Literary Chat

Anonymous

Table of Contents

Literary Chat

Anonymous

Europe appears to be exerting more and more of an attractive power over our literary men. Henry James has lived abroad so long that he may almost be considered to have expatriated himself; Bret Harte has of late years so thoroughly identified himself with England that his stories now always appear there before they do here; Frank Stockton is making a prolonged visit on the other side and a newspaper paragraph announces that Mark Twain is in Geneva so often that many believe him to have taken up his residence there. He himself declares that it is the Alps that draw him thither so frequently. "They follow me everywhere," he says, "and I cannot get away from them."

He did manage to get away and come over here recently to ascertain why his last story failed to "go" as well as his earlier ones went. That is the drawback with humorous writers; they are apt to use up their vein more quickly than their confreres of more versatile talent. Stockton's "Squirrel Inn," for instance, cannot compare for freshness and originality with his "Rudder Grange" and "The Lady or the Tiger." * * *

How interesting it would be," says the Publishers' Circular, "if a story teller could explain the precise process of mind by which he originates a character or invents a situation. . . . Thackeray's characters surprised himself; they spoke and acted in a manner which proved they were often beyond his control. That shows that he at least was not deliberate, and that he did not always quite understand his own conceptions. `Now how the deuce did you come to say that?' he frequently asked of some self willed puppet."

Some writers have told us a part of the process by which their stories came into existence. Miss Wilkins and Dr. Conan Doyle select their climax first and then lead up to it. But that climax? How did they come to think of that, is what a curious public wants to know?

It is inspiration, we suppose, and if we are asked how to secure this "divine afflatus" we can do no more than suggest a trial of the method recently discovered by Dr. Lander Brunton, which the London Daily News declares to be nothing less than the secret of commanding new ideas at will:

One night, after a long day's work, this eminent physician was called upon to write an article immediately. He sat down with pen, ink, and paper before him, but not a single idea came into his head, not a single word could he write. Lying back, he then soliloquized: "The brain is the same as it was yesterday, and it worked then; why will it not work today?"

Then it occurred to him that the day before he was not so tired, and that probably the circulation was a little brisker than today. He next considered the various experiments on the connection between cerebral circulation and mental activity, and concluded that if the blood would not come to the brain the best thing would be to bring the brain down to the blood.

It was at this moment that he was seized with the happy thought of laying his head "flat upon the table." At once his ideas began to flow and his pen to run across the paper. By and by Dr. Brunton thought, "I am getting on so well I may sit up now." But it would not do. "The moment," he continues, "that I raised my head, my mind became an utter blank, so I put my head down again flat upon the table, and finished my article in that position." *

* *

But if an aspiring genius distrusts the foregoing method, he is at liberty to avail himself of the following advertisement, which recently appeared in an English paper:

HOME WORK.—Good Plots for Novels for Sale. Apply Miss Smallwood, The Lees, Great Malvern.

We presume that Miss Smallwood guarantees not to sell the same plot to two different writers, and that she has a large and varied assortment on hand from which a choice may be made. Still her business must be rather precarious, for if she allows a man to examine her stock with a view to purchasing, and he decides that there is nothing that fits his style, she cannot be certain he will not absorb ideas and use them at some future day without compensating her for the indirect suggestion.

However, the entire literary profession exists by virtue of a code of honor prevailing among its members. What other protection than this has the editor against the author who may send copies of the same article to half a dozen periodicals simultaneously? Of course he would be sure to be found out in the end, but in these days of the typewriter he could take a fresh nom de plume and play the game over again. That this is merely a supposable case, and not the citation of an actual fact, reflects handsomely on the integrity of the guild. It is a pity that as much cannot be said in another line—that of copying an article out of an old periodical and sending it in as original. Instances are on record where a humorous weekly has bought a joke purloined from one of its own early issues. * * *

That plagiarism of this and other kinds is of such rare occurrence should tend to more and more ennoble a profession that is so closely linked with the "art preservative of arts." And yet there is no other calling so persistently decried by its followers. "Don't" is the admonition of nine out of ten men of letters to the young man or woman who would fain start out in the literary path.

Here is Daudet, for example, declaring that "after all there is nothing so weary as brain work, and it is practically impossible to keep up the sort of strain undergone by every literary man for many years without breaking down."

Then there is the matter of the rewards of literature. We all know how these—or the lack of them—have been held up to discourage aspirants. The newest instance of the sort is the report that the late Rose Terry Cooke, popular as her writings were, never made more than her pin money with her pen. Without questioning the authority of this rumor we should like to offset it by the statement that we have personal knowledge of a writer of juvenile stories, whose fame is not as widespread as Mrs. Cooke's, but who is identified with one of our leading publishing houses, and who receives $700 for a story of some twenty chapters in serial form, and the usual royalty after it has been put between covers. Two at least of these stories are used in a year. This income may not be princely, but it is surely not beggarly for a man who is neither a Stockton, an Aldrich, an Optic, an Alger, nor a contributor to one of the sensational weeklies. * * *

So much for the "lesser lights." Now let us look at the incomes of some of the "lights." The salary of an associate justice of the Supreme Court at Washington, a position eagerly coveted as all know, is ten thousand a year. One of our leading novelists has recently resigned an editorship netting him, it is said, about $17,000 per annum. J. M. Barrie's returns for his books are enormous and R. L. Stevenson's English publishers report that "Treasure Island" is in its fortieth thousand and "The Master of Ballantrae" in its twentieth; "The Black Arrow" in its nine−teenth, and "Kidnapped" in its thirty second. * * *

Robert Louis Stevenson's last book will perhaps be read with more interest in America than England. In the preface he admits that its subject, "Eight Years of Trouble in Samoa" is one for which his countrymen probably care little. The chief attraction of the volume is in its style rather than its matter, its descriptions of persons and places in his remote Pacific home being in his most picturesque vein.

One incident of Mr. Stevenson's narrative is the terrific and memorable hurricane of March, 1889. From his graphic account of the disaster we quote the dramatic paragraph in which he narrates the escape of the British ironclad Calliope.

"In the fairway of the entrance the flagship Trenton still held on. Her rudder was broken, her wheel carried away; within she was flooded with water from the peccant hawse pipes; she had just made the signal, `Fires extinguished,' and lay helpless, awaiting the inevitable end. Between this melancholy hulk and the external reef Kane must find a path. Steering within fifty yards of the reef (for which she was actually headed), and her foreyard passing, on the other hand, over the Trenton's quarter as she rolled, the Calliope steered between the rival dangers, came to the wind triumphantly, and was once more pointed to the sea and safety. Not often in naval history was there a moment of more sickening peril, and it was dignified by one of those incidents that reconcile the chronicler with his otherwise abhorrent task. From the doomed flagship the Americans hailed the success of the English with a cheer. It was led by the old admiral in person, rang out over the storm with holiday vigor, and was answered by the Calliopes with an emotion easily conceived. This ship of her kinsfolk was almost the last external object seen from the Calliope for hours; immediately after, the mists closed about her till the morrow."

It is such passages as this that will attract readers to the pages of "Eight Years in Samoa." * * *

The death of Whittier leaves us only one of the famous group of New England poets of which our country has been so justly proud. Carefully indeed should we cherish genial Dr. Holmes, and fervently pray that he may long be spared to us. For there are none arising to take the places of these great men of heaven born mind. We have many writers, and good ones, too, and some few poets, but—comparisons are not inviting. In monarchies, in the editorial chairs of newspapers, it is—"the king is dead, long live the king;" but with Oliver Wendell Holmes we fear it will be a case of the last of his line. * * *

It is too bad. We really thought that with so many of our magazines circulating extensively in England, we had come to have some sort of standing as producers of literature. But according to a writer in the Nineteenth Century America is to be noted merely as the great home of "journals of trades and fads and specialties." But we will quote a couple of paragraphs from Mr. Delille's article "The American Newspaper Press," which will show the trend of his bitter criticism:

"Distinctly the States are not as yet a literary nation. One of the most noticeable features in the wilderness of printed matter which crops up daily throughout the country is the absence of anything like literary thought or writing. To the best of my belief there has never been in America any greatly influential and representative literary organ. In every land under the sun, no doubt, there will be found somewhere or other the saving handful of just men. In America, during the middle years of the century, this small proportion of shining lights among the darkness, this tiny pinch of salt whereby the mass was leavened, was represented by Ralph Waldo Emerson and his Concord compeers and disciples.

But has this little American school of plain living and high thinking ever set its mark upon even the corner or margin of the American press at large? One is reluctantly inclined to doubt it when one looks through these hundreds and thousands of daily, weekly, and other publications, each more than the other trivial, vulgar, ignorant, braggart, and void of everything which constitutes true sense or thought. Not even one half−penny worth of the American bread of life to this intolerable deal of rancid and nauseous Yankee sack! * * *

It seems to us that the highest tribute that could be paid to the memory of the late George William Curtis is the fact that the Harpers are reported to have decided to discontinue the Easy Chair in their Monthly. * * *

One of Charles Dudley Warner's recent utterances has called attention to the ineffective way in which books are advertised. It is indeed high time that our novelists bestirred themselves to announce the existence of their wares, when these wares are beginning to be used as advertisements themselves. A trade journal devoted to the interests

of advertisers presents this striking suggestion to its readers:

A method of advertising that may yet win its way is that of some grocer or haberdasher who does up his packages in the separate installments of a new and striking story. It is said to be managed in a very ingenious manner. Each customer has his or her package or packages done up with the first chapter, or somewhat more, which is so announced as to call the customer back very soon for the second installment, for which another purchase will be necessary. If the story is interesting, as it must be, the reader who begins it will be on a constant trot for its continuation, and will multiply the trade of the dealer at a rapid rate." * * *

The Appletons announce a novel entitled "Cross Currents," by Miss Mary Angela Dickens, a granddaughter of Charles Dickens. The younger brother of Richard Harding Davis has gone into the writing of short stories, so that with the mother, Mrs. Rebecca Harding Davis, there are now three authors in that one family. Howells's daughter is a frequent contributor to the magazines, and the standing of Thackeray's daughter as a novelist is a high one. Who will dare to deny in the face of these facts that literary talent—not to say genius—is oftentimes hereditary? * * *

As an offset to the remarks of Mr. Delille on literary America, quoted elsewhere in this department, we clip from the St. Louis Republic an account of the notable change that has taken place in the taste for books of that city's reading public.

"The proportion of books of fiction for home reading drawn from the Public Library has fallen from 62 per cent to only 52 per cent. The decrease of 10 per cent is phenomenal, more so because within the time in which it has taken place much has been done to popularize the library and encourage its use by those who, supposedly, read least. In the same time the percentage of cyclopaedias and magazines used in the reference department has increased from 5.11 to 15.41 of the books drawn, and there has also been an increase of nearly 7 per cent in the ratio of books of social science drawn in the total.

We are unable to imagine any explanation for this other than that of the great change that has taken place in newspapers during the last ten years. Nothing is more calculated to suggest and stimulate thought than the great modern morning newspaper. In this generation the young man who has learned to `read, write, and cipher,' in the common schools is an oaf and a dullard indeed, on whom effort would be thrown away, if he cannot continue his education with the newspapers continually reminding him of what he ought to know, and suggesting new lines of thought to him in every issue, while the great libraries are open to him to follow them out, and while books for home study, if he desires to own them, as he should, are so cheap that those who will not own them do not deserve them." * * *

Our readers may recall the coincidence, commented on last year, when Mr. Howells's novel "An Imperative Duty," appearing serially in one magazine, was found to be almost exactly similar in conception to a short story written by a woman and published in another. There was no question of plagiarism in either case; it was merely an instance of two minds thinking alike. Here is another, which comes to light in a letter written to Walter Besant, regarding his "All Sorts and Conditions of Men."

"How did this idea come into my head when I was in the back blocks of New South Wales some five or six years ago, and when I had never heard of your book or the writer? Your book is said to have originated the People's Palace. My book is entitled `The People's Palace,' and I never heard of that building or its name until I came back to London three years ago. When I heard the name I thought that was coincidence enough, but when my curiosity led me to read the book in which the idea was first put forward— but you can, perhaps, imagine my feelings. You have even named your hero Harry, the same as mine." * * *

Shakespeare probably never played whist in his life, and yet his plays contain some very neat mottoes for use in connection with the game. Some member of an Ohio whist club was bright enough to pick them out for use in a

souvenir of a series of games. This the Critic has discovered and quotes from as follows:

Whatever else shall hap tonight, give it an understanding, but no tongue (Ham. i. 2).

Seal up your lips, and give no words but mum; the business asketh silent secrecy (2 Hen. VI i. 2).

No tongue! all eyes! be silent (Tem. iv. 1).

Be assured we come to use our hands and not our tongues (Rich. III i. 3).

I am fain to shuffle (M. W. ii. 2).

Who leads? (1 Hen. IV iv. 1).

The most patient man in loss, the most coldest that ever turned up ace (Cymb. ii. 3).

I have been in continual practice; I shall win at the odds (Ham. v. 2).

Have I not here the best cards for the game, to win this easy match? (K. John i. 2).

One out of suit with Fortune, that could give more but that her hand lacks means (A. Y. L. i. 2).

Our sport shall be to take what they mistake (M. N. D. v. 1).

I'll mark the play (Ham. iii. 3).

Our forefathers had no other books but the score and the tally (2 Hen. VI iv. 7).

* * *

Dr. Conan Doyle is reported to have made a wager with his wife that she cannot guess the mystery of his latest story until she finishes the last chapter. He is said to receive quantities of suggestions from strangers, who imagine that they are giving him valuable material in the shape of ideas for detective stories. But they scarcely ever prove of use to him. This is almost invariably the case with every writer. Friends will come to him with a wonderful story of some incident or experience of their own lives.

"You can make a splendid story out of it," they exclaim.

But this is just what the novelist cannot do. If he could his trade would be lost to him, for everybody would be writing his autobiography for the press. The ingredients necessary to the making of a successful story are very subtle. * * *

We are so accustomed to thinking of the great lights in literature as having always been great that it seems strange to read of their timidity and self distrust in the early days. Dickens has told us of the manner in which he watched the post box after he had dropped into it his first contribution to the press. Thackeray's expressed wish that no life of him be written has, of course, kept us from knowing so intimately of his beginnings. However, his daughter, Mrs. Ritchie, has recently gratified the public by telling her recollections of her father's delivery of his first "English Humorists" lecture.

"One day," she says, "Jackson drove the blue fly up to the door, and my father, looking rather smart, with a packet of papers in his hand, and my grandmother who had come over from Paris, and my sister and I all got in, and we

drove away, a nervous company, to Willis's Rooms to hear the first of the lectures upon the English Humorists. My father was of course very nervous, but as we drove along he made little jokes to reassure us all; then together we mounted the carpeted staircase leading to the long empty room, and after a time he left us. I have no very pleasant recollections of that particular half hour of my life. I remember the unoccupied chairs, and people coming in rather subdued, as if coming into a church.

"I was gazing at a lady who had taken off her bonnet, and sat in a little Quaker cap just in front of me, when suddenly there stood my father facing this great roomful. Though we had been waiting all the time, he came sooner than we expected. His voice sounded strained and odd for an instant, and I didn't recognize it. `In treating of the English humorists of the eighteenth century, it is of the men rather than of their works,' so the strange voice began, and then almost immediately it softened and deepened and became his own, and at the same time as he stood there I realized that he looked just like himself; there was his waistcoat and his watch chain, and my vague youthful spinnings and chokings and confusions began to subside.

"I was now glad the day of judgment hadn't come. I don't remember taking in one word after the first sentence, but sat staring and taking breath, and realizing somehow that all was going well. Among other things I did notice, and do remember, the proud and happy look of light and relief in my grandmother's face, and her beautiful gray eyes all shining, when the people applauded when the lecture was all over just as unexpectedly as it had begun, and the lady in the Quaker cap tied her bonnet on again, and somebody said she was the Duchess of Sutherland, and the people were all talking and crowding up and shaking hands with the lecturer. Then came the happy drive home; Jackson made the horse gallop, and my father laughed and made real jokes, without any effort, and we enjoyed every jolt and turning on the way." * * *

The heifer that knocked Mr. Gladstone down a few weeks ago is destined to immortality, at least a part of her is. A bookbinder in Chester is reported to have paid ten pounds for her hide, out of which he proposes to make bindings for "Views About Hawarden," "Leaves From My journal," and other volumes in which the distinguished premier figures. This suggests an interesting query. Suppose it had been a man who knocked down Mr. Gladstone, would a museum manager have stepped forward with the offer of a salary to the fellow as soon as he was out of jail? * * *

Methods employed by different novelists in the composition of their stories not seldom partake of the unique. It is said that when the late J. G. Holland was at work on two books at once, he kept each MS. in a room by itself, and thus changed his surroundings completely when he went from one to the other.

Daudet writes his novels in a book, leaving a blank page facing each written one. When the first draft is finished he writes it over again on the blank pages. But even now it is not ready for the printer. He goes carefully over each version and out of the two makes the final transcript. * * *

One of the most prolific writers of high class fiction of the day is Miss Maria Louisa Pool, whose "Roweny" has achieved a far reaching reputation. Miss Pool has a serial story running almost constantly in the New York Tribune, with whose readers she is—and most deservedly—in high favor. Her stories, like Miss Wilkins's, are for the most part descriptive of the rural side of New England life.

Speaking of Miss Wilkins, whose first novel is now running through one of the magazines, it is stated that she is very sparing in her reading of fiction, fearing that she may come unconsciously to be an imitator of others' work. It seems to us that a writer has not so much to dread from this source as from the possibility that he may reproduce himself. * * *

James Matthew Barrie's success is not of the ephemeral, shooting star order, with us a season or two and then dropping into the viewless void of obscurity. He is young, only thirty two, and has attained his present position by hard, persistent toil. He was educated at the Edinburgh University, and of this period of his life he gives the

following reminiscence to an English journal:

I knew three undergraduates, who lodged together in a dreary house at the top of a dreary street, two of whom used to study until two in the morning, while the third slept. When they shut up their books they awoke number three, who arose, dressed, and studied until breakfast time. The chief advantage of this arrangement was that as they were dreadfully poor one bed did for the three."

Further facts of interest concerning Mr. Barrie are given by another English periodical which declares that he achieved his first notoriety by a bon mot regarding the Literary Ladies' Dinner. He was at the time an occasional contributor to The Scots Observer, to which he sent the subjoined report: "On the —— of May, at the Criterion, the Literary Ladies, of a dinner."