

CURRENT TASTE IN FICTION: A QUARTERLY SURVEY

BY JOHN WALCOTT

From what the booksellers tell me I do not make out any very sweeping change in the buying public's taste for fiction during the past two or three months. There is no marked change, by all accounts, in the kind of fiction people are willing to pay for, or in the number of novels being sold as compared with other books. But I get an impression, from the various reports and rumors of the book-mart, of certain tendencies that should interest people who find in fiction, as I do, a sort of barometer in which the weather probabilities of current literature as a whole (and of current life as well) may be more or less uncertainly glimpsed.

Our forecast of a few months ago has come out fairly well. There has been a steady demand for novels and an increasing demand for good novels. As it happens, this has not expressed itself in the heaping up of a handful of "best sellers", so much as in a well-distributed patronage of all or a large part of the better novels (and some of the worse) that have been available during this period. It is notable that at the head of the market are several novels of exceptional power and artistic worth. The leader couldn't possibly have been "slated" as a popular novel, in advance—"The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", which has won on its merits as a serious and imaginative study of the war. Clearly, for a vast number of us, it has succeeded in bringing some sort of men-

tal and moral order out of the dreadful world-chaos of the past few years. I feel that it vindicates the judgment of the bookman who said to me, some months ago, that the time was ripe for a great religious novel; and that it is the underlying spiritual quality of its interpretation that yields its deeper appeal for so many readers. Another fine piece of fiction I mentioned in November has held its own, especially in New York: the cameo-like "Nocturne" of Frank Swinnerton. The conjunction of these two books near the top of popularity brings home the fact once more that the mere bulk of a story is in itself of small account to current novel-readers. Not so many years ago, publishers were afraid to produce a long novel. They spoke with wonder and some commiseration of the "three-deckers" the Victorians had time and taste for. A hundred thousand words or so was enough for any novel. Meanwhile, now and then, long stories were being written and read—by a fluke, it was supposed on each recurring occasion, till the enormous popularity of De Morgan made us realize that we actually liked a very long story, when its length was justified by its scope or quality.

So we have side by side in the regard of the current reading public the slender perfection of "Nocturne" and Mrs. Wharton's "The Marne", and the thumping proportions of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" and Wells's "Joan and Peter". There seems to be something more than a

whisper passing along the book-counters that the large sale of this latest Wellsian lucubration represents a supreme demonstration of loyalty and confidence on the part of the followers of the chattiest among modern prophets. It says something also, I think, for the mental eagerness of the hour; for wherever he may take us or fail to take us, Wells is at least the most reliable self-starter for the car of thought that can be purchased anywhere in our generation, at any price. There are signs of this mental eagerness on every hand. A rapidly increasing number of readers are looking for something in current literature to satisfy or pacify it. And the new fact is that they are looking for it more and more in current fiction. The contrast between "serious books" and novels is no longer the matter of course (in the public mind) that it was even a few years ago. For the modern novel has taken to itself, for better and worse, a variety of functions—for better, certainly, when it succeeds in exercising those functions in harmony with its primary function of telling a story. People, at all events, are looking hopefully to fiction as not only entertainer, but guide, philosopher, and friend.

Hence the increase of that tendency I recorded, on the authority of the booksellers, in connection with books on or out of the war—a tendency to turn from books of document or personal chronicle to books in which the phenomena of the war are imaginatively interpreted. Oddly enough, the abrupt end of actual fighting seems to have had little effect on the demand for war books. And there has been special demand for books that deal with our own part in the war; and, more generally, for books by Americans. It is noticeable that, except for

"The Education of Henry Adams", all of the non-fiction books listed in the BOOKMAN'S "Monthly Score" for November and December are in one way or another connected with the war, and all by deponents from this side of the water.

It is clear from all reports that the outstanding feature of the end-of-the-year situation, from the booksellers' point of view, was the very genial and coming-on disposition of the general customer. A friend in Cincinnati, writing toward the end of January, complains, or exults, that he and his are "still up to their ears in the clean-up game". A letter of about the same date from Portland, Oregon, is more specific: "The general trend of sales as indicated in the November BOOKMAN proceeded logically to a grand clean-up of good, but little advertised books. The sales of November and December were characterized by the ease with which we were able to induce people who 'had a book' to purchase another. . . . Gone was the necessity for lengthy explanations; gone the bubbling enthusiasm of the desperate salesman, endeavoring to persuade the fortunate possessor of \$1.50 to take something other than the most widely advertised book of the day; gone the delicious uncertainty of the hesitating buyer, the shifting from book to book—I say, gone were all these ancient landmarks, characteristic of the Christmas buyer. Yet must we render unto the mighty advertising dollar the homage that is due, and admit that 'A Daughter of the Land' and 'Winds of Chance' sold like the proverbial hot cakes."

I wonder if the let-up of the armistice didn't have something pretty directly to do with this?—a combined sense of "everything goes", and "now I needn't be quite so stingy with the

small change!" What should we do, with the strain of war taken off, and the strain of peace-making not yet felt, but "loosen up", even in the book-shops? Lucky for the booksellers, who must have accumulated a vast store of more or less literary gallimaufry the publishers had been pouring out ere the governmental meter should be installed! So the cynic might have argued. But the fact is clear, that whether from liberation of pocket or enlargement of soul, the general patronage of the book-market was notably generous during the "holiday season" and after. "The best feature of the fiction sale", says a New York deponent, "was the general distribution of the demand among the novels of all the authors, instead of its running to a few leading names." And indeed it were well not only for the publisher and bookseller but for author and public, that our national tendency toward a starring system should not get quite as strong a hold on our world of the novel as it has on our worlds of the theatre, the magazine, and the movie. It is encouraging to think that people are experimenting a little, feeling about for something palatable, on their own hook—though another cynical reflection would be that they are condemned to do this groping, since they find so little help in criticism, and the publishers, by their own accounts, are all the time publishing the best books of the year, if not of all time.

Some special forecasts in my survey of November seem to have come true: the increased demand for fiction as a whole; the growing markets for humorous fiction on the one hand, and for novels of serious interpretation on the other. I was speaking then from the book-buyers' and booksellers' ends solely. THE BOOKMAN's recent data

from the public libraries gives another angle from which we may in a fashion size up the tastes of the hour. It is the angle of the democratic book-borrower, who is content to wait his turn at the common source of supply. Still a third might be had if we could get at the figures of the circulating libraries: the aristocratic "athenæums", and also those drugstore dispensers of literature from which the latest novel may be had a good deal more cheaply than a "sundae" but still not for nothing. Here, after all, is your really independent citizen. Not for him to bother with catalogues, or wait for a possible verdict of "not in". What free soul would not pay a few cents for the privilege of taking his own book captive with two fingers, and an "I'll try that one" tossed, with a clink, upon the counter. . . . But no doubt the public library reports reflect the normal standards of the American book-borrower—except as censorship now and then steps in between the people and what it wants, as it has in one or two notable instances, during the past half-year.

The "Monthly Scores" printed in the January and February issues of THE BOOKMAN have some interesting features. For example, there seems to be a quite distinct cleavage in taste between the New York and New England, South Atlantic, and North Central sections on the one hand, and the South Central and Western sections on the other. You would notice, if you looked at those tables, that "Dere Mable" was popular, both months, in the former division and had no place in the latter. It is easy to understand that Joseph T. Lincoln's Cape Cod yarn, "Shavings", would be more popular in the East than in the West, but hardly to be expected that during the month of December it would hold first

place in New York and New England and no place at all (among the first six) elsewhere. Similarly, though for no discernible similarity of reason, Mrs. Humphry Ward's "Elizabeth's Campaign" is seen to rank third in the East, while it is out of the running altogether everywhere else. If you try to worry these facts about to the credit of Eastern taste, you are brought up short by the fact that "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" seems to have begun its extraordinary popularity in the South Atlantic States, but that while in December it is prominent in all four other sections, it has not yet made a place among the first six in New York and New England. The Eastern "highbrow" may perhaps take some comfort in the fact that after November "A Daughter of the Land" improved her rating in the West to a clear lead of the field, while the East succeeded in losing her altogether. Still, it is pretty much the other way round with "Greatheart"—so there you are! And will someone tell us why "Home Fires in France" should have been so much more widely read in the West than in the East?

Taking these two lists together and analyzing their contents, we may get on the track of current American taste from one or two other points of view than that of sectionalism. There are fifteen titles in all, and but for "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" there is not what can be called a dark horse among them. "Dere Mable" made its big hit as a serial before it stepped out into the market to see what it could do as a book. The thirteen other novels are labeled Burroughs, Canfield, Dell, Grey, Hughes, Lincoln, Locke, Porter, Rinehart, Sinclair, Tarkington, Ward, and Wells. Every one of these writers has a constituency waiting and eager to tackle

anything he or she may write—or to swallow it whole. Four or five of them have never had any sort of respectful treatment from criticism, but this is of the smallest consequence, since they are addressed to readers who don't in the least care whether they ought to like what they like, or not. For the rest, but for "The Tree of Heaven" and "The Magnificent Ambersons", which are not far from high-water mark for their respective authors, criticism would probably find that these books represent hardly more than an average performance for their authors. However, this is not our fault as readers, since we have to take what we can get, even from the head-liners.

Quality apart, we might see how these books pan out in a rough classification according to kind. Sentiment seems to be even more dominant among them than in most popular lists—sentiment running its gamut from the "glad" and somewhat humorless emotionalism of "Greatheart" and "A Daughter of the Land" to the high emotion of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse". The overt humor of books like "Dere Mable" and "Shavings" rests upon sentiment, of course. Humor frankly links hands with sentiment in "The Magnificent Ambersons". Sentiment of the stagy kind lies in wait for us all along "The U. P. Trail", and animates, more delicately, such war romances as "Elizabeth's Campaign", "The Rough Road", and "The Amazing Interlude". Sentiment gives warmth to "Home Fires in France" and, in the guise of patriotism, terminates the sheltered selfishness symbolized by "The Tree of Heaven". What, is it really love that makes the world go round! . . . Here is Mr. Wells, however. Mr. Wells is as incapable of sentimentalism

as a boy of ten, and his emotion is always intellectual. I believe it is his immense eagerness and ingenuousness that make so many of us his companions even along such trying journeys as he lets us in for with "Joan and Peter". Ideas are always more exciting to him than action. He had rather argue than interpret, and there is never lack of a new thing to argue about. In a larger way, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" is a novel of ideas; since in that great story the ideas and the action seem to be one. I feel like giving three cheers for us, when I hear from all sides evidence that as a nation we have given hearty welcome to a book of this calibre, at this critical time.

For we haven't often given a rousing welcome, as measurable by the reports of booksellers and librarians, to novels of serious quality, even when big, familiar names were attached to them. Of course one trouble with these reports is that they deal only in numbers sold or borrowed, and can make no account of the quality of the constituency reached. You might say, from a less rigid point of view, having regard for the spiritual and æsthetic qualities of a novel, that to satisfy one person of taste is more "efficient" than to pass muster with a hundred men in the street. Why speak of taste where there is no taste?—Well, then, for the purpose of this survey, we must frankly abandon that term, as trying to "put something over on us". Let us admit that we are simply jotting down a note or two of "what the public wants" in the way of fiction, now and here, or as nearly as we can estimate it. Leaving aside the questions of the best sold, or best borrowed, I may perhaps add the testimony of a reader who has come in personal contact with most of the novels published

during the past few months. Our Cincinnati bookseller and others all say that their customers have been buying fiction pretty much as it comes. How is it coming?

In my former article I ventured the guess that the new restrictions on publishing in the name of wartime economy might react favorably on the quality of the output in the near future. I really think it has done that. The noticeable thing is that the submediocre novels, the books which have seemed to have *less* than no excuse for being, no longer burden our shelves in such numbers. The publishers are being more careful in eliminating the obviously unfit. There is plenty of room for further improvement in the same direction. The current output of fiction might advantageously be cut in two without depriving the people of any of the different kinds of thing they want. Take, as the most glaring example, the wild western yarn. There I have been unable to see any decrease in quantity or improvement in kind. It is amazing how little trouble the authors of this kind of article think it necessary to take in putting it up for the market. Even the publishers display a cynical indifference to any appearance of originality. A rearing horse straddled by a pair of chaps, a shirt, a red handkerchief, and a "Stetson", with an abyss or a villain in the foreground and an admiring maiden in the rear—this is all that anyone need do, or does do, for a "jacket" to this sort of book: the maiden, to be sure, is optional. Why wouldn't it be a good thing for the publishers to get together like men and brothers, and have their best performers boil down say twenty of these affairs into four or five really good ones, each of which should be given

some little touch of novelty, so that the reason of the reader might be nursed along till the next time? I for one have come to the pass where I feel like gibbering when I take up a nominally fresh performance in this kind and find it unspeakably and insolently the same old stale business, yet again.

The recent supply of mystery stories, on the other hand, has been of distinctly better quality than usual. You have to have an idea of some sort in a story of crime and detection, and this saves it from the complacent banality of the tale of conventional "adventure". The difficulty has often been that the workmanship was so crude, the style so vulgar, the people so absurd, the dialogue so stilted, that mere ingenuity of plot—though hardly a secondary matter in this kind of fiction—could not make up for them, for any reader of intelligence. The standard in these respects is certainly going up. Writers are discovering that it cannot do harm and may do good to make their characters something like human beings, with the gait and accent of every-day; and we may as well suppose that this is in response to some sort of demand on the part of their special public. In short, I gather that the taste for mystery fiction not only holds in quantity but improves in quality. If you ask for instances I would cite offhand among very recent publications, "The Solitary House", "The Apartment Next Door", "The Mystery of Hartley House", and "Sinister House"—a rather odd uniformity of title, now that I notice it. There are current fashions in titles, as in everything else. We have had half a dozen novels in the last year or two called "The Heart of So-and-So".

I notice also that the group of studies of American life (commonly for more than one generation) of

which I spoke before, continues to gain accessions. "The Magnificent Ambersons", "In the Heart of a Fool", "Common Cause", are among the notable ones. Stories of the sophomore age seem also to increase and multiply, though "The Magnificent Ambersons", again, and "Henry Is Twenty" rather overtower the others. . . . I lack space to particularize further as to the special kind of things now being issued in some quantity to meet special demands. I think we may look to see the tendency of fiction swinging away from the *use* of the war as a convenience or an indispensable factor—though for some time our serious fiction will be inevitably tinged with the war, as our lives will be; and very likely our masterpieces of wartime interpretation are yet to be matured, as we get away from the stunning and confusing facts of the struggle.

I quoted, the other day, from certain booksellers whose letters showed an evident sense of responsibility toward their books and their customers. Many of them pride themselves upon keeping in stock, and recommending, a maximum of novels of solid merit. Like the publishers, they like to deal in the best that can be had—if the public will only back them up. I have had a good letter recently from a bookseller who does not hesitate to do a little predicting. In the near future, he says, "it would appear that the larger profit and the larger element of safety would lie in the bookseller's ruthlessly rejecting the black sheep that have masqueraded in white wool in previous years. . . . The ephemeral book is more unsafe than ever before. . . . The humorous book has indeed been revived successfully, and no doubt we may count upon an uninterrupted flow of small but profitable

stuff from the Lardners, the Streeters, and the Cobbs of the day. We think we may also count upon an uninterrupted interest in the book of personal experience, as well as in the book dealing with the larger issues of the peace question, and subsequent adjustments, politically and economically, on the other side."

So speaks our thoughtful and responsible vendor of books; and ends with a word of admonition for his colleagues the country over, with a possible moral for publishers. "One note of optimism may be found in the fact that the glorious clean-up of Decem-

ber affords a splendid chance for the best judgment of the bookseller in filling the vacant places on his shelves and counters with really 'worth while' books, and a reinvesting of his capital in books of a constructive nature. In other words, he is given a chance to prove himself adequate to a great opportunity. Woe be unto him who falls short of the mark." A bookseller, this, who feels to the full the responsibility he shares with the publisher, the public library, and the critic, in playing up instead of down to the taste of that careless but human monster, the public.

COMPLAINT DEPARTMENT

Juveniles and the Movies

The other day I was visiting some friends in the country who have two charming children, a little girl of ten and a boy of seven. In looking through my friend's library, I discovered the old standbys of my own childhood, "Little Lord Fauntleroy", "Alice in Wonderland", "Little Women" and "Little Men"—indeed, all the Alcott books—"Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn", and so on *ad infinitum*.

I asked ten-year-old Margaret how she had enjoyed "Little Lord Fauntleroy", and she surprised me greatly by saying, in the most grown-up manner, "Oh, that's a sissy book! I couldn't wade through it!" And little Philip, who stood close by, cried out, "We like the movies much better than those silly books!"

I was dumbfounded. A child of ten—and a girl, at that—thought Mrs.

Burnett's classic was "sissy". What was the world coming to?

But isn't this state of mind true of many households nowadays? Isn't Mary Pickford more popular than Miss Alcott's heroines? And doesn't Charlie Chaplin replace, in the affections of our youth, the immortal "Huckleberry Finn"? Children, in these crowded days—like their elders—have little time for contemplation, for character analysis, for the rather slow-moving tales that used to hold us spellbound. Rather they want wild west pictures, with excitement in every ten feet of film—and they get it. For the price of one good book they can see a dozen motion-pictures, and their excited minds, fed up on these thrillers, which are comparable only to the old "penny-dreadfuls", are in no state to receive or to be impressed by the gentle books that were your good friends and mine.

To what strange paths is the present generation being led? I tremble,