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THE SENSATION NOVEL.

IT is scarcely necessary to remark that the Sensation Novel is extremely popular at the present day. I have therefore chosen it for the heading of this paper, because to a certain extent it may be taken as a type of the times. We have, indeed, besides plenty of other kinds of fiction, tales of fashionable life, philosophical novels, and novels with a *purpose*, political or artistic :—but all these fall far short of the general popularity enjoyed by the real wholesale, thoroughgoing, Sensation Story. And yet we are told that we live in dull times—that the days of romance, like the golden age, or the days of chivalry, are past away, never to return. But surely this cannot be true of the age which has witnessed such scenes as the Commune in Paris, or the French and German war. Because soldiers do not now go to battle clad in armour, with sword and battle-axe, singing the praises of their own mighty deeds like Tennyson's heroes in the Idyls of the King, we are apt to consider that it is all a mere matter of business—that the new inventions in fire-arms leave no room for individual daring—and that war now, instead of being a fit theme to awaken the fire of the poet, or kindle the genius of the minstrel, is a matter more deserving the attention of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the members of the Peace Society.

Those were the days of romance, say some, when every road had its band of highwaymen—when Dick Turpin was causing more excitement by his daring deeds between London and York than could be got up by all the rest of the world put together. Or, to look back a few years before this to the time when coaches had no outside places at all; when the starting of a vehicle called the *Flying Coach*, and which undertook to do the whole journey between London and Oxford in one day, was looked upon as a perfect wonder. Macaulay has described the startling experiment. The Vice-Chancellor, by notice affixed to all public places, prescribed the hour and place of departure. At six in the morning the carriage began to move from before the ancient front of All Souls' College, and at seven in the evening the adventurous gentlemen, who had been the first to run the risk, were safely deposited at their inn in London. Yes, those were the days for adventures; when the traveller who wished to move expeditiously and was not encumbered with much baggage, performed a long journey on horseback; when the mounted highwayman, a character now only known to us from books, was a living fact, who haunted all the waste tracks which lay on the great routes near London; when the Cambridge scholars trembled as they approached Epping Forest, even in broad daylight.

We never now hear of such adventures as happened when Charles

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the Second was king. How Claude Duval, the French page of the Duke of Richmond, took to the road, became captain of a formidable gang, and had the honour to be named first in a royal proclamation against notorious offenders; how, at the head of his troop, he stopped a lady's coach, in which there was a booty of four hundred pounds; how he took only one hundred, and suffered the fair owner to ransom the rest by dancing a coranto with him on the heath; how his vivacious gallantry stole away the hearts of all women; how his dexterity at sword and pistol made him the terror of men; how at length, in the year 1670, he was seized when overcome by wine; how dames of high rank visited him in prison, and with tears interceded for his life; how the king would have granted a pardon, but for the interference of Judge Morton, the terror of highwaymen, who threatened to resign his office unless the law was carried into full effect; and how, after execution, the corpse lay in state, with all the pomp of escutcheons, waxlights, black hangings, and mutes, till the same cruel judge who had intercepted the mercy of the crown sent officers to disturb the obsequies. No, it is quite true that we have nothing now quite equal to this picture, as drawn by Lord Macaulay; yet still there is quite as much sentiment, quite as much romance in England now as two hundred years ago. True, nobody now, not even the most dreamy young lady, would like to look forward to a life of honeysuckles and clematis in company with Damon and a crook. Yet the novels of the day prove that there is no diminution of the romantic force of the English nation. Heroes of the Claude Duval school are still in favour. We still meet with Paul Cliffords, and the eagerness with which an interesting mauvais sujet is run after to-day, proves that human nature is still the same, and likely so to continue.

The feminine influence that pervades it is a strongly characteristic feature of the literature of the time. Women are of much account in it, and women produce a large share of it. The great bales of fiction which are constantly manufactured owe their chief proportions and bulk to female talent and diligence; and, bearing in mind that this sort of reading forms a very considerable part of the amusement of young people at present, the amount of harm done by it is by no means insignificant.

In alluding, however, to modern female novelists, we should carefully distinguish between the ladies whose works are a pleasure to read and those who seem to take a delight in outraging morals and probability. It is generally when female novelists undertake to draw characters of the opposite sex that they most frequently fall into absurdity. The Guy Livingstone stamp of humanity is not the most pleasing even when well painted, but it becomes utterly unbearable when it is burlesqued. And yet, with the same ease with which a fashion is changed, and a coal-scuttle bonnet becomes by substitution

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a wisp of dead hair and a beetle, a new vista is opened: and, withdrawing from pictures of their own sex, the ladies began to present us with studies of ours. Taking up the Rev. Charles Kingsley's doctrine of muscles, and finding in the pages of some male writer the supposed correct style of conversation, mostly made up of slang and twaddle, the novel-reading public all at once became overrun with an army of monsters, quite unlike, it is to be hoped, to any creatures in heaven or earth. There are novels now in circulation that will certainly puzzle the future student of the Victorian era. Thackeray used to say an English author dare not now describe a man in the fashion that Fielding described Tom Jones, or Smollett drew Count Fathom.

Of late the ladies have been having it all their own way in the realms of fiction. There was a time when the chief characters in fiction were men, and when to find a female portrait was a rare exception. There was a time when such characters as we now commonly encounter would be looked upon as the wildest dreams of a distempered imagination. How colourless, for instance, are some of Sir Walter Scott's heroines, when compared with the men in whom he delights. Now-a-days all the more important characters seem to be women. Our novelists have suddenly discovered an unworked mine of wealth, and they give us jewels of women in many a casket. This is not to be wondered at when the writer herself belongs to the fair sex, but strange to say their masculine rivals follow in the same track. Nor do we find this tendency evident only in prose fiction. Look at Mr. Tennyson: a great poet is supposed to be the most perfect representative of his age; and the greater the poet, the more attention people pay to his opinions. Now the greater part of the Laureate's poetry may be described as a dream of fair women. For one man, he paints half a dozen women; and we remember the women better than the men. We remember the Princess and all her trials; we remember Dora, Lilian, Enid, Elaine, Vivien, Guinevere, and the Gardener's Daughter, and many more. How many men of the Laureate's drawing can we set against so splendid an array of feminine excellence?

But though the ladies have flourished and still are flourishing so successfully in this branch of literature, still we must venture to remind them that although they very nearly, yet they did not quite, found the school of the Sensation Novel. I think we must grant this honour to Horace Walpole, for this species of composition cannot be traced higher than the "Castle of Otranto." The following curious account of the origin and composition of this romance is given by the author himself, in a letter dated March 9th, 1769. "Shall I confess to you," he writes, "what was the origin of this romance? I waked one morning in the beginning of last June, from a dream, of which all I could recover was that I had thought myself in an ancient castle (a very natural dream for a head like mine, filled with gothic story), and that on

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the uppermost bannister of a great staircase I saw a gigantic hand in armour. In the evening I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate. The work grew in my hands, and I grew fond of it. In short I was so engrossed with my tale, which I completed in two months, that one evening I wrote from the time I had drank tea, about six o'clock, till half-an-hour after one in the morning, when my hand and fingers were so weary that I could not hold the pen to finish the sentence. You may laugh at my earnestness, but if I have amused you by retracing, with any fidelity, the manners of ancient days, I am content."

This, I fear, is rather a long quotation, but it is interesting as the description of the birth, as it were, of the grandfather of "sensation." In the "Castle of Otranto" we find quite a surfeit of all the elements of a sensation novel. Have we not skulls and skeletons, sliding panels, damp vaults, trap doors, and dismal rooms? Is there not a sword which requires a hundred men to lift it; a hero imprisoned in a helmet; to say nothing of groans: gothic windows through which no light can pierce (rather a common failing in gothic windows now) and passages leading no-where, *ad lib.?* Certainly, if the hearers are not all ears, at any rate the writer is all tale. Without any doubt the "Castle of Otranto" is the first sensation novel, and it was written by a man.

But next to him comes a woman, and the lady's name is Mrs. Radcliffe: and to her I must devote a few words. Nor is there any occasion to say anything about the writers of the day, since everyone is familiar with their works, with all their merits and defects. Like all other of her school, the first object which Mrs. Radcliffe sets before her to accomplish in her works is to raise powerful emotions of surprise, awe, and especially terror, by means and agents apparently supernatural. To effect this laudable end, which was pretty much the same as that aimed at by the ancient tragedians to stir up the passions of their hearers, she places her characters and transports her readers amid scenes which are calculated strongly to excite the mind, and predispose it for spectral illusions. She prepares her readers for the nightmare which is to follow, by taking them through a series of gothic castles, gothic abbeys, and subterranean passages, where banditti flourish and winds howl, just as one might prepare one's body for a sensation dream by taking a good supper of lobsters and champagne shortly before going to bed. That which separates the works of Mrs. Radcliffe chiefly from those by which they were preceded is, that in the "Castle of Otranto" and the "Old English Baron" the machinery is in fact supernatural; whereas the means and agents employed by Mrs. Radcliffe in the "Romance of the Forest," and the "Mysteries of Udolpho," and others, are in reality human, and such as can be, or at least are professed to be, explained by natural events. Many of my readers can doubtless recollect the feelings of disappointment which they felt on finding the mysterious object which

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has been carefully concealed behind a curtain throughout three volumes of the "Mysteries of Udolpho," turn out at the end of the fourth to be only a wax figure. Another characteristic of the style of this very talented woman is the great freedom with which she indulged in landscape painting. She has even gone so far in one of her books as to make the sun set twice the same evening. One is sometimes inclined to lament that she did not follow the example of Mr. Puff in the play: "I open with a clock striking to beget an awful attention in the audience—it is also a mark of the time, which is four o'clock in the morning, and it saves a description of the rising sun, and a great deal about gilding the eastern hemisphere." Yet though we may smile at these little oversights, still some of Mrs. Radcliffe's landscapes are eminently beautiful, reminding us as specimens of word painting of Mr. Ruskin, and our wonder is increased when we reflect, that though most of her scenes are laid in Italy or Sicily, she herself had never moved out of the narrow circle of an English ordinary humdrum life. She has also been honoured by Lord Byron—no mean judge on such a matter—by having her name immortalised in a line of "Childe Harold." Miss Austin, in one of her charming tales, has smiled good-naturedly at her sister novelist's love of the marvellous. She makes her heroine, on paying a visit to Northanger Abbey, expect to find all manner of wonders in the old house. Her attention is drawn to an old piece of furniture in her bedroom, and on looking into it she discovers in one of the drawers a bundle of papers, which she hopes to contain the revelation of some unfortunate prisoner; but alas! it only proves to be a collection of old washing bills.

As we are now in the very midst of sensation, it will not be going far out of the way to relate a sensation fact. Some time ago I met with the following startling story, which was told by the Archbishop of Bordeaux to the French Senate a few years since. A young priest was struck with a cataleptic fit in a crowded church on a holiday in the year 1826. He fell down apparently quite dead, with the words of prayer upon his lips. They carried him out, and after some hours began to make preparations for his interment. He could not see; but all the time he could hear; and the nature of what he heard was by no means agreeable. The doctor duly declared that he was dead: and, after various inquiries as to his age, birthplace, and other particulars, gave orders that the funeral should take place on the next day. The venerable bishop of the church where the young priest was in the habit of officiating came, and, standing at the foot of the couch on which lay the body, recited the "De profundis;" they next measured him for his shroud, and then, as night advanced, they left him in a state of inexpressible agony such as a living being in such a situation may perhaps imagine. At last there sounded a voice in his ear with whose loved accents he was familiar as a friend of his youth. The sound of

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that voice was miraculous, and urged him to make a superhuman effort. The young priest appeared next day in the choir, restored again to life as it were out of the very jaws of death.

It cannot be denied, I think, after what has been said, that the present is an age of sensation. It is at the same time an age of reading desks and writing desks: this implies that it is also an age of thought. But of late years critics have been so impressed with the craving which exists among us for sensation, that they cannot bring themselves to believe in the thoughtfulness of a people demanding fresh excitement. But it is shallow to pick out the frivolities of the day as its regnant chracteristics. Perhaps it may be the very thoughtfulness of the age which leads people to seek relaxation in what appears light and almost childish amusements. Thus, when even many of our novelists indulge us with reflections, theories, schemes for universal improvement, and a good deal more which might generally be left out with advantage, is it to be wondered at that we are in our moments of leisure compelled to seek refuge from thought in sensation, and so pass from one extreme to another?

There is a writer, before concluding, whose name must not be left altogether without mention even in a sketch as brief as the present. In Miss Bronte's "Jane Eyre" a chord was struck which has vibrated very widely ever since the publication of that remarkable work. There are scenes in it often of the most startling and absorbing interest. Nothing can appeal more strongly to the imagination of the reader than the description of the mad wife of Rochester; the secret of the barred rooms; his almost marriage with Jane, which would have been bigamy; the fire, and that tremendous scene where the maniac is beheld with her long black hair streaming against the flames as she stood; where the husband ascends through the skylight in the roof, calling "Bertha." He approaches her; and then she yelled and gave a spring, and the next minute she lay smashed on the pavement. Though Rochester himself is not a pleasing character, still there is nothing in his conduct, even when most harsh and disagreeable, at all resembling the fierce and brutal bearing of some popular heroes of the present day. In the trials to which he is exposed from the terrible mad woman who is bound to him in the relation of wife, we may fairly draw some excuse for his restless and occasionally savage manner, and at his worst he never transgresses the boundary which separates the gentleman from the snob. It is indeed wonderful how a girl brought up in a remote country parsonage, seeing little of any sort of society, and having in consequence so few opportunities of observing character, should have succeeded in drawing a hero at once so complex in his nature and yet so true to life. Nor has she repeated herself in either of her subsequent works. "Shirley" and "Villette" belong to quite a different class of fiction from "Jane Eyre." Though both are

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excellent in their way, they do not rise to the same level of dramatic power which stamps the first effort of her genius.

What gives success to the novelist to-day is the same as brings audiences to the theatre—sensation. Of this we find traces everywhere, and often it is productive of much harm. There is more sympathy in the less exalted muse than in her graver sister. Comedy comes nearer home than Tragedy. No man expects to meet with Lears or Othellos in ordinary life, but at the corner of the next street he may find himself the hero of a situation such as comedy might prize. And so most of us prefer the mirthful actor, whether we read his doings in the pages of a novel, or smile at them from the stalls of a theatre. And so long as the mirth is harmless, perhaps this is the best. *Dulce est desipere in loco.* Nor do I think that I can conclude this paper better than by quoting a passage from a letter by G. P. R. James, a writer now perhaps too little remembered, in which he discloses his literary aims: —"My object has been to show," he says, "that fiction, without being dry and tedious, may be rendered serviceable to every noble principle; may be taught to convey every generous lesson; and, by interesting our good feelings, instead of our bad feelings, gain over imagination to the side of virtue, and, without crushing our passions, direct them aright."

E. B.

SONNET.

My love lies silent 'neath the darksome yew,
And I live on with beating heart and brain,
And feel my life may not be all in vain
Though he has bid me his last fond adieu.
I neither shall forget nor love again;
But time will draw away the spirit's pain,
As noon-tide glare dries up the morning dew,
When dawn's red tints melt in the zenith's blue.
The morn doth not return, nor doth the glow
Of early passion; but the hours pass by
In storm, it may be, or serenity:
And so my day of life must onward flow,
Till the eve come, and the dew fall once more,
And a new glory flood the western shore.

EMMA RHODES.

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