THE BEST RECENT NOVELS.

In this brief review of recent novels we may not keep strictly within the bounds of the current year. In other words, our purpose is to group for the benefit of our readers the most notable romances and novels that have claimed public attention since the first of November, 1893. In one or two instances we may go a little further back, for the reason that the mere date of a book's issue does not always begin the real period of its currency. Nor do we pretend that our review is to contain even an approximate list of the excellent novels of the year just ending. The aim is simply to group a few of the most noteworthy, with such brief comment as may seem called for.

Marcella, by Mrs. Humphry Ward, takes the lead as a "novel of purpose," and is, perhaps, the strongest of her stories. It has been widely discussed on account of its sociological burden, as well as its attractiveness as a piece of sustained art. We have had no American novel to compare with it; but Gen. Lewis Wallace's romance, *The Prince of India*, has been widely popular and justly so. It is a picturesque historical story, vividly descriptive of scenes and manners in the East at the time of Constantinople's fall, at the hands of Mohammed II. It is less engaging than "Ben Hur," by the same author; and, while its style is weakly elaborated, its explanations long-drawn, and its story too much weighted with historical disquisition, it is, nevertheless, an important and interesting work, and likely to be much read in the future. *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*, by George Meredith, ranks among distinguished novels of the year, more for its glittering diction and singular individuality of style than for any high value as a composition. It is without moral purpose, and in the end leaves a decidedly immoral effect. The sad death of Miss Constance F. Woolson adds pathetic interest to her last story, *Horace Chase*, a strong piece of work, much in the vein of her earlier Floridian novels. Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Ebb Tide*, a tale of the South Sea Islands, cannot be favorably compared with his best stories. It is, of course, cleverly told, but the gruesomeness and low tone of its character and the coarseness of its *dramatis personæ* overshadow it and dissipate interest. Mr. F. Marion Crawford's *Katharine Lauderdale* well sustains this prolific novelist's reputation. The scene is New York City, where Mr. Crawford recently visited and lectured, and the plot shows the way to some fine character-drawing and opens charming vistas of both realism and romance. *Dodo*, by E. F. Benson, we mention as the very silliest novel of the year, or any year, and *Pembroke*, by Mary E. Wilkins, is one of the strongest and least engaging. We cannot praise too highly the close and fine texture of Miss Wilkins's art, both in style and composition; but *her people and scenes* are dreary, and even repellant, almost beyond endurance. *Ships that Pass in the Night*, by Beatrice Harradan, caused a *ripple of attention on account of* its singular freshness, a freshness curiously generated out of some decaying lives. As literature, the work is nothing; as art, it ends crudely, even clumsily; but it is of unusal interest as a specimen not likely to be duplicated. *Out of Step*, by Marfa Louise Pool, belongs to the class of novels depending for their value upon the working out of disagreeable social and domestic problems. Thoroughly well written and composed with great cleverness, it is a novel far above the commonplace, viewed as a work of art. *A Yellow Aster*, by Mrs. Harington Caffyn, a young Englishwoman of marked talent, has been successful. It would be straining a point to give the story more than passing notice. A certain half-grotesque and wholly unnatural spirit informs it, and its interest rests upon its preposterousness. *Philip's Wife*, by Margaret Deland, follows briskly in the steps of later English fiction, dealing with domestic infelicity and inconstancy. Mrs. Deland has a bright style, considerable dramatic insight, and a fine command of details. A *Daughter of Music*, by G. Colmore (an Englishwoman whose writings have caused considerable comment), calls for only such notice as must be given to a book wholly bad, but written with brisk vigor, and highly charged with the spirit of revolt against marriage and moral restriction of the sexes, which is but poorly offset by a show of retribution in the end. *Benefits Forgot*, by the late Walcott Balestier, is a Western story of very uneven texture, crudely yet picturesquely wrought, with many points of interest and a good deal of dramatic energy to its credit. *Under the Red Robe*, by Stanley J. Weyman, is a fine romance, delightfully clean, swift and fascinating, with just enough of historical coloring to give it the force of reality. Indeed, there is a securer feeling of substantial reality under one's feet, so to speak, while reading this story than can be had during the perusal of *A Traveler from Altruria*, by Mr. Howells the realist. This latest story from the author of "Their Wedding Journey" is not a novel in the ordinary sense, but it doubtless embodies a large part of what Mr. Howells is coming to think a novel ought to be. In a most charming style and with characteristic humor we here have an exhibition of what would become of government and society should political and domestic economies ever pass under the control of socialists and realistic novelists. And so we pass to *Trilby*, by George Du Maurier, a story as preposterously heterogeneous in its make up as it is unquestionably engaging in quality. Cut out the blot on the heroine's fame, a blot quite unnecessary to the story, and *Trilby* will be almost faultless as a mere careless, gossipy history of what happened to a coterie of rollicking artists in the Latin Quarter of Paris. If an American had written it there would have been no noise over it. In England the book has not received very great attention as

compared with the reception given it in our country. *A Mild Barbarian*, by Edgar Fawcett, should have a place here. The author is one of our best novelists in the lighter field, always picturesque, dramatic and brilliant. His latest work is one of his best. *The Greater Glory*, by Maarten Maartens, is one of the notable stories by a Dutch writer, distinguished and original, who has within a few years past attracted wide attention. *Cœur d'Alene*, by Mary Hallock Foote, is one of those artistic and vividly dramatic Western romances for which we look when Mrs. Foote begins to write. It is a graphic story of mining troubles during the recent labor revolts. *Lourdes*, by Emile Zola, has all the strength and many of the faults of the great Frenchman's style and methods. It is a composite picture on a vast canvas crowded with details. The annual pilgrimage to the waters with the hosts of zealots and their contrasting miseries, and the pathetic delusions and ironies of a belated religious superstition are used with tremendous effect; but there is nothing satisfying or elevating in the novel. *Sweet Bells Out of Tune*, by Mrs. Burton Harrison, affects the seasoned novel-reader but slightly and not favorably. If it is true to any phase of American life it is a very restricted and unnatural one, where the worst European morality prevails in a sickly, exotic way. Unquestionally bright and emphatically feminine, Mrs. Harrison's style is attractive, and her novels, without being in the least original or strong, are catchy. They are ephemera shining on momentary wings. *The Green Carnation*, an anonymous story by an English writer, may be labeled the best light satire of the year. It is nothing great, but it is bitterly brilliant and atrociously sharp. The author has a diction made up of words that fret one another and get hot with harmless malice. *Fin de siècle* art, literature and life are handled with their own gloves and punctured with their own needles. *No Enemy (But Himself)*, by Elbert Hubbard, comes near being a thoroughly good tramp-story. It begins excellently and holds well for two-thirds of its flow, then it shifts and weakens and finally flattens itself into bastard tragedy. It is, however, a notably fresh and readable book.

The Honorable Peter Sterling, by Paul Leicester Ford, may be too slow in movement, but it is full of life. It is a political and sociological study of New York, the conditions and incidents being presented with realistic force, and the dramatic interest never flags. Without being dry or too minute, the picture of ward politics is severely true. Both sides, the good and the evil, are presented faithfully, and upon the whole the novel is of unusual power. The author keeps himself well in the background and lets his men and women do and say for themselves; but from beginning to end the book exhales a vigorous, wholesome and hopeful spirit which is very charming. The hero is a strong character drawn, or rather projected, with exceeding lifelikeness, and sustained with a steady hand. Indeed, it is long since we have read a better novel or one more thoroughly and naturally American. If it is not the "Great American Novel," of which we have always heard talk, it certainly is a broad, strong, well imagined and amply developed story of American life, imbued with a sound and wholesome spirit and wrought out with striking originality of treatment. *The Birth of a Soul*, by Mrs. A. Phillips, will be found interesting and even fascinating. It is not so much a deep psychological study as its title indicates: still human nature is searched with a novel light, and in the outcome the story leaves a very sharp impression. The play is between religious prejudice, the love of money and the deepest human passion, and it is worked out very cleverly, albeit the style is unsteady and the movement not uniformly well-sustained. *The Lilac Sun-Bonnet*, by S. R. Crockett, fills the measure of good story-telling without reaching any great hight of originality or profound depth of interest. It is simply a good, well-written and nicely rounded love story of Scotch life wherein some striking pictures of clerical experiences are set against a background of human nature fine and true, and some dramatic incidents and situations cleverly contrasted are rather too freely embossed with Scotch dialect. The core of the story holds a secret which delays love and threatens calamity, but in the end the lilac sunbonnet, or what is under it, prevails, and all is as it should be.
