

BOOKS

By James Branch Cabell

PUT to a jury of twelve average persons, the question, "What is the first requirement of a novelist?" would probably result in a hung verdict. The less prosaic would answer, "A publisher," and the ten dullards would wrangle of "original ideas" quite as though they discoursed of possibilities. And the whole dozen would be right enough: for the publisher is really indispensable, whereas, from the point of view of commerce—and really esthetics are in no wise concerned—our modern novel is nothing but a have not some superficial novelty to arrest the roving and languid interest with which all people (turned pessimists by experience) hear about new fiction. . . . Yet the humane laws of the land compel no man to read another's book. Emboldened by this fact, the general reader demands, with his visage too betraying such esthetic zeal, that a novel may fairly be described as characteristic:

"Interest me, against my natural inclinations, in your stated nonsense, and I will buy such novels of yours as I cannot borrow. I do not at all go in for reading and that sort of thing, when I can find anything else to do; but once in a while there is a vacant half hour I have to get rid of somehow. At such times I am willing to put you on an equal footing with the evening paper and the cinematograph, since I reserve the right to quit any one of you the moment I find the entertainment distasteful. Go ahead now with your fooleries; and remember I am here to be shocked or elevated or instructed or harrowed, or otherwise taken out of myself; and let us have no 'literary' nonsense, because I resent the impudence of people who allude to matters that I do not understand."

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It seems little enough to ask in return for a whole 10 per cent commission on a book that costs the general reader, very often, as much as his cravat. Still, it is a mercantile offer, which every true artist would meet with contempt if only it were possible to discharge the monthly accounts with the same coinage. But, unfortunately, most books are less a question of art than of bread and butter. The average fiction writer, at all events, can afford to look down upon the public only, as the acrobat looks down upon the tightrope, to ascertain whither it will hold, and to make sure that it will support him. . . .

Nor is it impeccable etiquette to blow one's own trumpet; yet each musician undoubtedly makes the most noise with his own instrument. So in the Vanity Fair of Current Letters each tradesman makes bold to commend his especial wares. . . . The attractions are many and various. There is Mr. Booth Tarkington dispensing, past doubt, the best confectionery in the market. At the familiar stand Mr. W. D. Howells is still making tintypes, and guaranteeing a perfect likeness. Mr. Bernard Shaw, of course, is in charge of that intriguing exhibition, the Crazy House, where everything is exhibited upside down; and in the fortune teller's tent, recently vacated by Mr. H. G. Wells, a prophesying this week, I forget who. Yonder row of pavilions is devoted to a display of precocious orphans, and you are warned not to enter with less than two pocket handkerchiefs. Those who are interested by the sport of firing missiles at a colored man can be diverted, to your regret, at any number of stalls (conducted by such dissimilar persons as ambassadors, newspaper correspondents, retired governesses, and ex-governesses to the nobility). Over yonder a very considerable section of the fair grounds is set apart for the performances commended by Col. Roosevelt. And, of course, there are any number of tents with flamboyant standards stating that the exhibits within concerns the highest and most exclusive society, and narrowly escaped being forbidden by the police. . . . It is a motley bazaar, and to make any choice therein cannot but puzzle the visitor with limited resources for his fairing.

NOW all this is very new and original, indeed, and the general reader ought to be satisfied. For it is at his demand the age thus pullulates with reading matter for the nonliterary. Still, all progress brings its attendant problems; and in this case one honestly wonders what is to become of our old literary masterpieces, now that people decline to read them. For there can be no earthly doubt that to a steadily augmenting majority the time honored bulk of English literature means only a forgotten "course" at school or college, along with the calculus and botany and other matters there is no longer any need to worry over, until it comes to helping the children with their lessons. . . .

As a case in point, one may well consider that especial glory of English letters, the much vaunted plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, which justly rank so high in literature that few can endure the altitude. Here for the asking is, in cold earnest, "the greatest part of the greatest period of the greatest literature of the world"; and to extol this quite priceless literary heritage of ours as animated, impassioned, brilliant, and inimitable, would be to deal in textbook truisms; but to describe it as generally pleasant reading would be an absurdity. To the most of us such portions as we can understand at all sound uncommonly like nonsense: and throughout the flavor of unreality in these dramas is even stronger than their depressing odor of antiquity. Our instinctive attitude toward them becomes much the same as that of Tom Tolliver toward the Latin language. Yet managers once with perfect justice classed these plays as "light popular stuff," and the jokes we puzzle out with the aid of commentaries and footnotes were put in for the especial benefit of the uneducated. . . . Then there is the Spectator, which time has transmuted from a popular periodical into a pest. And all the productions of Mrs. Aphra Behn, the seventeenth century Elinor Glyn, and of Samuel Richardson, who was the Florence Barclay of his day—these, too, assist to prompt avoidance of the well selected library. . . .

For time has erected barriers more or less serious before all the "popular" reading matter of yester-year. From this side of the fence the prospect seems attractive enough, and for Cervantes, let us say, nearly everybody has a civil superlative. . . . But the actual climbing of the palings, to the extent of reading famous books instead of the books about them, provokes inevitable disillusion. The moon is beyond question interesting when glanced at through a moderate sized telescope, but actually to sojourn on its surface might prove a trifle cheerless.

Thus every self-respecting person will assure you, with whatever pronunciatory divergence, that Don Quixote is one of the great characters of fiction: and past doubt the ingenious gentleman of La Mancha is a delightful companion, in anticipation. What could be more diverting than the adventure of Mambrino's helmet, and that perfectly killing affair of the windmills? And where will you find nowadays such wonderful character drawing as in Sancho Panza? You thrill to the notion of a jaunt through old world Spain in company with these two immortal types of humanity, concerning whom, as you glowingly remembered, it has been strikingly observed by somebody or other that such and such is the case. . . . So you begin the book, in an atmosphere of genial goodfellowship which vanishes long before the end of the fourth chapter. For it is an unfortunate fact that, so far as most of us are concerned, the essayists have written much more entertainingly about Don Quixote than Cervantes did. And when you fair mindedly consider that noble structure which commentators and occasional writers have erected with the works of Rabelais as foundation, you will hardly contend that the most attractive portion of the building is the cellar.