

## Editor's Study.

### I

IN connection with the present Dickens revival it is interesting to recall the fact that fifty years ago the novelist was also an editor, and that he read the contributions offered to his periodical, *Household Words*. Wills, his assistant, usually attended to the bulk of manuscripts, submitting only the most important to Mr. Dickens. But sometimes it happened that Wills was ill or absent, and the entire burden fell upon his chief. At such a time as this it was that Mrs. Gaskell forwarded to him some manuscripts written by a woman of her acquaintance. Dickens's response is characteristic, and is especially interesting since he takes this opportunity of expressing his opinion of the great mass of material thus offered for his consideration. After saying that the manuscripts sent by Mrs. Gaskell "possess no kind of characteristic to render them available," and that "they are of that intensely dreary and commonplace description to which not even the experience of this place reconciles my wondering mind," he adds: "Everybody could write such things, I imagine; but how anybody can contentedly sit down to do it is inscrutable. . . . People don't plunge into churches and play the organ without knowing the notes or having the ghost of an ear. Yet fifty people to-day will rush into manuscript, for these leaves only, who have no earthly qualification but the actual physical art of writing. . . . I am at this moment sitting (up to the neck) in a quagmire of these productions."

The character of the casual contributions offered to periodicals has not materially changed in fifty years. Curiously the number of manuscripts daily submitted to *Household Words* (if Dickens meant to be accurate in his statement) is about that of those offered to this Magazine; and the estimate of the value of the contributions in the one case, as expressed by the distinguished editor, would be equally appropriate in the other. As to four out of every five, a reader with any degree of critical judgment would wonder, not merely why they are

offered, but how anybody could contentedly have taken the trouble to write them. The ability to write at all, with due respect of grammatical rules, is in these cases mistaken for the ability to produce literature. These same writers are intelligent enough to discard any periodical made up of the kind of things they offer. They suffer themselves to write what, written by anybody else, they would not have the patience to read.

Later, some of these writers, grown wiser by experience, will hesitate before offering incomparably better things, which they could not have written perhaps save for the many failures of more confident ventures. This early confidence does not necessarily imply any conceit as to the value of the offering; it may be only the sense of an awakening power which prematurely seeks the arena. The effort is confessedly a trial.

It is not often, however, that the inept beginner becomes an adept. We have observed that in nearly every case the writer who is to win in the strenuous competition shows the promise of such victory in his earliest offerings, disclosing to the eager and hopeful editor an individual charm that arrests his attention and awakens delight in his soul. We cannot recall a single exception. Sometimes it happens—once a year perhaps—that the very first offering of a writer is accepted. This writer has schooled himself (to say herself would be generally more fitting), and it is likely that just as good things as the one accepted have previously been modestly withheld from the editor's inspection.

There are instances of promise without fulfilment—temptations to many a will-o'-the-wisp pursuit by the editor. Where this bright light flickers, how many manuscripts are read through by the editor in the vain hope of satisfaction! Of course, all manuscripts offered are not read through—that would take not the editor's evening only, but all the twenty-four hours of every day. If it were necessary to read every word of every manuscript, it would be done, if the work demanded ten or more readers,

but it is not. The editor has only one question to answer—Is the thing offered desirable? Obviously, in the case of many manuscripts, the full reading is not necessary to decide this question; but always the writer is given the benefit of the doubt. How futile therefore all those little tricks resorted to by the writer to detect the editor's neglect of him! Is it to be supposed that the editor would willingly let a good thing escape him? Always in the case of an unfavorable verdict other magazines are open to the writer, and it is likely that in some one of them the features objectionable to the others will have no weight against the contribution. A writer does not always know how near his contribution comes to acceptance. In any case, if he has faith in his work, he should try elsewhere.

The editorial habit is never primarily that of the critic. Sensibility is in the foreground, the critical judgment in abeyance. We speak of a contribution as submitted, but in reading it the attitude of submission is taken by the editor, who for the time being gives himself up wholly to the author—that is, for so long a time as the author can hold him. There is no feud between the two—no resistance on the reader's part to the charm of the writer. This is true reading, whether it is the editor who reads, with reference to acceptance, or the reader of the Magazine who peruses the printed copy. Criticism, except it enter by compulsion, is an after-thought, and in any case an unwelcome accompaniment.

We often in considering this subject try to put ourselves in the contributor's place—not a difficult thing to do to some extent, since we were not always a mere editor, but once experienced the hopes and fears attending the adventures of a contributor. But happily we know only in part. Our own contributors are, with very few exceptions, hidden from us by an impenetrable veil, through which shines only the light of their literary lamps or torch-lights. It is well that we do not know what in their personal lives acceptance or rejection may mean. Such knowledge might sometimes, in the case of acceptance, bring us pleasure, but more often it would probably add to the unpleasantness of rejection a bitter pain. Perhaps it is due to a kind

consideration for the editor's feelings, as well as to the writer's proper pride, that so seldom is a plea for favor urged because of extreme poverty or any other untoward circumstance. Many suppose that good fortune—the writer's social distinction, his fame in other fields, or his having a friend at court, if not himself a friend—is more apt to win favor. This is not true; and as for the editor's personal friends, it is well for them if they have equal advantage with the stranger.

## II

Many fallacies are entertained concerning publishers, editors, and those who are employed as readers. So many books and so many periodicals are published which have no relation to anything which may properly be called literature that it is too generally assumed that all publishing enterprises have that detachment, and are of a wholly commercial character. If this were true, it would cast a grave reflection upon the great body of intelligent readers in this country, showing on their part a monstrous depravity. The real situation is far different from that supposed. There is a large and steadily increasing number of cultivated and appreciative American readers whose taste has not been vitiated, and who insist upon the highest standards and the best ideals. How large this audience is may be inferred from the fact that a novel, of supreme distinction as literature, and with no factitious claim to popularity, may have a sale of from fifty to one hundred thousand copies—larger than it could have had a generation ago. It is an audience demanding something better than it gets, but not something better than we trust it will get. We have no such constellation of great novel-writers as forty years ago brightened the English literary heavens. The interval has been made radiant by solitary stars, now and then of great magnitude. We may not soon see such another group as thronged the field, dazzling the view of the last generation; but the skies are nebulously rich for fresh nucleations to satisfy the eagerly expectant eyes of the English-speaking people. The demand will surely be met. We are not confessing to the inferiority of our own present literature as compared with the past (excluding from the

retrospect a single period, as brief as it was brilliant). On the contrary, in America, literary taste and literary activity are far advanced since the days of Irving and Cooper. The quality of our literature is better than in those days; appreciation is quicker and more abundant, judicious criticism more exacting.

American publishers of the best class, like the select yet now very large and ever-increasing audience of thoughtful readers, want better books than are written, and, where they are proprietors of periodicals, better poems and stories and essays than are offered.

We have seen how comparatively unimportant in the actual constitution of a magazine are the casual offerings of contributors; no respectable number of the periodical could be made up by selection from them. No more can the publisher depend upon the voluntary offerings of book manuscripts. His dealings with authors must in the main be direct and of his own motion, and it is here that his ruling policy and his individual judgment are shown. It requires good business ability simply to make money by the publication of books and magazines, setting aside all literary standards; but it requires a higher order of ability and a finer determination to build up a great publishing-house, whose every issue will bear the mark of good literary judgment. How many books that would command large sales must be excluded from consideration! How many bringing a small immediate profit will be accepted and even solicited because the publisher has a prophetic sense of their permanent value! Such a publishing-house will employ readers, enough of them and sufficiently intelligent to let no promising new author escape notice or lack encouragement. These readers are eyes to the publisher, and the more clearly their opinions disclose what he would see if he could read the manuscripts himself, the better their service.

Another fallacy—especially as to magazine conduct—is that which assumes the domination of publisher and editor by great names that stand simply for success and not for literary worth. To the disgrace of our literature, it is true that many writers aim at this kind of success, and some of them attain it. Nine out

of ten of the best-selling books (so remote from any appeal to cultivated minds that few of them are known even by their titles to the readers of this Magazine) have no claim to literary distinction, and could not secure the imprint of any first-class publishing-house. The mere fact of success, however, does not condemn an author who has reached the minds and hearts of intelligent readers, and it is natural that he should be sought by publishers and editors. Still, a really better thing by a wholly unknown writer would have the preference.

### III

But what is the "better thing"? It is for that thoughtful readers as well as publishers and editors are waiting. The want is indeed for better things than any of our writers are offering or producing. We cannot reasonably complain of a lack of literary taste or of literary activity; but with so great a demand for the best and such readiness for its appreciation, we do wonder that the actual production is not better than it is. The appreciation, too, is catholic, tolerant of every variety of good literature—the story, the sketch, the social or philosophical essay, the poem—and intolerant only of indifferent and inferior work. There is no dearth of good literature, no inferiority of it as compared with that of the past, yet the best that is forth-coming is not up to the level of the demand. It is not true of this waiting audience—whatever may be said of the reading public at large—that it has been vitiated or demoralized. It wants only the best, and out of its very impatience, it may be, will spring the new writers who will satisfy its ideals. This is our only hope, and may the period of transition from the only partially satisfactory work to such as shall seem adequate be brief! It is the writers who are at fault. Many of them yield to glittering hopes that divert them from the proper goal; far too many of them indulge the fallacies we have sought to expose, and lack confidence in the literary taste of cultivated readers and in the desire of publishers to meet its highest requirements. They have too much in view the favor of a recently developed audience, whose appetite has grown by feeding upon unwholesome stuff.

## IV

Several months ago in the Study we called attention to the fact that few short stories reach a very high point of excellence—high enough to give them a permanent place in literature. We, on this account, made a special plea for the use in the Magazine of such serial novels as have this supreme excellence. Is the short story so often deficient because it is short? This cannot be, for short stories have been written that will be read as long as our literature endures. The canvas may be small, yet admit a picture of enduring value.

Far better sketches, and better tales distinguished by native wit and humor, are written than short love-stories. Yet it is just these stories of romantic love that are most in demand. It would seem as if on this planet the most interesting objects possible were a man and a woman in this romantic relation. In the simplest idyllic form of the love-story, as in Goethe's "Hermann and Dorothea," we are satisfied with but the youth and the maid, so they love, and the prompting of spring-time be not in vain. In Goethe's poem we have the perfect artistic form, as simple as the elements it embraces, and thus an immortal classic. The simple lines of Goethe's poem and of a few other equally brief and equally typical love-tales cannot be endlessly repeated by later writers. Thus the more dramatic tale of passion takes the place of the idyl. But passion lacks significance unless there be character, and thus other interests must be interwoven, and the fabric grows more complex. The very brief love-story, if it is not to be too obvious in its unfolding—if it is to have the charm of surprise—is exceedingly difficult. Only the novel allows space for full and adequate dramatic development. For this reason, probably, the writer of a short love-story prefers to take those already married as the actors in his little drama, in some situation where much may be taken for granted without his telling it, and the movement may have a quick turn without seeming too abrupt. Partly this is done because the emotions of characters already developed more strongly tempt the writer, and in many respects are more interesting, intellectually, to the reader. The

spontaneous blossoming of boy and girl love is perennially interesting, as youth itself is, but because it affords to the writer so little opportunity for novelty or for any appeal to the reader's mental interest, it seems necessary to introduce other dramatic elements, if only obstacles and delays, to give point to the final triumph, as in the real story of Victor Hugo and Adèle Foucher. But this makes a long story. The mature man, bachelor or widower, and the woman who is either a widow or has remained unmarried until she has passed through the crude period of girlhood, are more tempting to the writer of the short love-story because of the greater opportunity to give intellectual satisfaction, with perhaps a spice of humor, in a brief episode.

But making all allowances for the lions in the way, the short love-story of the purely romantic character, and dealing with the emotions of youth, is still not only possible, but when achieved with distinction is one of the greatest triumphs of literary art. Maurice Hewlett—to present a single example—is a master in this field. The note of *Aucassin and Nicolette* still tempts both writers and readers.

There are other passions, not romantic. The affection between members of a family often rises to the height of passionate devotion, and for the purposes of a short story may prove one of the strongest of *motifs*. No feeling is of commanding interest save as it has the vibrancy of a passion, and then the whole world answers to the note. It was this that made *Silas Marner* interesting for all time, though its theme was the passion of a miser. There must, of course, be something beyond and above the merely material element, something of human interest, such as the introduction of the little child brings into the novel just mentioned. Deep and right feeling, with true art, will always make a good story.

## V

Several years ago, in one of his lectures, Sir William Thomson, now Lord Kelvin, made the following statement: "The reversibility of every motion in pure dynamics has no place in the world of life. Even to think of it (and on the merely dynamical hypothesis of life we can think of it as understandingly as of

the origination of life and evolution of living beings without creative power) we must imagine men, with conscious knowledge of the future but with no memory of the past, growing backward and becoming again unborn; and plants growing downwards into the seeds from which they sprang."—*Popular Lectures and Addresses*, vol. ii., p. 465.

Mr. Carl Snyder, in an article entitled "The Newest Conceptions of Life," in this number of the Magazine, cites an instance of just such reversibility in the case of a living plant, and he suggests that "perhaps all the processes of life are reversible—growth even; that under given conditions the oak might become an acorn, the grown man a child, the adult organism led back through the successive stages of its development to the primitive germ from which it sprang."

It almost seems that our author in this hypothetical assertion of the reversibility of vital processes had in mind the very phrascology in which Sir William Thomson denied it, since he uses so nearly the same terms. Finding a well-authenticated instance of such reversibility, he is tempted to present as possible what Sir William admitted to be the necessary sequel of even the thought of such a case—a sequel involving our acceptance of the dynamical hypothesis of life. Mr. Snyder's extreme only matches Sir William's. Perhaps neither writer should be taken too seriously as to the imagined consequences of admitting or denying the fact of the reversibility of natural processes in the world of life.

Probably the future investigator will find a point in structural development where this reversibility is practically impossible; this point may be far above the *campanularia* and yet far below man or even the oak. In unicellular development life is in its wonder-working period; indeed, the lowest forms of life generally admit of wondrous transformations. Even the worm, if it loses its head, will make a new one. The more advanced and complex structure, gaining in stability, surrenders, or seems to surrender, the miraculous potentialities of more plastic life. A new wonder, however, is lodged in the more elaborate and stable structure, and while there do not appear to be any given conditions under which the

oak may turn back into the acorn, yet every year under its normal conditions it becomes the acorn, and under like normal conditions man becomes the child, not by retroversion, but in a progressive series, generation after generation.

But, however limited chemical processes may be for such marvellous transformations as are suggested in Mr. Snyder's article, the disclosure there made of the relation of chemistry to life—as the result of recent investigations—is hardly less wonderful. The reversibility of processes is so far possible, under applicable conditions, as to suggest the renewal of the physiological structure and the prolongation of human life beyond its present attainable term.

In that world with which inorganic chemistry deals, under a given set of conditions, oxygen and hydrogen unite to form water; under other conditions this alliance is broken. We speak of this as the inorganic world; but the distinction between the organic and the inorganic is found to be apparent rather than real. In the realm of physiology, we say that we are in the living world, and we think of vitality as a new principle which has entered into and constituted this world by a kind of supervention over and beyond the chemical synthesis. But science is now dismissing this idea of supervention, and will in time disclose a living universe. As Mr. John Fiske points out in his essay on evolution in this number, the synthesis which is going on now is the same that, under constantly changing aspects, has been going on from the beginning. No new principle has entered, whatever diverse names we may give to processes, calling some physical, some chemical, and some vital. The inorganic does not produce the organic, nor the unliving the living. There is one life from the beginning—the creative life; and it has no present attribute that essentially and by implication did not belong to it from the beginning.

We need not be alarmed, therefore, by any new disclosures that exalt chemical operation. If life is simply fermentation, then is that leaven a very wonderful thing, to the contemplation of which we are invited by the Master, who found in it a likeness to the kingdom of heaven, essentially a creative kingdom.



# EDITOR'S DRAWER

## My Swedish Romance

BY WILLIAM CHESTER ESTABROOK

"CHRISTINE," said I, "you pound the steak *before* broiling, not after." I spoke as a man goaded beyond endurance.

Christine eyed me dully. Lacking the medium of a common language, I gave her, as I had so often done before, ocular demonstration of my words.

"First, pound," I cried, assuming a threatening attitude over the already exhausted steak; "next, broil," and I suspended another steak,—an imaginary one,—above the range.

Christine dodged my first illustration, and looked askance at the second. I repeated the performance. There came to Christine's eyes that canine look which betokens a joyous friendliness toward all concerned, rather than appreciation of the nice points in the case; and had she possessed a caudal appendage, I doubt not that she would have wagged it industriously.

"Christine, do you understand?" I demanded.

She nodded vaguely. "Ay tank ay—" she began, with maddening deliberation.

"No, no, Christine, don't say that! Don't imply that you ever think," I interrupted, sarcastically.

I myself carried the steak to the dining-room, and placed it before my children with a roughness of manner which startled them.

"What's the matter, papa?" asked Dorothy.

"Perhaps it's Christine," said Theodore, with a covert wink that did not escape me.

In spite of the insinuation, I triumphed over self, and we began our meagre breakfast in silence. Christine's presence was the outcome of a suggestion and a fact. The suggestion came from

my wife upon her departure for the country. "If Nora should insist upon leaving," she had cautioned, "get a Swede. They are slow to learn, but slow to anger, too. They are tamer than the Irish, and they are very clean; and you never have to teach them the same thing twice."

Nora had insisted upon leaving, in spite of a tongue which had made for me a comfortable place in our little legal world. The last part of my wife's admonition came back to me like a mockery. In three weeks I had not succeeded in teaching Christine anything—even once.

The fact which conspired with my wife's suggestion was that for six months I had revelled in the presidency of the Woodruff Social Science Club. A great question agi-



CHRISTINE EYED ME DULLY