

## Editor's Easy Chair

THE Veteran Novelist sat before his desk pensively supporting his cheek in his left hand while his right toyed with the pen from which, for the moment at least, fiction refused to flow. His great-niece, who seemed such a contradiction in terms, being as little and vivid personally as she was nominally large and stately, opened the door and advanced upon him.

"Do I disturb you, uncle?" she asked; she did not call him great-uncle because that, she rightly said, was ridiculous; and now, as part of the informality, she went on without waiting for him to answer. "Because, you know, you wanted me to tell you what I thought of your last story; and I've just read it."

"Oh, yes!" the veteran novelist assented brightly, hiding his struggle to recall which story it was. "Well?"

"Well," she said firmly, but kindly, "you want me to be frank with you, don't you?"

"By all means, my dear. It's very good of you to read my story." By this time, he had, with the help of the rather lean volume into which his publishers had expanded a long-short, and which she now held intensely clasped to her breast, really remembered.

"Not at all!" she said. She sat down very elastically in the chair on the other side of his desk, and as she talked, she accented each of her emotions by a spring from the cushioned seat. "In the first place," she said, with the effect of coming directly to business, "I suppose you know yourself that it couldn't be called virile."

"No?" he returned. "What is virile?"

"Well, I can't explain, precisely; but it's something that all the critics say of a book that is very strong, don't you know; and masterful; and relentless; and makes you feel as if somebody had taken you by the throat; and shakes you up, awfully; and seems to throw you into the air, and trample you underfoot."

"Good heavens, my dear!" the veteran novelist exclaimed. "I hope I'm a gentleman, even when I'm writing a novel."

"Your being a gentleman has nothing to do with it, uncle!" she said severely, for she thought she perceived a disposition in the veteran novelist to shuffle. "You can't be virile and at the same time remember that you are a gentleman. Lots of *women* write virile books."

"Ladies?" the novelist asked.

"Don't I say that has nothing to do with it? If you wish to grip the reader's attention you must let yourself go, whether you're a gentleman or a lady. Of course," she relented, "your book's very idyllic, and delightful, and all that; but," she resumed severely, "do you think an honest critic could say there was not a dull page in it from cover to cover?"

The novelist sighed. "I'm sure I don't know. They seem to say it—in the passages quoted in the advertisements—of all the books published. Except mine," he added sadly.

"Well, we will pass that point," his great-niece relented again. "I didn't intend to wound your feelings, uncle."

"Oh, you haven't. I suppose I *am* a little too easy-going at times."

"Yes, that is it. One can't say dull; but too easy-going. No faithful critic could begin a notice of your book with such a passage as, 'Have you read it? No? Then hop, skip and jump and get it. Don't wait to find your hat or drink your coffee. March! It's going like the wind, and you must kite, if you want one of the first edition of fifty thousand! Now that,' his great-niece ended fondly, "is what I should like every critic to say of your book, uncle."

The veteran novelist reflected for a moment. Then he said, more spiritedly, "I don't believe I should, my dear."

"Then you *must*; that's all. But that's a small thing. What I really wonder at is that with all your experience, you are not more of a stylist."

"Stylist?"

"Yes. I don't believe there's an epigram in your book from beginning to end. That's the reason the critics don't quote any brilliant sentences from it, and the publishers can't advertise it properly. It makes me mad to find the girls repeating other authors' sayings, and I never catch a word from a book of yours, though you've been writing more than a century."

"Not quite so long, my dear, I think; though very, very long. But just what do you mean by style?"

"Well, you ought to say even the simplest things in a distinguished way; and here, all through, I find you saying the most distinguished things in the simplest way. But I won't worry you about things that are not vital. I'll allow, for the sake of argument, that you can't have virility if you remember that you are a gentleman even when you are writing fiction. But you *can* have *passion*. Why don't you?"

"Don't I? I thought—"

"Not a speck of it—not a single speck! It's rather a delicate point, and I don't exactly know how to put it, but if you want me to be frank I must." She looked at her great-uncle, and he nodded encouragement. "I don't believe there's a single place where he crushes her to his heart, or presses his lips to hers in a long kiss. He kisses her cheek once, but I don't call that anything. Why, in lots of the books, nowadays, the girls themselves cling to the men in a close embrace, or put their mouths tenderly to theirs— Well, of course, it sounds rather disgusting, but in your own earlier books, I'm sure there's more of it—of passion. Isn't there? Think!"

The veteran novelist tried to think. "To tell you the truth, my dear, I can't remember. I hope there was, and there always will be, love, and true love, in my novels—the kind that sometimes ends in happy marriage, but is always rather shy of showing itself off to the reader in caresses of any kind. I think passion can be intimated, and is better so than brutally stated. If you have a lot of hugging and kissing—"

"Uncle!"

"How are your lovers different from

those poor things in the Park that make you ashamed as you pass them?"

"The police ought to put a stop to it. They are perfectly disgraceful!"

"And they ought to put a stop to it in the novels. It's not only indecent, but it's highly insanitary. Nice people don't want you to kiss their children, nowadays, and yet they expect us novelists to supply them with passion of the most demonstrative sort in our fiction. Among the Japanese, who are now one of the great world-powers, kissing is quite unknown, in real life. I don't know the Japanese fiction very well, but I doubt whether there's a single kiss, or double, in it. I believe that a novel, full of intense passion, could be written, without the help of one embrace, from beginning to end."

"Uncle!" the girl vividly exclaimed, "why don't you *do* it? It would be the greatest success! Just give them the wink, somehow, at the start—just hint that there was the greatest kind of passion going on, all the time, and never once showing itself, and the girls would be raving about it. Why *don't* you do it, uncle? You know I do so want you, for once, to write the most popular book of the month!"

"I want to do it myself, my dear. But as to my writing a book full of suppressed passion, that's a story in itself."

"Tell it!" she entreated.

"The Easy Chair wouldn't give me room for it. But I'll tell you something else. When I was a boy I had a knack at versing, which came rather in anticipation of the subjects to use it on. I exhausted Spring, and Morning, and Snow, and Memory, and the whole range of mythological topics, and then I had my knack lying idle. I observed that there was one subject that the other poets found inexhaustible, but somehow I felt myself disqualified for treating it. How could I sing of Love, when I had never been in love? For I didn't count those youthful affairs when I was only in the Third Reader and the first part of the Arithmetic. I went about trying to be in love, as a matter of business; but I couldn't manage it. Suddenly, it managed itself; and then I found myself worse disqualified than ever. I didn't want to mention it; either to myself

or to her, much less to the world at large. It seemed a little too personal."

"Oh, uncle! How funny you are!"

"Do you think so? I didn't think it much fun then, and I don't now. Once I didn't know what love was, and now I've forgotten!"

"No such thing, uncle! You write about it beautifully, even if you're not very virile, or epigrammatic, or passionate. I won't let you say so."

"Well, then, my dear, if I haven't forgotten, I'm not interested. You see, I know so much more about it than my lovers do. I can't take their point of view, any longer. To tell you the truth, I don't care a rap whether they get married or not. In that story there, that you've been reading, I got awfully tired of the girl. She was such a fool; and the fellow was a perfect donkey."

"But he was the dearest donkey in the world! I wanted to h—shake hands with him; and I wanted to kiss—yes, kiss!—*her*, she was such a lovable fool."

"You're very kind to say so, my dear, but you can't keep on making delightful idiots go down with the public. That was what I was thinking when you came in and found me looking so dismal. I had stopped in the middle of a most exciting scene because I had discovered that I was poking fun at my lovers."

"And here, I," the girl lamented, "didn't take the slightest notice, but began on you with the harshest criticisms!"

"I didn't mind. I dare say it was for my good."

"I'm sure I meant it so, uncle. And what are you going to do about it?"

"Well, I must get a new point of view."

"Yes?"

"I must change my ground, altogether. I can't pretend, any longer, to be the contemporary of my lovers, or to have the least sympathy with their hopes and fears. If I were to be perfectly honest with them, I should tell them, perhaps, that disappointed love was the best thing that could happen to either of them, but if they insisted on happiness, that a good broken engagement promised more of it than anything else I could think of."

"That is true," the girl sighed. "There are a great many unhappy marriages. Of course, people would say it was *rather* pessimistic, wouldn't they?"

"People will say anything. One mustn't mind them. But, now, I'll tell you what I've been thinking, all the time we've been talking."

"Well? I knew you were not thinking of *my* nonsense!"

"It was very good nonsense, as nonsense goes, my dear. What I've been thinking is that I must still have the love interest in my books, and have it the main interest, but I must treat it from the vantage-ground of age; it must be something I look back upon, and a little down upon."

"I see what you mean," the girl dis-sentingly assented.

"I must be in the whole secret—the secret, not merely of my lovers' love, but the secret of love itself. I must know, and I must subtly intimate, that it doesn't really matter to anybody how their affair turns out; for in a few years, twenty or thirty years, it's a thousand to one that they won't care anything about it themselves. I must maintain the attitude of the sage, dealing, not unkindly, but truthfully with the situation."

"It would be rather sad," the girl murmured. "But one likes sad things."


"When one is young, one does; when one is old, one likes true things. But of course, my love-stories would be only for those who have outlived love. I ought to be fair with my readers, and forewarn them that my story was not for the young, the hopeful, the happy."

The girl jumped to her feet and stood magnificent. "Uncle! It's grand!"

He rose, too. "What is?" he faltered.

"The idea! Don't you see? You can have the publisher announce it as a story for the disillusioned, the wretched, and the despairing, and that would make every girl want it, for that's what every girl thinks she is, and they would talk to the men about it, and then *they* would want it, and it would be the book of the month! Don't say another word. Oh, you dear!" In spite of the insanitary nature of the action, she caught her uncle round the neck, and kissed him on his bald spot, and ran out of the room. She opened the door to call back: "Don't lose a single minute. Begin it *now*!"

But the veteran novelist sank again into his chair in the posture in which she had surprised him.



## Editor's Study

PERHAPS Mr. Kipling has never uttered anything more characteristic of his individual genius than his speech last May at the banquet of the Royal Academy. There was a legend, he said, "that when a man first achieved a most notable deed he wished to explain to the tribe what he had done. As soon as he began to speak, however, he was smitten with dumbness, he lacked words, and sat down. Then there arose, according to the story, a masterless man who had taken no part in the action of his fellow, who had no special virtues, but was afflicted—that was the phrase—with the magic of the necessary words." This man described the action in so eloquent a fashion that the words "became alive and walked up and down in the hearts of all his hearers." Thereupon the tribe, seeing the power of such magic, fearing that it might be falsely or dangerously used, took him and killed him. "The old and terrible instinct," Mr. Kipling went on to say, "which taught our ancestors to kill the original story-teller warns us that we shall not be far wrong if we challenge any man who shows signs of being afflicted with the necessary words." The world has the right to demand of the story-teller that at any cost he shall tell the truth.

The celebrated master of fiction was responding to the toast for "Literature," and would have betrayed the trust reposed in him if he had meant to contrast the man of deeds with the man of words to the latter's disadvantage. He duly exalted the power of speech. "A bare half-hundred words breathed upon by some man in his agony, or in his exaltation, or in his idleness, ten generations ago, can still lead whole nations into and out of captivity, can open to us the doors of three worlds, or stir us so intolerably that we can scarcely abide to look at our own souls."

Returning to our own time, Mr. Kipling rehearsed a modern legend of a tribe

in South Africa which complained of its rain-makers—men who were supposed to have the magic of words necessary to the miracle expected of them—that they were doing their work so partially and ineffectually. "But," retorted the masters of incantation, "what has the tribe been doing? Hunting jackals and chasing grasshoppers, and so long as they continue these ignoble practices the heavens, in answer to our spells, will give but patches of cloud and scanty showers." The challenge, then, is to the men of action as well as to the men of words—they must do their best. There must be the old-fashioned miracles of faith and heroism and passion, else the old miracle of words will fail.

These allegories stand, having a veracity inexpugnable, though they are not and were not intended to be faithful transcripts of historical facts as to the relation of the record to the action. But it is interesting to note the actual relation, and especially the fact that originally the record of a notable achievement of the tribe, taking the form of song, was as communal as the action itself, all being participants; and equally communal were those earliest spells and incantations by which the gods themselves were held in fief to the tribe. Yet in the natural course of development the individual hero arose and was worshipped as a demigod, and in like manner the individual singer, whose nativity or burial-place would be claimed by many cities—such distinction was accorded him after death; and while he lived so far was he from mortal peril that his soul was cherished, and at every feast he held the place of honor and was given the widest audience. Nor was he severely challenged in the interests of truth or even restrained from flattery in his adulation of a people's heroes; and that other order of singer—the *vates*, or master of vaticination—was sacredly immune, while holding in his