

PITY THE SUCCESSFUL AUTHOR!

By James Montgomery Flagg

THERE is a theory that a short story and a novel are two distinct literary expressions. Perhaps as much difference between them as there would be between a sonnet and an epic or a madrigal and an oratorio. If I'm wrong correct me. In actuality the only variance seems to be in length. If an author can't think of enough stuff to make a serial, he lets it go as a short story. He's out of luck. If I'm right correct me.

When the farmer says to the hen, "Lucille, I want three eggs by Wednesday at nine fifteen!" he will no doubt get the eggs, since Lucille is a trained layer. Yet the very best eggs are not laid by request. When Lucille has a wonderful idea for three eggs and the farmer doesn't know anything about it, she is quite likely to lay three dreams in gold and white!

Of course, that opens up the world-old discussion as to whether an artist in any art does his best with or without the whip of necessity. Nowadays it is the lash of luxury, I'm afraid.

Too often it probably is the case that when an author has an unexpected success he says, "Aha! Now I shall indulge in a pergola and twins!" He bites off more pergolas and twins than he can chew for. The children of his brains give way to the children of his exuberance. Then come the contracts for serials. Whereupon mediocrity sets in.

The most irritating modern improvement in style is this "Came" business! "Came Ethelbert to the library", "Came Whitsuntide", "Came Tuesday", "Came smallpox" — Where do they get that stuff? Why not, "Went the plumber", or "Went Wednesday"? Or why not, "Poked he the Bishop in the ribs"?

Another thorn, at least in the side of an illustrator, is the male author's insistence upon describing his heroine's wearing apparel. They never know anything about women's clothes, and if an illustrator followed them as they fondly hope to be adhered to, a sartorial monstrosity would appear. To a male author a heroine's makeup usually includes "coils of hair done low on the neck", "clinging material", when perhaps the mode is bobbed hair and straight line effects!

Why do they think they have to describe clothes? And scenery — especially in western stories? Pages of grey hills, purple shadows, pink buttes, cotton clouds, amber valleys, lavender rabbits, dust colored dust clouds — and all nature seemed hushed and everything! In one of Mark Twain's books he had all the descriptions of scenery in the appendix — assorted — read it or not as you pleased! That's service!

The author's traditional complaint against the illustrator is that the latter does not read his story. Whose fault is that? The author's, of course. Why doesn't he write stories that even

an illustrator could read? His publisher says, "Here is a gripping story of the Northwest Mounted and Framed — 'Passion and Chilblains!' — you cannot lay it down till you've finished it!" That sort of thing. If it be true, why does the illustrator lay the book down? Don't say he never takes it up!

There is a particularly depressing formula in the publishing business. When an author has made a hit in a certain type of story, or hero, he is forced to grind out replicas of his first success ad nauseam, for decades. He has said all he had to say in the first thirty eight stories, but money talks — the public likes it — it has the habit, so keep it up.

It is human on the part of the publishers to strive to fill the demand — but is it humane, or is it art? Would "Alice in Wonderland" have lasted if she had been dragged through years of adventures — "Alice in Putney", "Alice at the Crystal Palace", "Alice at Oxford", etc.!

You must immediately recall instances of this repeater business. There was Sewell Ford with his "Torchy" — it has been going on for centuries. He has worn out illustrators. The original model for the person of Torchy is a grandfather. Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford of Chester's lasted fifty times as long as Ponzi of Boston. Dear old Penrod must have been a Knight Templar with a large stomach the last time he played hookey. And Owen Johnson's Tennessee Shad and Doc McNooder and the others are going to Lawrenceville again. I will say they are as entertaining as ever in spite of their invisible long white beards!

It is obvious that these characters are real Americans on account of their popularity — but God help successful authors!