

THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

LIBRARY OF THE EARLY NOVELISTS

By William Lyon Phelps

THOSE enterprising, indefatigable, catholic publishers and importers, E. P. Dutton and Company, not content with issuing many new books by known and unknown writers, have launched in America three series, by which some almost inaccessible classics of past time are made available for the student or reader. I refer to "The Bodley Head Quartos", an exceedingly valuable collection of reprints of Elizabethan booklets and pamphlets; "The Broadway Translations", containing works like the Greek Anthology and the "Gesta Romanorum"; and "The Library of Early Novelists", where at all events quantity is supplied at a reasonable price — "Early English Prose Romances", edited by Thoms, contains nearly a thousand pages, and is obtainable at \$3.50. The volumes are printed in readable type, are handsomely bound, and with the exception of the tome of Thoms, pleasantly light in weight.

Some of those that have already appeared are "The Monk" (1795); Brooke's "The Fool of Quality" (1766), with Charles Kingsley's biographical preface; Sidney's "Arcadia" (1590); Johnstone's "Adventures of a Guinea" (1760); Defoe's "Moll Flanders" and "Roxana" in one volume; all of the above edited by E. A. Baker. Then there are "The Heptameron", translated by Arthur Machen; Smollett's translation of "Gil Blas", edited by W. M. Fullerton; Morley's edition of "Gulliver's Travels", containing

also the account of Cyrano de Bergerac — how little Morley dreamed of what that name would soon signify!

In looking over these reprints, one is forced to the inevitable conclusion that in the long run public taste is accurate. The most easily accessible of all these works is "Gulliver's Travels", and why? Because it is by far the greatest. It is indeed one of the supreme masterpieces of the world's literature, supreme from any point of view you choose to take. Among all the satires directed against life and the human race, this is the most terrible; paradoxically, as a story for little children, it is the most charming; it is a model of prose style, wherein language and idea, execution and conception, are not only harmonious, they are identical. It seems to me that even the most secret meditations of Swift must have taken instinctively a perfect literary form. As a work of imagination, "Gulliver's Travels" is flawless, the characters living people, and the drawings in the first two books exactly according to scale. Nor, until human nature changes, will this book cease to be pertinent. Incidentally, the prophecy of the two satellites of Mars, of particular interest in 1924, and first discovered in 1877, is one of the uncanniest things in literature.

In spite of the accessibility of this work, there are three reasons for buying this particular edition. First, it is an accurate reprint of the first edition of 1726: second, it has valuable edi-

torial matter contributed by Henry Morley and J. P. Gilson: third, it includes seven of the best of Swift's independent essays. Let us now begin to prepare for a world wide celebration in 1926 of the two hundredth anniversary. I am as certain as I am of anything that there will also be a celebration of its two thousandth birthday.

Swift spoke his mind, and used plain words; but nobody ever read "Gulliver's Travels" except for legitimate reasons. This cannot be said of some of these other reprints, which, however much hypocritical cant may be uttered concerning their art and beauty, owe their circulation today chiefly to their pornography; if it were not for that element, they would be covered with dust. For the truth is that most of them are intolerably, insufferably dull, and the majority of their readers are drawn to them even as Peeping Toms go to burlesques and revues, where they can peep legally at \$3.30 a peep. Time was, too, and not so long ago, when readers of this class were compelled to go to the classics, old, "standard" works; but now many contemporary writers are competing to supply this particular demand.

Sidney's "Arcadia" is a lovely, flowery old romance, which while it cannot possibly be called exciting, has a certain momentum that carries the reader along. The best thing about it was said by the late Barrett Wendell: you always want to find out what happens next, though you invariably forget what happened last. Furthermore, there is a quaintness in the antithetical quality of the style, which is perennially amusing, thus:

The messenger made speed, and found Argalus at a castle of his own, sitting in a parlour with the fair Parthenia, he reading in a book the stories of Hercules, she by him, as to hear him read: but while his eyes looked on the book, she looked on his eyes, and some-

times staying him with some pretty question, not so much to be resolved of the doubt, as to give him occasion to look upon her: a happy couple, he joying in her, she joying in herself, but in herself, because she enjoyed him: both increased their riches by giving to each other; each making one life double, because they made a double life one; where desire never wanted satisfaction, nor satisfaction ever bred satiety; he ruling, because she would obey, or rather because she would obey, he therein ruling.

The chief fact about Sir Philip Sidney; he was infinitely greater than anything he wrote. His personality was so radiant that even today he is a living force, a vital influence. Compared to such sunshine as "David Copperfield", the "Arcadia" is like moonlight; like a dead moon, it gleams only by reflected light.

How totally different is the case of Daniel Defoe! Defoe proves that it is possible to be a first rate literary genius without having any personality at all. An enormously voluminous writer, he is more elusive than Shakespeare. It is impossible to tell whether his continual moralizings are sincere or satirical, or what his actual point of view was on any subject. My guess is that in the ranks of literature he resembles the old professional soldier of fortune, who took no interest in any "cause", but was devoted to his trade. In other words, Defoe was a professional hack writer elevated to immortality by the possession of genius. It was as essential for him to scribble as to breathe. His works would in every respect be as interesting to read as if their authorship were unknown. In a sense, it is unknown; for while everybody delights in "Robinson Crusoe", no one knows anything whatever of the inner mind whence it came.

These volumes, like "The Bodley Head Quartos", will be of particular value in the numerous courses given in universities on the history of fiction.