

From the days of long-sleeved aprons we have loved our storybooks. Then it was the ones with large, colored pictures that pleased us most. We wanted the Three Bears pictured vividly with immense teeth and shaggy coats; we wanted to see Red Ridinghood walking along engaged in a confidential conversation with a very large wolf. — Now we do not care so much for the pictures. We have grown enough so that we want a good, well written story, and will accept nothing else, though the illustrations may be the finest which can be designed for a critical public.

While we have more demand for good fiction than ever before, it is certainly true that we have every means by which to supply it. The poet, inspired by the Muses, sings his songs of life and love and home; we have bequeathed to us the romance told by the man of old, giving to us astonishing information regarding the days of knights, fair ladies and wild beasts; but better than all, in the novel, that outgrowth of the years, we have our most profitable and most entertaining form of fiction.

It is usually the case that unless we are studiously inclined we choose fiction for recreation, rather than to try to amuse ourselves with any other branch of literature. We read history to study it; we spend time on biography in order that historical characters may become more real to us; we peruse travels to increase our knowledge of the world around us;



but fiction, — that we save for some quiet hour when we are tired and want to rest, or are glad to have to speed the moments as we wait for the train. At such times a good novel will help us most.

The novel has come to be so largely a part of our amusement that we do not often think of it as a growth, such as everything good in our civilization has been. But when we take up an old novel it is at once plain to us that there has been development. First is the poorer style, the less expanded thought, and a less natural representation of life. Then these thoughts used as a basis are slowly added to by minds of great men. So it is that there appears so great a difference of style between Richardson and Dickens, Thackeray or Howells.

The novel is said to have been earliest fore-shadowed in the Greek romances of the early part of the Christian era. Such romances which then won the applause of the multitudes have been compared to a small kernel, surrounded by interminable wrappings, — the kernel representing the plot, hidden from sight by interminable adventures, which were introduced in all possible and impossible places through the story.

The first real English novels were the work of Richardson and of Fielding, the two being named



together as contemporaries. But the work of each was very easily distinguished one from the other.

The first novel appeared in the form of letters. Richardson's style in writing letters was unusually graphic, so he gave to both hero and heroine a confidante, who was written to upon every occasion and in a most voluminous style. It was Richardson who depicted the first womanly character, and even yet critics point to the figure of "Clarissa" as being the most lifelike woman who has ever grown from a writer's pen. But in spite of the remarkable delineations of character, these first novels have lost their popularity, and now live only in the minds of critics and of students. People in general no longer read Richardson. Though his stories contain so much that is good, it is told in a manner too tedious for the modern reader, who wants to skim over a novel in much the same way that he eats his dinner. Besides, and more than this, the covers of these earlier stories hold between them very much that we none of us care to read. — So it is that they are living, yet dead to the most of us.

The novel did not rest from this time forth; in fact, even in the midst of his writing Fielding began to be recognized as an author, and so soon as



this we can observe a beginning of growth. Fielding's style is much more easy and natural, and his men and women seem to move about unconscious of assistance from their creator. He was not only a better writer, but he knew men better. He discarded the more formal, letter writing style and wrote what has been called "breezy" paragraphs and chapters. If there had been for years no other development than this, it would be well worth noting carefully; for whether or not we are able to appreciate a thought, fully, must always depend largely upon the manner in which it is presented.

In 1766 "The Vicar of Wakefield" appeared, and ever since has been esteemed one of the most notable of English Classics. In some respects this seems a very peculiar book, full of impossibilities and improbabilities, and yet it is pervaded by the happy, homely, charitable spirit of Dr. Primrose. Not only is the story lifelike, and the characters those of every day men and women, as in the foregoing, but we have to add that it is all simple and pure, in a marked degree differing from anything else which had appeared. "The Vicar of Wakefield" lives only the more strongly in the bright sunlight.

Next in the process of evolution comes the



historical novel. Such a thing as dressing the heroes or the common people of a historical period in the garments of their own time, and carrying us back to them in imagination as we entered into their lives, — such a thing had never been dreamed of until Sir Walter Scott began to write novels.

The man who wrote Historical novels not only must know human nature well but he must also have a vast amount of book knowledge to enable him to clothe incidents long past with a reality which otherwise could not be produced. That Scott was eminently able to do this has never been doubted. He leaves in *Ivanhoe*, *Kenilworth* and many other of his novels, a most perfect and accurate description of men and manners; and through it all he sprinkles the most exquisite bits of description ever written. Added to all this we find another improvement. Prior to this one or two characters have received all the attention of the writer, — every circumstance has been bent to add to the already superfluous graces of the lovely heroine, or to bring into stronger relief the dreadful treachery of the villain. Now care is taken with the least important as well. Not only do we see a King as we read of one, but the clown comes to us, too, with his individuality even



more strongly marked.

This is a great achievement—this bringing forward to the nineteenth century the men who have long been consigned to dust, clothing them in their own garments and giving them their own speech. The one character of Rebecca would make us glad for Scott's pen.

Later there have been several epochs of growth. George Eliot's work was new because of the deep insight into character which it revealed. She especially labors to show the struggle of human minds in their decision whether to please self or live for others. Each action is minutely accounted for; and so we come to comprehend the workings of the worst character, and to sympathize, when we look at the map of his mind spread before us. And while one often turns away unsatisfied, disappointed, feeling unreconciled to the drowning of Tom and Maggie, perhaps, still we can see that such an ending was the only one that could give unity,—the only way the characters could have been true to their innermost souls, with which we are so intimately acquainted.

And Dickens,—he comes with his delightful humor, picturing in their perfection such characters as Sam Weller and Fanny Braddles. He was original in style and in conception of life.



While he shows us bad as well as good, it is always a wholesome hatred of the bad which impresses us, while we admire more than ever what is true and good in the world. In displaying vice, by poetry and vulgarity he has accomplished more than one good end, and has set on foot more than one reform.

Then Thackeray, — perhaps the greatest of all. This is a style peculiarly winning and most notably all his own. We laugh even when he makes no effort to be funny, for a sense of humor seems to pervade the page on which he writes. Again, we are saddened, with as little apparent effort on his part. He "gossips about life." He possesses wonderful powers of description. At one touch of wonderful skill in his great description of Waterloo he brings us back to the thread of the story. We can see the battle; at the same time we are made to feel the effect upon the waiting people as we read. This is the greatest test of the writer. — — — Thackeray's plots were strong; his humor humorous; his whole thought strong and pure; and through it all runs the irresistible humor of the man behind it.

Howells of our own day completes the



development of the novel as far as it has come.

His power is as a realistic writer, and one who more than all allows characters to grow and develop so naturally that it would seem a natural evolution, rather than a preconceived plan of the author. In this lies his greatest power.

As we have seen the novel in a few of its phases, and in a little of its advancement. This only outlines a study as interesting as human evolution. And no doubt the novel will continue to develop until the work of the twentieth century may as far exceed that of the nineteenth as *Thackeray* does *Richardson* or as *Dickens*, *Fielding*.

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