

## EDITORIAL

THESE are palmy days for the authors of the Republic. There was never a time when they had wider or more eager markets, or got larger honoraria. Nor was there ever a time when the reading public demanded an ampler range of goods. The writer of fiction used to have a sort of monopoly: he was the only American author treated politely by bankers, lawyers, bishops and other such clients of the Golden Calf. But now there is a steady and immense sale for so-called serious books, and some of the fattest fortunes made in the scrivening trade of late have been made by historians, psychologists, biologists, and even philosophers. A new book of metaphysics, catching the public fancy, is apt to run to a sale of 150,000. In such a sale, counting in the by-products, there is more money for the metaphysician than the total professional takings of all his predecessors from Thales to Kant. I hear of historians, after a couple of lucky strikes, buying country estates with swimming pools; of psychologists acquiring cellars; of biologists getting so rich that hopeful one-building "universities" begin plastering them with LL.D.'s. The by-products that I have mentioned come from the lecture platform and the train-boy magazines. The latter, with their gigantic circulations, pay such prices for safe but lively manuscripts as would have staggered the opulent collaborators in the *Edinburgh Review*. There must be nothing in these manuscripts against the Hon. Andy Mellon, but otherwise the field is wide and luscious. On the platform there is more easy money, for with the decay of the chautauqua the old-time lyceum seems to be reviving, even in the big cities, and the fees that it offers are often extremely generous. Let a professor write a book that sells beyond 5,000,

and at once he is flooded with offers of lecture engagements. Nor is his thumping fee the whole of it: his expenses are also paid, and he is lured with dark hints about trustworthy gin and sightly gals. This resuscitation of the lyceum deserves to be investigated. It was once a struggling pansy; now it is a gaudy and exuberant dahlia, dripping genuine Scotch. No doubt the collapse of the theatre on the road has had something to do with the change. Mrs. Babbitt used to give theatre parties, and vent her libido for the intellectual by going back stage to meet James K. Hackett or Mrs. Leslie Carter. But now the show-houses in the provinces are almost unanimously given over to dismal horrors out of Hollywood, and so she turns to the literary historians, psychologists, biologists and metaphysicians. The wise one throttles his lecture at the end of an hour.

Those literati who devote themselves to fiction prosper quite as heavily as their brethren of the enlightenment. One reads anon in the public prints that the day of the best-seller is over, and in a sense it is so: there are not many novels today that match the sales of such champions of yesteryear as "David Harum," "Ben Hur" and "Three Weeks." But there are still plenty that sell above 50,000, and more than a few that cross 100,000, and with the standard trade price lifted from 98 cents to \$2. or even \$2.50, the author now derives more actual revenue from a sale of 100,000 than he used to get from one of 250,000. Moreover, his serial rights, when he can dispose of them, bring four or five times as much as they used to bring. Yet more, the brisk trade in short stories that follows a success yields him even greater usufructs: he used to brag about it in the saloons when he got \$200 for a story; now the

*Saturday Evening Post* and its rivals pay him \$2,000, \$3,000 or even more. Finally, there is Hollywood. It has failed, so far, to make anything save botches of best-sellers, but that failure has surely not been due to parsimony. It pays truly colossal prices for screen rights—and then scraps them in favor of the well-tried trade goods of its resident Nick Carters and Ethel M. Dells. A price of \$25,000 for a bad novel is a commonplace. Some time ago it gave an eminent American fictioneer \$90,000 for the film rights to a novel weighing four pounds, and of moral treachery and Freudian psychology all compact—and then discovered, after he had departed rapidly with the money, that the work, if actually filmed, would make 125 reels.

## II

On the lower levels the corn-fed Balzacs and Turgenievs wallow in the same fat. There are more cheap fiction magazines on the stands today than ever before, and the sharp competition among them works for a steady increase in their scale of prices. The lowly hack who used to get \$25 or \$30 for a short story now gets \$100 or even \$150. And when he runs short of ideas he can always turn to writing "confessions" for the scandal magazines, and so keep his Cadillac in gas. The demand for such "confessions"—of reformed night-club hostesses, of almost-seduced secretaries, of Ruth Snyders who think of God in time—is tremendous: there is never enough on the literary wharves. More than one ingenious newspaper reporter, turning to their confession, has delivered his bones from wage-slavery, and lifted himself to the opulence of a Prohibition agent, a movie actor, or a nose and throat specialist.

Thus the Republic, in this great year 1927, rewards its literary artists. They used to lurk in the cellars of Greenwich Village, gnawing petrified spaghetti; now they take villas at Pasadena or St. Jean de Luz, and dress their wives like Follies girls. It is a spectacle that somehow ca-

resses the gills. As a critic I hail and welcome it, just as a policeman welcomes a wave of crime: it augments, in a way, the public importance of my job. I wish I could add that the labors so heavily rewarded are also intrinsically meritorious, but here, alas, I run into inconvenient facts. There is, indeed, not the slightest sign that the art of letters in the United States has kept pace with the prosperity of the literary trade. On the contrary, there is every evidence that the thing runs the other way. It has become so easy to sell second-rate work, and at vast prices, that the old incentive to do first-rate work has slackened, and, in some quarters, quite vanished. Why try to write a "Revolt of the Angels" or a "Lord Jim"? The magazines for Babbitts will have none of it, and Hollywood will have none of it. There is in it, at best, a sale of 25,000 copies—with no serial rights, no stage rights, no movie rights. In other words, there is in it, at best, a second-hand Ford. But in the safe and easy stuff there is a Packard, and maybe, if the winds are really fair, a Rolls-Royce.

So the safe and easy stuff is being manufactured *en gros*, and the life of a book reviewer begins to have its pains. The new novels show a vast facility, but one must be romantic, indeed, to argue that they show anything else. The thing vaguely called creative passion is simply not in them; they are plausible and workmanlike, but they are never moving. The best fiction of today is being written by authors who were already beginning to oxidize ten years ago; the youngsters, debauched by the experiments of such men as James Joyce, wander into glittering futilities. One hears every day that a new genius has been unearthed, but it always turns out, on investigation, that he is no more than a clever sophomore. No first book as solid and memorable as "McTeague" or "Sister Carrie" has come out since the announcement of Coolidge. Nor is any progress visible in the short story. Delivered at last from the blight of the O. Henry influence, it has settled down into banality, and be-

comes formalized anew. The aim of every short story writer, apparently, is to horn into the popular magazines: it is as if the aim of every painter were to do their covers. The annual collections of "best" stories make very sad reading. They meet, no doubt, the specifications of the dreadful pedagogues who teach the craft of fiction by correspondence, but as works of art they are as hollow as jugs. Who remembers them? Who, indeed, remembers *any* American short story published during the past five years? I recall a few fine pieces by Miss Suckow, and a few others by lesser performers, but that is all. The heroes whose names glare at one from the covers of the magazines have simply covered so much paper, got their princely honoraria, and then departed—no doubt for Hollywood.

### III

If they have done anything out there save collect more honoraria, there is as yet no sign of it. The movies sweat and pant for help, but it does not seem to be forthcoming. If they show any improvement at all, it is only on the technical side: the transactions they depict remain indistinguishable from the maudlin melodrama of the "confessions" magazines. All the American novelists save a lonely half dozen or so have tried their fists at the movies. Why have they produced nothing above the level of the serials in the tabloids? The common answer is that the movie magnates will have none of it—that they insist upon bilge, and only bilge. But that answer, it seems to me, is rather too easy. In point of fact, they waste millions trying to unearth better stuff. If they encountered a scenario as instantly and overwhelmingly moving, as a scenario, as "Kim" and "Lord Jim" were moving as novels, would they take it or leave it? I suspect that they would take it. They may be fools, but they are also gamblers.

These later years, indeed, have been too fat to prosper the fine arts, which tend to languish, as everyone knows, when the

artist is overfed. It is now possible for a young composer in America to make an excellent income writing for the orchestra—but he must write jazz. Some of that jazz, to be sure, has its moments, but I doubt that any critic, save perhaps in New York, would range it seriously beside the music of, say, Johannes Brahms. What it lacks is sober dignity; if it arouses emotions, they are transient and superficial emotions; it warms without burning and leaving scars. That is what also ails the thousands of novels and tens of thousand of short stories now issuing from the American presses—and the so-called poetry that follows after them. They are competent, but they do not reach below the diaphragm; reading them is a diversion, not an experience. There is no moving passion in them; they leave the withers unwrung. When, from that placid and brackish stream there leaps anon an "Elmer Gantry," it seems a sort of indecorum. All the scrivening boys and gals, it appears, can do better than that. They have better manners; they know how to entertain without shocking. But the works of art that last are those that shock.

I remain, as a sound 100% American, optimistic. We have been through such doldrums before, and survived them. They simply cannot last: one day a sharp, stinging wind blows up, and that is the end of the transient palmy days. The magazines that everybody reads, especially those who read nothing else, do not run to longevity. One *Atlantic Monthly* has outlived a dozen *Godey's*, New York *Ledgers* and *Fireside Companions*. On a higher level the public turns from flabby fiction to the compositions of the hortatory historians, psychologists, biologists and metaphysicians. And the movie men, tired of being stung, abandon the literary Mellons and Charlie Schwabs for bright youngsters—untried, but at all events not hopeless. The days were dark enough, God knows, in the 90's. But with the last gasps of the century came "McTeague."

H. L. M.

# LIFE, DEATH AND THE NEGRO

BY LOUIS I. DUBLIN

IN AUGUST, 1619, a boatload of Negro slaves was landed at Jamestown by a Dutch man-of-war. Booker T. Washington has somewhere poignantly remarked that the *Mayflower*, which "brought to America the first seeds of civil and religious liberty, reached Plymouth a year later, 1620, so that Negro slavery is older than Anglo-Saxon liberty on the soil of the United States." With varying degrees of intensity, the slave trade flourished for nearly two centuries, until it was prohibited by law in 1808 and actually stopped by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

From the outset, slavery was taken for granted in all the original colonies except Georgia, which, under the leadership of Oglethorpe, prohibited the importation of both rum and slaves. But a clandestine trade flourished, and in 1750 the overt importation of slaves was authorized even in that colony. The Negro furnished a much desired labor supply. The opening of the country, with its rich agricultural resources, called for hands which the colonists alone could not supply. The Indian was of little or no use on the farm, and the importation of indentured servants was prohibited near the end of the Seventeenth Century.

At the beginning, the Negro was fairly evenly distributed along the Atlantic seaboard. But the experiment soon showed that he could be used advantageously only on the Southern plantations. He was not well adapted to the small, individualistic farms of the North, but the warm climate and the mass method of production in the South made him a most desirable and profitable laborer. Practically all the tobacco ex-

ported from Virginia, and all the indigo and rice of the Carolinas, were the fruit of his toil. But it was only after the invention of the cotton-gin, patented in 1794, that slave labor in the South became indispensable, and there began that concentration of Negroes in the cotton-growing States which lasted down to the end of the Civil War.

About 25,000 Negroes were brought into the country during the Seventeenth Century. In the first half of the century following the importations numbered approximately 100,000. It is probable that the total number brought into the colonies prior to the establishment of independence was 200,000. The survivors of these and their descendants accounted for somewhat over a half million in 1776. During the Revolution the importation of slaves was checked, and, because of the added hardships, the mortality of those already in the country was undoubtedly very heavy. With the close of the war, slavery was practically at an end in the North. By 1787, it had been legally terminated in all the States north of Maryland except New York and New Jersey, which followed suit a few years later.

The South, on the contrary, witnessed a post-war revival of the slave-trade, marked by a significant change in popular temper. Slavery was no longer an experiment, but a vital and permanent necessity. In the rest of the country there was a widespread feeling at the time of the adoption of the Constitution that the whole theory of slavery was unsound, that it was morally indefensible, and that slave labor was uneconomic. This sentiment was accompanied by a