

# THE GADFLY

By James Branch Cabell.

WHERE other persons decently attempt to conceal their foibles, and mistakes, and vices, this maniac, the literary artist, stung by the gadfly of self-expression, will catalogue all his and print them in a book. Since write he must, interminably he writes about himself because (in this respect at least resembling the other members of his race) he has no certain knowledge as to any one else. And the part he has played in other persons' lives he will likewise expose in a manner that is not always chivalrous. Indeed, he will undertake much uncalculated research with the assistance of women who do not entirely comprehend they are participating in a philosophical experiment. And all this, too, he will print in his damned book, for from a social standpoint the creative literary artist is always a traitor, and not infrequently a scoundrel. Meanwhile he becomes callous, by virtue of never yielding so entirely to any emotion as to lose sight of its being an interesting topic to write about. All that which is naturally fine in him, in fact, he will so study, and regard from every aspect, that from much handling it grows dingy. And very clearly does the luckless knave perceive this fact, for all the while, amid these constant impairments, his vision grows more quick and keen, and mercilessly shows him the twisted and scathed thing he is. Nor is this the final jibe. However pleasant it be to dream of survival in the speech and actions and libraries of posterity, reflection suggests that this "immortality" is deplorably parochial. For we and our contemporaneous wasters of shoe leather and printers ink, it may be recalled, are that "posterity" to which Shakespeare and Milton so confidently addressed themselves: and it were folly to pretend that to us, as a generation, either of these poets is today, not merely as generally known and read, but as generally an intellectual influence, as Mr. Harold Bell Wright or Mrs. Gene Stratton Porter\*. Of course, a century hence there will still be a few read—for "Hamlet," whereas "Freckles"—which is regarded, I believe, as Mrs. Porter's masterpiece—will conceivably be out of print. Yet even in the whole outcome of things it may be disputed if the great creative artist exercises more influence, all in all, or is more widely a public benefactor, than is the perpetrator of a really popular novel . . .

I have spoken of the literary artist's patient immolation, which he himself contrives in order that his dream, once snared with comely and fit words, may be perpetuated, and that so the artist may usurp the brain cells and prompt the flesh of unborn generations. And I have spoken, too, of the "Faustus," at some length, as the indisputable masterpiece that it is: but suppose you compare its actual aggregate influence upon humanity with the influence, say, of the novel called "Queed," which was so extensively purchased, not even the publishers pretend nowadays that "Queed" was an important contribution to literature; but this book was read by millions, and by many of its readers was naively enjoyed and admired and more or less remembered. "Queed" did thus somewhat influence all these honest folk and tinge their minds, such as they were. Now the "Faustus" during three centuries of polite speeches about it, has not with any such directness tinged the minds of millions, nor has it been read by thousands of their own volition. Nor has the "Faustus" ever given that general pleasure which was provoked by "Queed." And, moreover, the "uplifting" optimism of "Queed," it must be remembered, really brought out that which was best in the readers who took the book seriously. You cannot, of course, evoke from any source more than is already there, and to every end the means must be commensurate; so that, while to bring out the best there is in a wrecked vessel or a gold mine, or a person of some culture, requires a deal of elaborated apparatus, a nutpick will do as much for a walnut, and a popular novel for the average mind. And the point is that this average mind, which from "Queed" derived enjoyment and some benefit,

has (after a brief toleration of the "Faustus" on account of its dreadful "comic" scenes) for some three centuries perceived in Marlowe's masterpiece "just another one of those old classics," and will so view it always. . . . We thus reach by plain arithmetic the proof that as a writer Mr. Sydnor Harrison (who wrote "Queed"†) has exercised a greater influence, and has really amounted to more than Christopher Marlowe; and, continuing to be quite honest in our mathematics, we find that as touches influence, neither craftsman can pretend to rival the sympathetic scribe whose daily column of advice to the lovelorn is printed simultaneously by hundreds of our leading public journals, and daily advises millions as to the most delicate and important relations of their existence.

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AND should you raise the objection that, none the less, the "Faustus" is fine literature, whereas "Queed" is fairly answerable to some other description—that the drama is profuse in verbal magic, and the novel, to put the matter as civilly as possible, is not remarkable for literary art—I can but remind you that, after all, your protest amounts to astonishingly little. All you assert is true enough, but to what, in the high and potent name of St. Stultitia (who presides over the popularity of our reading matter) does your objection amount? Even to the very, very few who can distinguish between competent work and butchery, the "style" of an adroit writer is apt to become an increasing annoyance, as he proceeds with such miraculous and conscious nicety: until at last you are fretted into active irritation that the fellow does not ever stumble and flounder into some more humanly inadequate way of expressing himself. And for the rest, how many persons really care, or even notice, whether a book be conscientiously written? It is merely "something to read"; and they, good souls, have been reduced to looking it over, not quite by any reverential quest of "art," but by a lack of anything else to do.

For literature is a starveling cult, kept alive by the "literary." Such literature has been, and will continue to be, always. I grant you that it will continue always. But always, too, its master works will affect directly no one save the "literary"; and to perceive this is the serious artist's crowning discouragement. For he has every reason to know what "literary" persons are, if but by means of uncomfortable introspection, and all and sundry of them he despises. At an authors' league dinner, or any similar assemblage of people who "write," you may always detect the participants uneasily peeping toward mirrors, to see if they really do look like the others. . . . And it is only persons such as these, the artist sometimes comprehends forlornly, who will be making any to-do over him a thousand years from today! At such depressing moments of prevision he recognizes that this desire to write perfectly, and thus to win to "literary" immortality, is but another dynamic illusion; and he concedes, precisely as Congreve long ago detected, that, viewed from any personal standpoints, the game is very far from being worth the candle.

\*Charteris here refers to two very popular novelists of his day. "It is his almost clairvoyant power of reading the human soul that has made Mr. Wright's books among the most remarkable works of the present age."—Oregon Journal, Portland. "It is difficult to speak of the work of Gene Stratton Porter and not call upon all the superlatives of praise in the language."—San Francisco Call.

†Of all American authors who have made their debut in the twentieth century, I regard Mr. Henry Sydnor Harrison as the most promising. . . . Of all our younger writers he seems to have the largest natural endowment."—William Lyon Phelps in "The Advance of the English Novel" (published 1916).