousers and the battered bowler. Thackeray, Washington Irving, Kingsley, and notably Dickens,

knew the value of journalism. Dickens was the most peculiar case, for it is fairly clear that *Nicholas Nickleby* helped to suppress the ragged schools and that *Oliver Twist* was instrumental in reforming workhouse law; both works were immensely successful, but Dickens felt that he wanted a platform where he could be always wholly serious: for this the *Daily News* was born in 1846. Likewise Mr Wells has written enormously upon the war and economics; Mr Arnold Bennett has printed many political articles; Mr Galsworthy has become more direct than a novelist can be and written largely on cruelty to animals, prison reform, etc. It is the only way in which we can be taken seriously. We must be solemn, a little dull, patriotic or unpatriotic, socialistic or conservative; there is only one thing we may not be, and that is creative and emotional.

It should be said in passing that even the press does not think much of us. Articles on solid subjects by novelists are printed, well paid for, sought after; it does a paper good to have an article on Imperial Federation by Mr Kipling, or on Feminism by Mr Zangwill. The novelist amounts to a poster; he is a blatant advertisement; he is a curiosity, the man who makes the public say: 'I wonder what the *Daily* – is up to now.' Be assured that Mr Zangwill's views on Feminism do not command the respectful treatment that is accorded a column leader in the *Times*; he is too human; he sparkles too much; he has not the matchless quality of those leaders which compels you to put on an extra stamp if you have to send the paper through the post.

The newspapers court the novelist as the people of a small town court the local rich man, but neither newspaper nor little town likes very much the object of its courtship. Except when they pay us to express them, the newspapers resent our having any views at all; the thought behind is always: 'Why can't the fellows mind their own business, and go on writing about love and all that sort of stuff?' During the war, references to novelists who express their views have invariably been sneering; it is assumed that because we are novelists we are unable to comprehend tactics, politics, in fact any 'ics,' except perhaps the entirely unimportant aesthetics. But the peculiarity of the situation is that not a voice has been raised against professors of philology, who write on finance, against Bishops dealing with land settlement, against doctors when they re-map Europe, against barristers, businessmen… These may say anything they like; they are plain, hard-headed men, while our heads are soft enough to admit a new idea.

To define the attitude of the press is in modern times to define the attitude of the State. From our point of view this is frigid. In America, there are no means of gauging a novelist's position, for American classification rests upon celebrity and fortune. Ours rests upon breeding and reliability. America is more adventurous; Britannia rides in a chariot, while the American national emblem foreshadowed the aeroplane. And so, in the United States it may profit a man as well to be a Jack London as an Elihu Root. America has no means of recognising status, while in England we

have honours. We distribute a great many honours, and indeed the time may come, as Mr Max Beerbohm says, when everybody will be sentenced to a knighthood without the option of a fine. Honours are rather foolish things, monuments that create a need for circumspection; they are often given for merits not easily perceived, but still they are a *rough* test of status. Setting aside money, which is the primary qualification, and justifies Racine in saying that without money honour is nothing but a disease, a title is a fairly clear sign of distinction. Sir Edward Shackleton, Sir Douglas Haig, Sir Frederick Treves, Lord Reading, Sir William Crookes, Lord Lister, all those titles are obvious recognition of prominence in Polar Exploration, the Army, the Law, Medicine, Research, as the case may be; there are scores of Medical Knights, many Law Lords, many Major Generals and Admirals endowed with the Knight Commandership of the Bath. We do not complain. They deserve their honours, most of them. They deserve them more than the politicians who have received for long service rewards that ability could not give them, than the Lord Mayors who are titled because they sold, for instance, large quantities of kitchen fenders. When we consider the arts, we observe a discrepancy. The arts do not ask for honours; they are too arrogant, and know that born knights cannot be knighted. Only they claim that an attempt should be made to honour them, to grant them Mr Gladstone's and Mr Chamberlain's privilege of refusing honours.

Consider, for instance, the Order of Merit, one of the highest

honours that the British Crown can confer. At the end of last year it numbered twenty-one members. Among them were some distinguished foreigners, Prince Oyama, Prince Yamagata and Admiral Togo; historians, pro-consuls, four Admirals … and one novelist. Mr Thomas Hardy. We do not complain that only Mr Thomas Hardy was chosen, for there is nobody else to set at his side … only we do complain that in this high order four admirals find a place. Are we then so rich in admiralty, so poor in literature? The same is still truer when we come to the inferior orders, which are still fairly high, such as the Commandership of the Bath. That ancient order is almost entirely recruited from amongst soldiers, sailors, politicians, and civil servants; it does not hold the name of a single novelist. No novelist is a Privy Councillor, though the position is honorific and demands no special knowledge. On the Privy Council you find labour members of Parliament, barristers, coal owners, sellers of chemicals and other commodities, but no novelists. In all the other orders it is the same thing; for novelists there are neither commanderships of the Bath, nor of the Victorian Order, nor of St Michael and St George, no honours great or minor; no man has ever in England been offered a peerage *because* he wrote novels; and yet he has been offered a peerage because he sold beer. George Meredith was not offered a peerage, even though some think that his name will live when those of captains and kings have melted into dust. Our little band of recognised men, such as Sir James Barrie, Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins,

Sir Rider Haggard, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, small is the toll they have taken of public recognition; perhaps they should not expect it; perhaps they have been recognised only because of certain political activities; but must we really believe that so many lawyers and so few writers are worthy of an accolade? Is the novelist worthless until he is dead?

This picture may seem too black, but it is that of Great Britain, where contempt for literature has risen to a peculiar degree. Make an imaginative effort; see yourself in the drawing-room of some social leader, where a 'crush' of celebrities is taking place. A flunkey at the head of the stairs announces the guests. He announces: 'Lord Curzon! … Mr Joseph Conrad! … The Bishop of London!' Who caused a swirl in the 'gilded throng?' The cleric? The politician? Or the novelist? Be honest in your reply, and you will know who, at that hypothetical reception, created a stir. The stir, according to place or period, greeted the politician or the bishop, and only in purely literary circles would Mr Conrad have been preferred… For the worship of crowds goes to power rather than to distinction, to the recognised functionary of the State, to him whose power can give power, to all the evanescent things, and seldom to those stockish things, the milestones on the road to eternity. The attitude of the crowd is the attitude of the State, for the State is only the crowd, and often just the mob; it is the chamberlain of ochlocracy, the leader who follows. In all times, the State has shown its indifference, its contempt, for the arts, and particularly for literature. Now and then a prince, such

as Louis of Bavaria, Philip of Spain, Lorenzo the Magnificent, has given to literature more than respect. He has given love, but that only because he was a man before a prince. The prince must prefer the lawyer, the politician, the general, and indeed, of late years what prince was found to patron George Meredith or Henry James?

The attitude of the State to the novelist defines itself most clearly when a royal commission is appointed. In England, royal commissions are *ad hoc* bodies appointed by the government from among men of political influence and special knowledge, to investigate a special question.

As a rule they are well composed. For instance, a royal commission on water supply would probably comprise two or three members of Parliament of some standing, the President of the Institute of Civil Engineers, a professor of sanitation, a canal expert, one or two trade unionists, one or two manufacturers, and a representative of the Home Office or the Board of Trade. Any man of position who has shown interest in public affairs may be asked to sit on a royal commission … provided he is not a novelist. Only one novelist has attained so giddy a height: Sir Rider Haggard; how it happened is not known: it must have been a mistake. We are not weighty enough, serious enough to be called on, even if our novels are so weighty and so serious that hardly anybody can read them. We are a gay tribe of Ariels, too light to discuss even our own trade. For royal commissions concern themselves with our trade, with copyright

law, with the restrictions of the paper supply. You might think that, for instance, paper supply concerned us, for we use cruel quantities, yet no recognised author sat on the commission; a publisher was the nearest approach. Apparently there were two great consumers of paper, authors and grocers, but alone the grocers were consulted. What is the matter with us? Is our crime that we put down in indecent ink what we think and feel, while other people think and feel the same, but prudently keep it down? Possibly our crimes are our imagination and our tendency to carry this imagination into action. Bismarck said that a State conducted on the lines of the Sermon on the Mount would not last twenty-four hours; perhaps it is thought that a State in the conduct of which a novelist had a share would immediately resolve itself into a problem play. Something like that, though in fact it is unlikely that Ariel come to judgment would be much more fanciful in his decrees than the historic Solomon.

All this because we lack solidity … and yet the public calls us commercial, self-advertisers, money-grubbers. It is thought base that we should want three meals a day, though nobody suggests that we can hope to find manna in the street, or drink in our parks from the fountain Hippocrene. We are told that we make our contracts too keenly, that we are grasping, that we are not straight … and yet we are told that we are not business men. What are we to do? Shall we form a trade union and establish a piece rate? Shall we sell our novels by the yard? May we not be as commercial and respected as the doctor who heals with

words and the lawyer who strangles with tape? Now and then the defences of society and state are breached, and a novelist enters Parliament. Mr Hilaire Belloc, Mr A. E. W. Mason, followed Disraeli into the House of Commons, but it is very extraordinary. No one knows how these gentlemen managed to convince the electors that with their eye 'in fine frenzy rolling' they would not scandalise their party by voting against it. (Those writing chaps, you know, they aren't *safe*!)

It must be said that in Parliament the novelists did not have a very good time; they were lucky in having been preferred to a landowner or a pawnbroker, but once in they had not the slightest chance of being preferred to those estimable members of society. It was not a question of straight votes; it never came to that, for Mr Belloc soon disagreed with both sides and became a party of one, while Mr A. E. W. Mason as a rushlight flickered his little flicker and went out. It is as well; they would never have been taken seriously. It is almost a tradition that they should not be taken seriously, and it is on record in most of the worldly memoirs of the nineteenth century that the two main objections to Disraeli were his waistcoats and his authorship of *Contarini Fleming*. Nero liked to see people burnt alive; Disraeli wrote novels. Weaknesses are found in all great men.

There seems in this to lie error as well as scandal; when a new organisation is created, say for the control of lamp oil, obviously a novelist should not be made its chairman, but why should a blotting paper merchant be preferred? Indeed, one might side

with Mr Zangwill, who demands representation for authors in the Cabinet itself, on the plea that they would introduce the emotion which is necessary if the Cabinet is to manage impulsive mankind. As he finely says, we are professors of human nature; if only some University would give us a title and some initials to follow our name, say P.H.N., people might believe that we knew something of it. But the attitude of the State in these matters is steadfast enough. It recognises us as servants rather than as citizens; if in our later years we come upon hard times, we can be given, through the Civil List, pensions which rescue us from the indignities of the poorhouse, but no more. Mostly these pensions benefit our heirs, but the offering is so small that it shocks; it is like tipping an archbishop. Thus Mr W. B. Yeats enjoys a pension of £150, Mr Joseph Conrad, of £100. Why give us pensions at all if they must be alms? One cannot be dignified on £100 a year; one can be dignified on £5000 a year, because the world soon forgets that you ride a gift horse if that horse is a fine, fat beast. The evidence is to be found in the retiring pensions of our late Lord Chancellors, who receive £5000 a year, of our Judges, £1000 to £3750, in the allowances made to impoverished politicians, which attain £2000. Out of a total of £320,000 met by our civil list, literature, painting, science, research, *divide* every year £1200. Nor do the immediate rewards show greater equality. Lord Roberts was voted £100,000 for his services in South Africa; Mr Thomas Hardy has not yet been voted anything for *The Dynasts*.

The shame of literature is carried on even into following generations. The present Lord Nelson, who is not a poor man, for he owns 7000 acres of land, is still drawing a pension of £5000 a year, earned by his august ancestor, but the daughter of Leigh Hunt must be content with £50. We are unknown. We are nobody. Rouget de l'Isle, author of *La Marseillaise*, gave wings to the revolutionary chariot, but tiny, bilious, tyrannic Robespierre rode in it, and rides in it to-day through the pages of history, while men go to their death singing the words of Rouget de l'Isle and know him not.

Even in our own profession of authorship the novelist is an object of disdain. We are less than the economists, the historians, the political writers: we amuse while they teach; they bore, and as they bore it is assumed that they educate, dullness always having been the sorry companion of education. Evidence is easily found; there exists a useful, short encyclopædia called *Books That Count*. It contains the names of about 4000 authors, out of whom only sixty-three are novelists. Divines whose sermons do not fetch a penny at the second-hand bookseller's, promoters of economic theories long disproved, partisan historians, mendacious travellers … they crowd out of the 'books that count' the pale sixty-three novelists, all that is left of the large assembly that gave us *Tom Jones* and *The Way of All Flesh*. This attitude we observe in most reference books. We observe it, for instance, in the well-known *Who's Who Year Book*, which, amazing as it seems, contains no list of authors. The book

contains a list of professors, including those of dental surgery, a list of past Presidents of the Oxford Union, a list of owners of Derby winners, but not a list of authors. The editors of this popular reference book know what the public wants; apparently the public wants to know that Mr Arthur H. King is General Manager of the Commercial Bank of London Ltd. … but the public does not want to know that Mr Anatole France is a great man. The only evidence of notice is a list of our pseudonyms. It matters that Mr Richard Le Gallienne should write under the name of 'Logroller,' for that is odd. Mr Le Gallienne, being an author, is a curiosity; it matters to nobody that he is a man.

II

What is the area of a novelist's reputation? How far do the ripples extend when he casts a novel into the whirlpool of life? It is difficult to say, but few novelists were ever so well known to the people as were in their time such minor figures as Bradlaugh and Dr Grace, nor is there a novelist to-day whose fame can vie with that of, say, Mr Roosevelt. It is strange to think that Dickens himself could not in his own day create as much stir as, say, Lord Salisbury. He lacked political flavour; he was merely one of the latter day prophets who lack the unique advertisement of being stoned. It will be said that such an instance is taken from the masses of the world, most of whom do not read novels, while all are affected by the politician, but in those circles that

support literature the same phenomenon appears; the novel may be known; the novelist is not. The novel is not respected and, indeed, one often hears a woman, at a big lending library, ask for 'three of the latest novels.' New novels! Why not new potatoes? She takes the books away calmly, without looking at the titles or the names. She is quite satisfied; sometimes she does not care much whether or not she has read those novels before, for she does not remember them. They go in at one ear and come out at the other presumably, as a judge said, because there is nothing to stop them.

It is undeniable that the great mass of readers forget either names or titles; many forget both. Some of the more educated remember the author and ask their library for 'something by E. M. Dell,' because she writes such sweet, pretty books, a definition where slander subtly blends with veracity. But, in most cases, nothing remains of either author or title except a hazy impression; the reader is not quite sure whether the book she liked so much is *Fraternity* or the *Corsican Brothers*. She will know that it had something to do with family, and that the author's name began with 'G' … unless it was 'S'. It cannot be otherwise, so long as novels are read in the way they are read, that is to say, if they are taken as drugs. Generally, novels are read to dull the mind, and many succeed, ruining the chances of those whose intent is not morphean, which fulfil the true function of art, viz., to inflame. The object of a novel is not to send the reader to sleep, not to make him oblivious of time on

a railway journey; it is meant to show character, to stimulate observation, to make life vivid, and as life is most vivid when it is most unpleasant, the novel that is worth reading is naturally set aside. For such novels stir the brain too much to let it go to sleep. Those novels are judged in the same way as the baser kind, and that is, perhaps, why the novel itself stands so low. It does stand low, at least in England, for it is almost impossible to sell it. Inquiries made of publishers show that they expect to sell to the circulating libraries seventy to seventy-five per cent. of the copies printed. To sell to a circulating library is not selling; it is lending at one remove; it means that a single copy bought by a library is read by anything between twenty and a hundred people. Sometimes it is read by more, for a copy bought by Mudie's is sold off when the subscribers no longer ask for it. It goes to a town of the size of, say Winchester. Discarded after a year or so by the subscribers it may be sold off for a penny or twopence, with one thrown into the dozen for luck, and arrive with its cover hanging on in a way that is a testimonial to the binder, with its pages marked with thumbs, stained with tears, or, as the case may be, with soup, at some small stationer's shop in a little market town, to go out on hire at a penny a week, until it no longer holds together, and goes to its eternal rest in the pulping machine. On the way, nobody has bought it except to let it out, as the padrone sends out the pretty Italian boys with an organ and a monkey. The public have not bought the book to read and to love. The twenty-five or thirty per cent. actually sold have

been disposed of as birthday or Christmas presents, because one has to give something, and because one makes more effect with a well-bound book costing six shillings than with six shillings' worth of chocolates. Literature has been given its royalty on the bread of shame. Yet, impossible as the novel finds it to tear its shilling from the public, the theatre easily wheedles it into paying a guinea or more for two stalls. It seems strange that two people will pay a guinea to see *Three Weeks* on the boards, yet would never dream of giving four and sixpence for Miss Elinor Glyn's book. That is because theatre seats must be paid for, while books can be borrowed. It goes so far that novelists are continually asked 'where one can get their books,' meaning 'where they can be borrowed'; often they are asked to lend a copy, while no one begs a ride from a cabman.

In England, the public of the novel is almost exclusively feminine. Few men read novels, and a great many nothing at all except the newspaper. They say that they are too busy, which is absurd when one reflects how busy is the average woman. The truth is that they are slack and ignorant. They have some historic reason to despise the novel, for it is quite true that in the nineteenth century, with a few exceptions, such as Thackeray, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Dickens, Scott, George Eliot, the three volume novel was trash. It dealt, generally, with some rhetorical Polish hero, a high-born English maiden, cruel parents, and Italian skies. Right up to 1885 that sort of thing used to arrive every morning outside Mudie's in a

truck, but if it still arrives at Mudie's in a truck it should not be forgotten that other novels arrive. That is what the men do not know. If they read at all you will find them solemnly taking in *The Reminiscences of Mr Justice X. Y. Z.* or *Shooting Gazelle in Bulbulland*, *Political Economics*, or *Economic Politics*, (it means much the same either way up). All that sort of thing, that frozen, dried-up, elderly waggishness, that shallow pomp, is mentally murderous. Sometimes men do read novels, mostly detective stories, sporting or very sentimental tales. When observed, they apologise and say something about resting the brain. That means that they do not respect the books they read, which is base; it is like keeping low company, where one can yawn and put one's boots on the sofa. Now, no company is low unless you think it is. As soon as you realise that and stay, you yourself grow naturalised to it. Likewise, if you read a book without fellowship and respect for its author, you are outraging it. But mankind is stupid, and it would not matter very much that a few men should read novels in that shamefaced and patronising way if they were not so open about it. If they do not apologise, they boast that they never read a novel; they imply superiority. Their feminine equivalent is the serious-minded girl, who improves her mind with a book like *Vicious Viscounts of Venice*; if she reads novels at all she holds that like good wine they improve with keeping, and must be at least fifty years old. By that time the frivolous author may have redeemed his sins.

It is because of all these people, the people who borrow and

do not cherish, the people who skim, the people who indulge and cringe, and the people who do not indulge at all, that we have come to a corruption of literary taste, where the idea is abashed before the easy emotion, where religiosity expels religion, and the love passion turns to heroics or to maundering, that the success of the second-rate, of Mrs Barclay, of Miss Gene Stratton Porter, of Mr Hall Caine, has come about. It is a killing atmosphere. It is almost incomprehensible, for when the talk is of a political proposal, say, of land settlement in South Africa, or of a new type of oil engine, hardly a man will say: 'I am not interested.' He would be ashamed to say that. It would brand him as a retrograde person. Sometimes he will say: 'I do not like music,' but he will avoid that if he can, for music is an evidence of culture; he will very seldom confess that he does not care for pictures; he will confess without any hesitation that he does not care for any kind of book. He will be rather proud to think that he prefers a horse or a golf-stick. It will seldom occur to him that this literature of which some people talk so much can hold anything for him. It will not even occur to him to try, for literature is judged at Jedburgh. It hardly ever occurs to any one that literature has its technique, that introductions to it are necessary; a man will think it worth while to join a class if he wants to acquire scientific knowledge, but seldom that anything in the novel justifies his taking preliminary steps. It is not that literature repels him by its occasional aridity; it is not that he has stumbled upon classics, which, as Mr Arnold Bennett delightfully says, 'are not light

women who turn to all men, but gracious ladies whom one must long woo.' Men do not think the lady worth wooing. This brings us back to an early conclusion in this chapter; novelists are not useful; we are pleasant, therefore despicable. Our novels do not instruct; all they can do is to delight or inflame. We can give a man a heart, but we cannot raise his bank interest. So our novels are not worthy of his respect because they do not come clad in the staid and reassuring gray of the text-book; they are not dull enough to gain the respect of men who can appreciate only the books that bore them, who shrink away from the women who charm them and turn to those who scrag their hair off their forehead, and bring their noses, possibly with a cloth, to a disarming state of brilliancy.

Sometimes, when the novelist thinks of all these things, he is overcome by a desperate mood, decides to give up literature and grow respectable. He thinks of becoming a grocer, or an attorney, and sometimes he wants to be the owner of a popular magazine, where he will exercise, not the disreputable function of writing, but the estimable one of casting pleasant balance sheets. Then the mood passes, and he is driven back to Flaubert's view that it is a dog's life, but the only one. He decides to live down the extraordinary trash that novelists produce. Incredible as truth may be, fiction is stranger still, and there is no limit to the intoxications of the popular novelist. Consider, indeed, the following account of six novels, taken from the reviews in the literary supplement of the *Times*, of 27th July, 1916. In

the first, *Seventeen*, Mr Booth Tarkington depicts characters of an age indicated by the title, apparently concerned with life as understood at seventeen, who conduct baby talk with dogs. In the second, *Blow the Man Down*, by Mr Holman Day, an American financier causes his ship to run ashore, while the captain is amorously pursued by the daughter of the villainous financier, and cuts his way out through the bottom of a schooner. *The Plunderers*, by Mr Edwin Lefevre, is concerned with robbers in New York, whose intentions are philanthropic; we observe also *Wingate's Wife*, by Miss Violet Tweedale, where the heroine suffers 'an agony of apprehension,' and sees a man murdered; but all is well, as the victim happens to be the husband whom she had deserted twenty years before. There is also *The Woman Who Lived Again*, by Mr Lindsey Russell, where a cabinet, in office when the war breaks out, concerns itself with German spies and an ancient Eurasian, who with Eastern secrets revives a dead girl and sends her back to England to confound the spies. There is also *Because It Was Written*, by Princess Radziwill, where Russian and Belgian horrors are framed in between a prologue and epilogue entirely devoted to archangels. There is nothing extraordinary in these novels; they merely happen to be reviewed on the same day. The collection compares perfectly with another, in the *Daily News* of the 19th September, 1916, where are reviewed a novel by Miss C. M. Matheson, one by Mr Ranger Gull, and one by 'Richard Dehan.' They are the usual sort of thing. The first is characterised by Mr Garnett as 'a hash

of trite images and sentimental meanderings.' Miss Matheson goes so far as to introduce a shadowy, gleaming figure, which, with hand high upraised over the characters' heads, describes the Sign of the Cross. Mr Ranger Gull introduces as a manservant one of the most celebrated burglars of the day, a peer poisoned with carbon disulphide, wireless apparatus, and the lost heir to a peerage. As for 'Richard Dehan,' it is enough to quote one of her character's remarks: 'I had drained my cup of shame to the dregs.'

This sort of thing is produced in great abundance, and has helped to bring the novel down. Unreality, extravagance, stage tears, offensive piety, ridiculous abductions and machinery, because of those we have 'lost face,' like outraged Chinamen. No wonder that people of common intelligence, who find at their friend's house drivel such as this, should look upon the novel as unworthy. It is natural, though it is unjust. The novel is a commodity, and if it seeks a wide public it must make for a low one: the speed of a fleet is that of its slowest ship; the sale of a novel is the capacity of the basest mind. Only it might be remembered that all histories are not accurate, all biographies not truthful, all economic text-books not readable. Likewise, it should be remembered, and we need quote only Mr Conrad, that novels are not defined by the worst of their kind… It is men's business to find out the best books; they search for the best wives, why not for the best novels? There are novels that one can love all one's life, and this cannot be said of every woman.

There are to-day in England about twenty men and women who write novels of a certain quality, and about as many who fail, but whose appeal is to the most intelligent. These people are trying to picture man, to describe their period, to pluck a feather from the wing of the fleeting time. They do not write about radium murders, or heroines clad in orchids and tiger skins. They strive to seize a little of the raw life in which they live. The claim is simple; even though we may produce two thousand novels a year which act upon the brain in the evening as cigarettes do after lunch, we do put forth a small number of novels which are the mirror of the day. Very few are good novels, and perhaps not one will live, but many a novel concerned with labour problems, money, freedom in love, will have danced its little dance to some purpose, will have created unrest, always better than stagnation, will have aroused controversy, anger, impelled some people, if not to change their life, at least to tolerate that others should do so. *The New Machiavelli*, *Lord Jim*, *The White Peacock*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *Ethan Frome*, none of those are supreme books, but every one of them is a hand grenade flung at the bourgeoisie; we do not want to kill it, but we do want to wake it up.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.