

books for people of limited means who seek self-education. These books presented in good editions the standard works of the classical writers, the philosophers, and the scientific discoverers of all times and of all nations. In addition to these suggestions to the reading public, there was a "model bookshop" with a display of the necessary variety of books, effectively arranged, which would enable a bookseller to modernize, and make more attractive, his store.

This brief recapitulation gives an idea of the possible scope of a national book fair in the United States. It is with these possibilities in mind that we return to the contention outlined in an earlier part of this article: we believe the Marshall Field Book Fair to be worthy of a wider scope than the mere locale in which it was held, and that the brilliant idea of its creator, Marcella Burns Hahner, is destined to a far more glorious unfolding.

FASHIONS IN FICTION

BY CHARLES HANSON TOWNE

THERE are definite fashions in fiction, as there are in clothes. I go back as far as the time when it was smart to write—and to try to read—dialect stories. This is like saying that one is of the vintage of Godey's Ladies' Book. But lots of us remember how the higher class magazines used to print, time and again—indeed, when they never went to press without—the story filled with apostrophes. Those tales sounded as if the author had placed a nice hot potato in his mouth, leaned back in a chair, and dictated to a six-dollar-a-week stenographer. Scotch dialect was much in vogue; it held its place above all other languages, including the Scandinavian. Printers, I think, if not subscribers, must have finally rebelled; for it was a constant leap in the direction of that section of the case which contained the all-too-necessary apostrophe; and proofreading must have been an ardu-

ous task. There was only this, the printers thought, in favor of such fiction—no one would have known whether a typographical error had been made: the whole thing looked like an elongated list of mistakes. What hard reading it made! Everyone suffered, from the first manuscript reader to the editor himself; and it is strange to realize now that this type of story had so definite and long a day. It was considered fashionable to read the latest sketch by MacPherson MacDonald. Not to have read it placed one outside the pale. Dinner parties discussed the vague plot, the non-essentials that made up the imperfect whole; and friends almost came to blows over these stupid tales and their hidden meanings.

Then came the child story for grownups, when writers so worth while as Myra Kelly, Josephine Daskam Bacon, Elizabeth Jordan, and

George Madden Martin were ushered in. At first these seemed the easiest kind of stuff to write. One had only, it seemed, to recall one's own childhood and put it down on paper. To make such records, however, was far from simple. It was discovered by those who attempted it—and how many there were!—that the greatest art lay behind these stories. The public school on the lower East Side was Miss Kelly's exclusive field. She had actually taught in such districts as she described so well, and her pattern could not be imitated. She was like a bartender in the prehistoric days before the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect, who had a secret cocktail recipe, or a cook who never measures the ingredients that go into a pudding—but lo and behold, the perfect cocktail, and the pudding *par excellence*!

Stephen Crane, who came long before these others, set the world agog for a time with his realism; but his was a dangerous art to imitate, and many there were who fell by the wayside when they sought to catch the glow of his style and infuse it into their own pale stories. He was a lonely genius, much talked of, not altogether understood, fantastic in his irregular verse, laughed at, reviled, praised astoundingly—a candle that was lighted for all too brief a time, which went suddenly out; and no one realized how decently the room had been lit until the spark was extinguished.

The country story has always been popular, since the days when Sarah Orne Jewett (too little read now) and Mary E. Wilkins made it a thing to conjure with. There is a long-short tale by the former called "Hilton's Holiday" that is worth looking up—a *tour de force* in writing beautifully about very little; but Miss Jewett was mistress of her material, and her

sharp effects were gained simply, with that concealed art which is the very pinnacle of fine writing. So with Miss Wilkins, who had many followers and many blurred imitators.

When "The Black Cat" came into being, it brought with it the mystery yarn—the exciting story of adventure that kept you guessing, and brought you up with a thud at the end. This little magazine set a sudden fashion, which was stimulating; but the fashion did not last very long, like all such sensational movements. The substantial "Saturday Evening Post" came along with its virility, its energy, its typical Americanism, and in it was born the story of business life that has lasted and will continue to last so long as the American office and factory remain almost the most romantic things in our national consciousness. The Jewish story here found its awakening too, though Bruno Lessing may have been the forerunner of this particular fashion.

The arrival of O. Henry of course set a new pace, injected a new force into American literature; and it was no time at all before he had dozens of imitators. He was the high priest of the parable, beginning, as he did, so many of his sketches with a vivid picture that seemed to have no relation to what followed—until you reached the end. Those who came immediately after him were too close to his influence to produce the best that was in them, the best of which many of them afterward proved themselves capable. Harris Merton Lyon, an early offender and carried away by the master, deliberately set out for a while to write just like O. Henry. He got away from that—he certainly didn't get away *with it*!—for he was far too clever to remain a mere imitator; and had he lived he would no doubt have set up

an authentic style of his own, and made his name one to remember.

Romantic stories will always be printed and read. There is no cycle in which they move. They are cosmic, so far as the magazines are concerned, hardy perennials that bloom forever. I remember once hearing a young author complain because a certain editor sent him, in a line, his everlasting needs. "Short young love stories, in an American setting" was what he always wanted; and seldom got. One wonders why such a recipe should be so diligently called for; and one marvels that the bulk of magazine readers so sedulously demand this changeless food. It makes one despair; but I venture to say no editorial schedule fails to take into account this special need; and woe betide the popular periodical that goes to press, too frequently disdainful of this simple type of tale! The fashion never dies out; and so long as youth is youth, and love is love, and America is what it is, this kind of story, with the usual trimmings, will go on being written and published.

The strange part of these fashions is that, once the style has vanished, it cannot be revived. It is as though there should be an attempt to make hoopskirts come back. Write a child story for grownups today, and you couldn't sell it. Yet stories may come, and stories may go, but love stories go on forever.

And at one time it looked as if the crook story would run it a close second in lasting popularity. The underworld has always been a fascinating ground for the fictionist. Low life appeals to the folk abovestairs, even as "plush" stories are eagerly devoured by the servants in the kitchen. The crook story had a long and deserved vogue: indeed, that vogue has never quite

died out. The burglar who led a double life—was a gentleman by daylight and a housebreaker when evening fell—will never lose his glamour for any of us with imagination; and the crook who gets the better of the police—who does not love him eternally? Robberies, murders, tense situations wherein wily women defeat the law and get Bill out of a pickle to boot—these have steady and certain charm for most of us; and any series, wherein the same band of thieves moves like a cinema before us, will appeal to the editor. It is an enduring type of fiction that is as up to date today as it was fifteen years ago; and it would be a calamity if it became unfashionable. See the hosts of magazines that have sprung up, which make a specialty of detective yarns and adventure stories. Their name is legion; they are as thriving as the little poetry journals scattered through the land.

The sex story had its exultant hour. (Do not confuse this with the love story!) And it is no credit at all to the publishers who created a demand for this type of fiction that the vogue lasted longer than it should. Like the dancing craze, it preceded the war, and psychologists would tell us there was a reason for this frantic interest in almost pathological studies of the sex relation. People were nervous and high-strung, and maybe they needed this false stimulant to carry them through perilous days. I don't know; but a band of writers certainly gave the public what it seemed to crave at the time, and most of them have gone to a deserved limbo of forgotten popularity. The demand gone, these writers seemed unable to turn to other fields.

I often wonder why the ghost story has never had its certain day. Ask

any group of people sitting about a fire if they like supernatural tales, and they will all answer in the affirmative. There will be a movement of chairs, a snuggling closer, an atmosphere of contagious interest, and the teller of the most gruesome story will be hailed as the king of any house-party. The more the wind whistles down the chimney and the more the rain beats at the pane, the happier the listeners will be; yet few ghost stories are printed, despite this human curiosity in the unseen world. Now, with psychic lecturers galore and ouija boards in abundance dancing in every household, there should be a revival of the spirit tale. The war, too, lends a thrilling background for such stories. What are the authors thinking of not to seize such a golden opportunity? Perhaps the reason lies in the fact

that it is difficult to make a ghost story convincing; and of course the perfect ghost story is the one that does not explain—that leaves the reader in the air, panting and unsatisfied. And remember that Americans, above all things else, like a happy ending. The story with the happy ending will never disappear from the pages of our popular magazines. The best-sellers are usually books that spell gladness before the word “Finis” is written, however the heroine may have suffered through three hundred and fifty tragic pages.

Fashions may change, and what seems lovely today may look grotesque tomorrow; but the happy ending endures, just as young love goes on forever. The wise writer, earning his bread and butter, knows this; and so does the wise editor, earning his.

THE LONDONER

The Limits of Biography—The Life of Beerbohm Tree—Walpole and the Theatregoer—A Table of Expenses—Bennett on Women and Other Things—Shaw's New Book—An Irish Play—A Spanish Play and a Spanish Boom—Psychoanalytical Fiction—Industry in Reading and the Story-telling Faculty.

LONDON, October 1, 1920.

I RECENTLY saw a copy of a book by an American professor entitled “The Art of Biography”, and although I did not read the book the sight of it produced in me a feeling of the strangest melancholy. I was reminded of the old days when a man I knew constantly begged me to abandon fiction and adopt the rôle of biographer. He used to mention wistfully the names of many men whose biogra-

phies had never been adequately written, and used to say, “Now *there's* a subject for you!” It was a peculiar time, for I never had the least desire to write biography. Why? Because one cannot really be candid in biography. One cannot show the man as he lived, for the simple reason that the thing is not “done”. It is impossible. Yet my friend's chief reading was in biography. He was an elderly man, very sincere, and very deeply inter-