From Richardson to Howells

From the days of long-sleeved aprons we have loved our storybooks. Then it was the one with large colored pictures that pleased us most. We wanted the Three Bears pictures 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 Muse, sings his songs of life and love and home; we have frequented 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 offspring 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 pursue 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 spend 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 other thoughts, once as basic as the tree, are slowly added to by minds of great men. As 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 foreshadowed by the Greek romances of the early part of the Christian era. Such romances which then wore the appearance 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 this 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 "Claire" 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.——As 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 this writing Fielding began to be recognized as an author, and as soon as
this we can observe as beginning of growth. Fielding's style is much more easy and natural, and his men and women seem to move about unconsciously of assistance from their creator. He was not only a better writer, but he knew men better. He discarded the more formal, better written style and wrote what has been called "hurly" 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, much 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 familiar book, full of impossibilities and improbabilities, and yet it is pervaded by the happy, homely, charitable spirit of Mr. Palim-mer. Not only is the story lifelike, and the characters shrewd 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 enter 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 books 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 us Dunbar, 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 atten-
tion of the writer,—every circumstance has been
fused to add to the already superfluous grace of
the lovely heroine, or to bring into stronger relief
the dreadful beauty 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 their own garms and giving them their own speech. The one character of Rebecc would make us glad for death's few.

Later there have been several epochs of quantity. George Eliot's work was new because of the deep insight into character which is 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 souls, 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 unused to the drearyoning 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 inward souls, with which we are so intimately acquainted.

And Dickens, -- he comes with his delightful humor, picturing in their purest forms such characters as Sam Weller and Tommy Traddles. 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 us free from one reproof.

Then Thackeray, perhaps the greatest of all.
His is a style peculiarly winning and real
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 "goes into 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
deal of the writer. — Thackeray's plots
were strong; his humor humorous; his whole
thought strong and firm; and through it all
runs the irresistible humor of the man
behind it.

Harrell's 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 as 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 contin-
ue to develop until the work of the twentieth
century may as far exceed that of the
nineteenth as Dickens does Richardson as
well as Fielding.

Adieu Vail.