

# THE UNPOPULAR EDITOR OF THE POPULAR MAGAZINE

By George Horace Lorimer

**T**HE editor of a popular magazine is unpopular with all critics except those who contribute or who hope to contribute to his magazine. Just as "size is sin" to the average small town Congressman who has never been able to make more than seventy five hundred a year, so is popularity sin to the critic who is unable to achieve it.

Recently a novelist has covered anew this main traveled road of criticism, though one senses under all his strictures a yearning for the fleshpots of the popular magazine. This latest critic, like all the others, builds a straw man that he labels the popular editor, and then proceeds to demolish him. He does not distinguish between the place of the popular magazine and that of the book. He concludes that literature in America is being debauched by lowbrow editors; that they are wilfully barring genius from the public; and inciting promising young novelists to happy endings and crimes of violence to their art.

The real truth is, of course, that all type looks alike to some men. But there is a wide difference, and there should be, between the fields of the newspaper, the review, the popular magazine, and the book. Many fine novels will not stand serialization — the lapse of a week or a month between chapters. Others are written for a specialized audience. But these will find their public and bring a financial

return to their authors if they have any element of vitality.

For every stone that the popular magazine rejects there is a place somewhere. There are magazines that make a cult of dulness; thin little refuges for pink and pallid verse; expensive and degenerate, as well as cheap and nasty, periodicals that cater to the prurient minded; not to mention those reviews and magazines whose Brahmins beat their breasts and proclaim their literary and artistic quality. If among all these a man fails to get printed and if, after being printed, he fails to secure the recognition that every writer craves, it must be that his work is lacking in some vital quality.

In a book, the author accepts full responsibility for what he says; in a magazine his editor shares it with him. The book is bought or left on the stalls on the strength of printed or oral criticism. The magazine goes to all classes, ages, and conditions. The editor must be their reviewer.

However, the inference that the popular magazine does not want good workmanship; that its editor asks his contributors to write down; and that he craves nothing but mush and happy endings will not stand up under impartial investigation. Those who complain most loudly about the popular magazines are, on the whole, kept out not because their work is so good, but because it is so bad; because, though

they can tear a novel to pieces in ten minutes, they cannot write one in ten years. Almost every American novelist of standing contributes to the popular magazines and, in my experience, contributes what he wants to write. And almost every writer does the best that is in him at the time.

I have learned during the twenty five years that I have been editing "The Saturday Evening Post" to have confidence in the good sense, good judgment, and good taste of our popular audience. It is true that many of them like an occasional story dealing with American business. But why not? If literature has any relation to life, the American writer cannot pass it by. In "Babbitt", Mr. Lewis held up to ridicule one type of business man. But there are quite as many Babbitts among the critics, the writers, the lawyers, and the professors as there are among the Rotarians.

The other type of business man, who grades much higher in intelligence than his critics, is not quite so easy to know and to write about as Babbitt, so we

have yet to read a great American novel about him.

Our popular reader is not, as his critics infer, deceived by "big names" on little stories, nor slow to withhold his appreciation of a good story by an unknown writer. We find that in the end his judgments are usually endorsed by book publishers and sound critics. True, he does not care for pornographic writing, nor the novel of perversion, but I am lowbrow enough to be in hearty agreement with him.

Some years ago I was visited by a dull, prosy member of a dull, prosy group of pseudo-intellectuals. After a few minutes of condescending conversation in the jargon of his type, he concluded:

"I have decided that I should like to write for 'The Saturday Evening Post'. I have seen many thoughtful people reading it lately." And as I gave him a firm, goodbye handshake, I said to myself, knowing just what he meant by "thoughtful" people:

"We must look into this and correct it."