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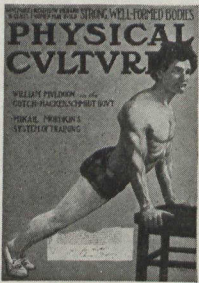
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Concerning Stories

(From The Argonaut.)

IT is said that every novelist in the English-speaking world has contributed at least one work of fiction to this year's list, and the list itself is cited in confirmation. Never before was there such prodigious activity among the fiction makers. We must suppose either that the majority of the authors are willing to write for the smallest remuneration or that the novel-reading public is reading more than it ever did before. Perhaps the truth lies half way between the two theories.

Only the most placable of critics can observe the results without pessimism. On the one hand we have the dead levels of mediocrity. On the other hand are the lower levels of nastiness, prurience, and the evil brood that may be classed under the name of problem novels. There are, of course, some few notable and shining stories that stand out like oases in the desert, but they may be counted almost upon the fingers of one hand. Also there are some few honest stories of romantic adventure well and truthfully told, and some of the lesser novels, while without a ray of genius, are yet based upon wholesome and universal sentiment and are good to read. The sociologist of the future will wander wonderingly through the fiction of to-day and he may mercifully decide that we could not have been quite so bad as we seemed.

But on the whole the short story is a greater offender than the novel, and unfortunately the short story is still in the heyday of its popularity. To a great extent the short story in its present form is an expression of the weariness of the day that is incapable of the continuity of attention demanded even by the weakest novel. But it is more than this. It is an expression also of the profligacy of the day that demands the arousing of some evil animal passion as a counter irritant to greed and cupidity. Its animating theory is the repudiation of restraint and the glorification of gratified impulse. It assumes that the attainment of pleasure, and usually of a vicious and passionate pleasure, is the aim of life and the justification of every evil course. The short story might easily have become one of the most powerful agencies for good that the human mind has ever produced. It has been made a vehicle for general debauchery. Its writers no longer try to express themselves. Their only ambition is to express and to aggravate the lusts of the majority.

To see how true this is we have but to glance at some of our most popular weeklies and monthlies. During the last few years their progress has been an undeviating descent into hell. Their dominant note has become that of animal passion.

The excuses that are made are almost too transparent for refutation. Literary art, we are told, must deal with the facts of life. That is true enough. It is true of all art. But are we then to suppose that the facts of life chosen by the literary artist must always be the unclean and the ugly facts of life. Are we to assume that life is represented by the divorce courts, by marital infidelities, by unbridled lusts, by naked and unashamed passions, and by the miseries that follow them. What should we think of the picture gallery that contained nothing but picture of sewers, drains, gutters, and garbage cans? All these things may have their place in art, but they are not art in themselves unless they are used to emphasize a contrast. But there is no contrast in the indecency of modern fiction. It is indecent for the sake of being indecent.

There is another class of short story that perhaps is still more pernicious because it lacks even the wretched parody of romance and sentiment that is used to gild the problem novel. It glorifies dishonesty instead of passion, and its hero is a thief instead of a rake. To "get rich quick" is the one ideal of these stories, and to get rich not by adding to the wealth of the nation, but by processes best described as swindling within the law.

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