THE GENERAL MANAGER'S STORY.*

Just as I was about to begin writing I heard a voice.

"Well, you've got a nerve to review a book like that," it said.

I looked up quickly, naturally feeling resentful. "Why shouldn't I review a book like this? Who are *you*, anyway, to tell me what I shall do and what I shan't do?"

I thought I detected a note of derision in the reply. "I am the Voice of the Great Reading Public."

"And I——"

But the Voice got ahead of me. "You represent 'the elect,'" it said sneeringly, "the special public, the dilettante. Now *The General Manager's Story* wasn't written for people like you. What you want is something literary, and there's nothing literary in that book on your desk."

"That's exactly what I was going to say," I cried triumphantly, referring of course to the last few words of his remark. "And that's what I like it for."

"You do?" the Voice said incredulously. And then it was impolite enough to add: "I don't believe you."

I ignored this remark. "And so perhaps I am quite as competent as you are to review the book."

"I don't review books," he replied decisively.

"Well, you do what is a good deal more effective. You express your opinion in most unmistakable terms."

"I can't say that about some of your critics," he remarked drily. Then curiosity seemed to get the better of his superior reserve, for he said coldly: "You remarked that you liked the book. Why do you like it?"

"In the first place, I like it because it's so human."

"Pish! What do you mean by that? I wish you critics would learn to speak English. If you don't look out, young man, in a few years you'll invent a language of your own and no one will

*The General Manager's Story. By Herbert Elliott Hamblen. The Macmillan Co. $1.50.

understand you, just as that freak, Henry James, has been doing lately."

I had some difficulty in restraining my resentment. But, in spite of myself, I was interested. "By saying that the book was human," I replied, trying to use the simplest and least hackneyed words, "I mean simply that it gave me the impression of being an honest, straightforward, and vivid record of a man's experience."

"That's better," the Voice said with satisfaction. "But do you consider that it is good just because it is a vivid record of a man's experience?"

"Yes," I replied, with a quiet consciousness of being right.

"I don't agree with you there." The Voice became decided. "In my opinion the experience of the ordinary man is deadly dull."

"But in Art," I ventured, forgetting myself for a moment. The Voice, however, got ahead of me again.

"There you are with your professional talk! You think that anything that's literary is good, just because it's literary. Now that's just where I differ from you. Take this man Hamblen's book, for instance. It's interesting because it describes in an interesting way a mighty interesting life—the life of a railroad man, without any gloss or cheap literary talk."

"But that's just what I meant to say," I exclaimed impatiently.

"Then why didn't you say it?" the Voice replied with equal irritation.

Just to let him know how much better bred I was, I assumed a tone of excruciating politeness. "I believe that we really agree about this book. It is plain that it's going to be popular and I like to find myself on the popular side."

"Oh, you do, do you?" the Voice said derisively.

"That is, sometimes," I replied, with a shuddering thought of several "popular" books of recent years. "And I am particularly interested in this book for several reasons. In the first place, I liked Hamblen's first book, *On Many Seas*. Remember it?"

"Well, I guess I do."

"Good, wasn't it? When I read it I said to myself: 'Here is a man who has acquired the narrative faculty by storing his mind with good material. So when he began to write, the material came out with a rush and the narrative told itself.'"

"Well, that's the way it impressed me," the Voice replied with a kind of grudging courtesy.

"And that's the best thing that can be said of any book," I went on. "After all, that's the impression that Art—the Literary Art—tries to make."

I waited for a response, but there was such a disgusted silence on the part of the Voice that I thought it best not to return to that point.

"Another curious thing," I continued, "when I had finished *On Many Seas* I said to myself——"

"You're always saying things to yourself, aren't you?" the Voice jocosely remarked, throwing me into momentary confusion and making me realise how unendurable life would be if there were no such thing as politeness.

"I said to myself," I resumed firmly, "'I wonder if this fellow Hamblen is going to be a one-book man. This book evidently gives the whole story of his life and he has probably exhausted himself in it. He'll either stop writing altogether or he'll try to make up stories and do the old-fashioned, conventional, what-other-men-have-done kind of thing that won't be worth a picayune.'"

"Well, you were mistaken about that," the Voice remarked with a chuckle.

"That's the most wonderful part of it, —I mean, what he has done since," I added, hastily, for fear of being misunderstood. "By abandoning the sea altogether in his second book and writing a book about railroad life just as true as his other volume, he has made an astonishing revelation."

"What's that?" the Voice asked suspiciously, as if afraid I was going to say something that would queer the book.

I was about to reply, "It has shown that Hamblen is an Artist," but I didn't dare. I had to cast about for a phrase. "Why, that he—that Hamblen has imagination—that he can describe not only what he has himself experienced, but can invent episodes that give readers the conviction that he has experienced them."

"Pshaw! I knew that long ago." The Voice had become very contemptuous. "Do you mean to say you swallowed all those yarns in that sea book of Hamblen's?"

"Swallowed them," I repeated, almost

losing my temper. "Of course I swallowed them. That's why——"

"Well, you critics haven't even as much sense as I thought you had. Why, I was on to 'em as soon as I read 'em."

"And yet you liked them?"

"Of course, I did. What difference did it make whether they were true or not?"

This time it was I who created the silence of disgust. I felt even more disgusted by the Voice's next remark, which had a triumphant tone. "Is it possible that you think any the less of *The General Manager's Story* because you know that a lot of the yarns in it are probably made up?"

"On the whole, I am inclined to think rather more of it," I replied, though I felt as if the Voice were tangling me up in some way. Then I determined to assert myself. "As I intimated it establishes Mr. Hamblen in my opinion as a literary artist."

"Oh, dear!" the Voice exclaimed plaintively, "I hope that won't hurt him."

"Still," I went on, growing bolder, "though I appreciate the power of the book, particularly in the descriptions which are wonderfully clear and vigorous, and the conversations, which are not only natural but convey the impression of character, I can't help feeling that the author hasn't been able to hold himself in check quite enough. His hero had too many startling adventures for one man, too many hair-breadth escapes."

"Oh, nonsense! Of course, the average railroad man wouldn't go through all that; but who cares for the average railroad man? I don't. That helps to make the book interesting, because there's so much adventure in it. Now that's just where you literary fellows——"

But here I refused to listen any longer. I was afraid of that most terrible of disasters to a critic—losing confidence in my own opinion.

John D. Barry.