



NOTES



The Decadence of the Novel

In a review of some recent fiction, J. Middleton Murray, writing in the *London Nation*, has some interesting *obiter dicta* concerning the genesis and the decadence of the average modern novel. The Fashionable Novel may nowadays mean the novel in fashion as well as the novel of fashion. There are two samples of it made to-day by experts. Thirty years ago unknown hack-writers put together for the consumption of housemaids novels that set forth, against a setting of baronial halls and vast wooded parks, the romantic love affairs of the members of the Peerage, telling with much sugary sweetness how Lord de Vere loved and married, in spite of the opposition of his family, the pretty daughter of the village carpenter. Usually such productions were published as serials in the *Family Herald* or as pamphlets printed on bad paper. Then there was the ponderous three-volume novel, often tiresome, always moral, rarely clever, and as a rule costing about thirty shillings, and generally sent out in Mudie's boxes to country houses. That was the old novel of fashion. One way or another high life was always to the forefront of the picture. Indeed Paul Bourget makes it a law that a novelist who wishes to enter upon a psychological study of his characters must place them in a position which gives them a chance to cultivate their souls in peace. In the course of time a reading public, intermediate between the patrons of the old three volume novel and the servants hall arose, and created a supply which was met by the six-shilling novel of pre-war days. Between the covers of such publications was as a rule found a slightly superior *Family Herald* story, which now became accessible in popular libraries to the servants', shop-girls, and lower-middle-class matrons with time to kill on their hands. Hall Caine and Marie Corelli sailed to fortune on the top of the wave, and they have had many imitators since. Then came a more adventurous school of craftsmen whom we prefer to let the writer describe in his own words:

"The novelist who was beginning about fifteen years ago had, of course, a supreme contempt for Hall Caine and Marie Corelli; but still, it would be pleasant to be as rich as they. Plenty of reputable novelists—indeed, some of the greatest—had deliberately employed aristocratic settings. Why should not they? Why not, indeed? They would give an intimate description of the aristocratic fairy and they would allow their readers to move familiarly among clubs and country houses, handle the furniture, examine Lady Eleudely's lingerie. And they could do it all with the noblest motives. They would touch the upper crust of the vast novelette audience, and they could still themselves appear without a blush in literary society."

The modern novelist does not forget that winners in the book market are bred by Aristocracy out of Sex. "The upper-class

soul gives way to lower-class emotions; the aristocratic society to plutocratic irruptions. Only in developing the theme the novice must be careful not to suggest that membership of the aristocracy is accompanied by any distinctions of mind or refinement of sensibility. It must be purely a matter of motor-cars and footmen." Apart from these essentials, all the author needs is to throw in the proper (or improper) amount of "smartness" and "sex." Having digressed though over two columns into a historico-literary study of origins on the foregoing lines, the critic comes down to facts and to Stephen McKenna's last book, *The Secret Victory*, of which we had a little to say, and that much not kind, a short time ago. With him he couples W. L. George, and he might as well throw John Galsworthy into the same galley. Compton McKenzie is on the edge and hardly saved. When people get so much of the sort of stuff these men write, and so much that is ten times worse, we can understand why a taste of Conrad is so rare.

Classical Pedantry

Among the other follies of Public School education, it has been long customary to regard only as Latin the writings of a few men who lived in a narrow-remote period. With as much reason might one say that Ruskin, Addison, Newman, Tennyson, Keats, Swinburne ought not be read because they depart from the classical standards of Chaucer and of the old Bible. Pedants forget that Latin developed with the ages, just as English and French did, and that it is as absurd to pretend that a knowledge of Cicero and Horace is a knowledge of Latin as to say that an English scholar need not go beyond Spenser or the Revised Version. Mr. Macken, who is no mean authority, tells us that in his opinion one approaches more nearly to the Roman spirit in Church Latin than in that of the age of Augustus; and Mr. W. H. Myers, a great classical scholar, says: "Adam of St. Victor is metrically nearer to Livius than to Virgil or Ovid; and the Litany of the Arval Brethren find its true succession, not in the Secular Ode of Horace, but in the *Dies Iure* or the *Veni Creator*." And Professor Phillimore says: "England is to this day laboring under an opposite extreme of pedantry (to Petrarch's) which decrees that only the narrowest classical period deserves any study. Men pass for educated and for good Latinists who have never read St. Augustine or Prudentius, and for whom 1200 years of their own ignorance are tabooed as the Dark Ages. Shut your eyes and call it the Dark Ages. This is a darker state of mind than that of those who, though they had the bad taste to prefer St. Jerome to Cicero as a stylist, at least read both. In this matter Classicism has shrunk and narrowed since Petrarch 500 years ago. Ciceronianism was then a pedantry; but the English Public Schools tradition, supported by their dutiful adjuncts, the

Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, is a narrower pedantry still." Classicism is in truth a dead thing: as dead as English scholarship would be if it ruled out all the writers later than Spenser. Only for those who know medieval and post-Augustan Latin does the language really repay study. Cicero is as cold as his own dust to-day; Horace is a delightful word-spinner and no more; Nepos and Livy have only an antiquarian interest. But for history which still reaches out to grasp the present, for philosophy which is actual to-day, for exposition of truths which were never more wanted than now, one must go to the Latin writers of the glorious Middle Ages which ignoramus miscall the Dark Ages. Do you think that your smattering of Caesar and Virgil entitles you to deride the diction of the medieval writers? Then read what de Quincey says: "Their diction was a perfect thing in its kind, and to do it justice we ought rather to compare it to the exquisite language of algebra—equally irreconcilable to all standards of aesthetic beauty; but yet for the three qualities, of elliptical rapidity, of absolute precision, and of simplicity, this language is unrivalled among human inventions." And Mann says: "It would be to fall into a pedantic fallacy of the more conceited humanists of the Renaissance to suppose that a Latin composition can not be artistic because the Latin is not Ciceronian. The letters of Gregory will be read, ay, even for their literary excellence, when the insipid production—classically perfect—of the Renaissance will be consigned to oblivion." The prejudice against Church Latin—the real living Latin tongue—is, like Capitalism and Pauperism, a fruit of the Reformation. On the whole, the priest who reads his breviary intelligently is a better Latin scholar than the average British University professor—the former knows the living Latin language; the latter is an archaeological fossicker in a very narrow and barren field.

DIOCESE OF DUNEDIN

A meeting of Christian Brothers' old boys was held in St. Joseph's Hall on Sunday evening last in order to make the necessary arrangements for the control of the side-shows at the forthcoming Dominican carnival. Mrs. G. M. Baker was elected president and Mr. C. Cull, secretary. A strong and energetic committee was set up consisting of Messrs. Meuhnick, Bradley, Collett, Clutterbuck, Fay, Donaldson, Kelly, Harty, Russell, Walker, and Bayne. It was arranged to hold a series of euchre parties, the dates on which these will be held being advertised in this issue of the *Tablet*. Although taking no part in the "queen" contest the committee is desirous of obtaining the assistance of as many other old boys as possible, in a combined effort to make the carnival a financial success.

At St. Joseph's Cathedral on Sunday evening Miss Amy Rochelle, a notable professional vocalist now on a tour of the Dominion, gave an artistic rendering of a particularly beautiful setting of the "Ave Maria," in which her magnificent voice was heard to great advantage.