THE POPULAR VERDICT AND SOME RECENT NOVELS*

IT is generally conceded that of all literary forms the novel stands nearest to the drama in its dependence upon popular favour. As with the drama, its legitimate purpose is neither to teach nor to preach, but to entertain. It may, of course, incidentally accomplish many other things besides. It may, on occasion, stir us to noble impulses and righteous indignation; it may propound some of the weightiest problems of human life and point a way to their solution; it may strip the veil from hideous social evils and kindle a sweeping fire of reform. But unless it possesses the initial gift of entertaining, it courts defeat at the outset; for whatever people may do with sermons and essays and text-books, it is quite certain that they will refuse to read a novel that bores them. Accordingly it is well-nigh axiomatic that a novelist, like a playwright, must catch and hold the interest of his audience. What the nature of his audience shall be is one of the questions he is privileged to answer for himself. He may write for the many or for the few; for the wise or the foolish; for the reverend senior or the matinee girl. But having chosen his public, he must give them entertainment, or else own himself ignorant of the first principles of his art.

Now, since the purpose of all fiction, of whatever degree of ambition and achievement, is to present a series of imagined incidents in such a way as to produce the maximum impression of reality, it would seem to be a perfectly reasonable and legitimate question to ask why the popular verdict on a novel is not the decisive verdict—in other words, why the novel that reaches the widest audience is not artistically as well as commercially the best novel? For the art of fiction is different from the other arts, in that it does not afford a conscious enjoyment, for its own sake, excepting in rare, individual cases. None but the trained critic takes pleasure, as he reads a story, in the cleverness of its technique, the symmetry of its structure, the effective tricks of rhythm and assonance, because in the technique of fiction the best art lies in most subtly concealing it; it is not something to be enjoyed for its own sake, as in music or painting. And so, if the aim of all novelists is essentially the same—namely, to interpret life in the most graphic, effective and convincing way at their command—then it would seem that the test of a novelist's ability, like that of a great actor, should lie in the size of his audience, the number of people whom his genius has the power to hold spellbound.

In point of fact, there are a sufficient number of cases in which the popular verdict and the verdict of authoritative criticism have coincided, to give a sort of fallacious justification to this doctrine that a novelist's greatness is in direct ratio to his popularity. Scott and Dickens and Thackeray, Stevenson and Kipling, Dumas and Balzac and Zola, are familiar instances of great writers who could hold and sway a great audience. But they were able to do this because of the breadth of their sympathies with human life, the universality of their themes, the gift of touching certain common chords of human nature, that set all classes of readers vibrating in response. This power different writers have to a varying degree; Dickens, for instance, to a greater extent than Thackeray—and therefore, while Thackeray is the finer

*Antonio. By Ernest Oldmeadow. New York: The Century Company.

Idolatry. By Alice Perrin. New York: Duffield and Company.

Salvator. By Percival Gibbon. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

Peter-Peter. By Maude Radford Warren. New York: Harper and Brothers.

The Whips of Time. By Arabella Kenealy. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.

The Black Flier. By Edith Macvane. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company.

The Half Moon. By Ford Madox Hueffer. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

artist, Dickens gathers around him a more motley audience and wins by popular verdict. So long as a novelist confines himself to themes that possess this universal appeal; themes dealing with such primitive, basic emotions that they are as intelligible to the ploughman as to the man of letters; themes as single-minded as Othello's jealousy or Macbeth's ambition, just so long will his true worth be roughly measured by the size of his audience.

It is, of course, one form of genius to be able to choose themes that will thus reach the public at large and make the whole world feel the thrill of kinship. But it is not one of the indispensable factors of great fiction, because greatness lies in the way a story is told, rather than in the story itself. It depends upon the degree of an author's ability to tell the truth about life, rather than upon the particular truth that he has undertaken to tell, and if he succeeds greatly, the absolute value of his achievement remains the same, whether a million readers or only a score possess the intimate knowledge of life that is necessary to a complete understanding of what he has done.

It follows that while many of the greatest novels ever written belong, and rightly, too, to the general public, many other novels, equally great, must remain caviare to the general. The general public will continue to yawn over the novel that deals with problems too subtle for it to understand; and it will continue to read and admire writers whose ignorance of life it is itself too ignorant to detect. There are just a few peculiarly gifted writers who achieve that seemingly impossible task of simultaneously appealing to the child and the adult, by means of an *Alice in Wonderland* or a *Jungle Tale*. But the mere fact that books like these augment their possible audience by the sum total of the nation's childhood, does not make them greater in literary value than, let us say, *Vanity Fair* or *Pere Goriot*, which must remain content without a juvenile audience. A certain portion of the general public are at best only children of a larger growth; and while certain masters of fiction succeed in writing down to their level, it would be folly to claim for these a higher degree of merit than for other writers who frankly choose to write for a limited public possessed of a special culture, an exceptional maturity. The fact that three generations have wept over the death of little Nell does not alter the fact that *The Old Curiosity Shop* lies considerably lower in the scale of art than, for example, *The Golden Bowl* of Henry James, whose very meaning would persistently elude ninety per cent. of the sum total of Dickens's readers.

For these reasons it should be remembered that there are few tests so fallacious as the popular verdict on books of fiction. As against the one time when the public may possibly be right, there will be ten times when it will be plainly, if not grotesquely wrong. It will look askance at the really promising work of an author's youth, and then end by absurdly overrating the mediocre productions of his middle age. And this is not surprising, because mediocrity is itself one of the notes that awaken a ready response from the world at large.

And yet the Popular Verdict is a factor which it has become impossible to overlook in the criticism of modern fiction because of the easily understood and somewhat deplorable reason that it is the factor which largely explains why so many mediocre books are published—and also why many a book containing the promise of better things is deliberately warped and cheapened and spoiled. A casual glance over a shelf full of so-called "summer novels" is in these days rather disheartening, not because a light little story skilfully told is in itself an unworthy achievement, but because in so much of our current fiction it is unpleasantly evident that the author has had his eye at least two-thirds of the time upon his audience, rather than on his work.