

"He would be an exceedingly funny fellow if he did," I replied.

"No," he continued, "there are no Dickenss, no Thackerays just now—if there are, they don't write. Why don't some of you newspaper fellows, who always have your hand in, give us a new *David Copperfield*, or a new *Vanity Fair*?"

"I intend to some day," I told him, "but just now I really haven't the time. You know there is no newspaper man in the world, who isn't just about to write a novel, or thinking seriously of it, or picking out the characters for one; but we are always so busy. Besides there is no money in it, and time is money in Printing House Square. As long as the publishers can have a good English novel for the asking they can hardly be expected to pay much for an American one."

"That is true, to a certain extent," he replied, "but it applies only to works of an inferior sort. If an American will write a book that is entitled to rank with the two I have just named, he will not have any difficulty in getting his own price for it. You take a new *Copperfield* or a new *Pickwick* down to Harper's, or any of the other big publishers, and see how long they will hesitate to buy it. They cannot 'borrow' such things from England, because England is not producing any. As long as it is a question between taking wishy-washy English novels for nothing, and buying wishy-washy American ones for a price, of course they will continue to take the English ones. It is only a choice between two evils, both for the publisher and for the reader."

"My dear sir," I interrupted, "you cannot mean to classify all the current novels under the heading wishy-washy?"

"That term is a little ambiguous, perhaps, but still it describes pretty well what I think of them. Our novel writers, just now, are too infernally æsthetic (excuse the emphatic way I put it). They dig so deep into motives, feelings, and dispositions that they get out of the scope of fiction entirely. The æsthetic in art has spread into literature, and a bad mess it makes for us poor readers of fiction. I was very much amused the other day by somebody's description of George Eliot. 'Other writers,' this somebody said, 'describe bodies: George Eliot painted souls.' Precisely, and there are too many soul painters among our present novelists to my way of thinking."

"You do not object to character painting in a work of fiction?" I asked.

"Certainly not," he replied; "provided it is well done, and the characters themselves are worth painting. But I do not think that most of the characters in our new novels are worth the paint. If a character is a strong one, and well drawn, it is the best part of a novel. But a description of some every-day person, of his thoughts and desires, his mannerisms and eccentricities, be it ever so well done, is very stupid reading. I find more amusement just now in reading the opinions of some of our modern novelists about the great novelists of the past than in anything else they write. It is always amusing to see a slight young fellow flare up at a giant, and try to thrash him. We had an opinion from one of them not long ago, perhaps you remember, that the writings of Dickens would not be tolerated in this age. Well, perhaps not; it is barely possible that we have deteriorated to such an extent that we could not appreciate him. But there was something extremely funny about that, considering what people do tolerate in the pages of the modern novel."

Long before this we had left the ferryboat and taken our places in the train—that part of the train given up to smokers, emigrants and inebriates. My friend took a magazine from his overcoat pocket.

"Let me read you," said he, "(it is only a few lines,) what one of our modern novelists has been writing about Dickens. He is talking about Christmas literature, and it is almost a wonder that he will condescend to mention Dickens in connection with that subject: 'The might of that great talent,' he says, 'no one can gainsay, though in the light of the truer work which has since been done his literary principles seem almost as grotesque as his theories of political economy.' Now, if a man wants to read for amusement, where can he find anything more amusing than this? 'In the light of the truer work which has since been done!' Why, I have a Texas donkey out in my barn that would smile from the tip of one ear to the point of the other if I could

translate that sentence to him. But let me read you a little more of it: 'Very rough magic, as it now seems, he used in working his miracle, but there is no doubt about his working it. * * * The pathos appears false and strained, the humour largely horse play, the character theatrical, the joviality pumped, the psychology commonplace, the sociology alone funny.' His types of humanity 'were as strange as beasts and birds talking.' His ethical intention told for manhood and fraternity and tolerance, and when this intention disappeared from the better holiday literature that literature was sensibly the poorer for the loss.' 'It imbued subordinate effort and inspired his myriad imitators throughout the English-scribbling world, especially upon its remoter borders, so that all holiday fiction, which was once set to the tunes of the *Carol* and the *Chimes*, still grinds no other through the innumerable pipes of the humbler newspapers and magazines, though these airs are no longer heard in the politer literary centres.' Could a man ask for anything more amusing than that?"

"You are making that up as you go along," I said; "you do not mean to say seriously that you have been reading from the magazine you have in your hand?"

"Every word of it, my dear boy," he answered. "Every word is here just as I read it." And he showed it to me. "Do you think an ordinary person like myself would be using such high-flown words as 'commonplace psychology,' 'sociology,' and 'ethical intention'?" It is all here, every word, from the 'light of the truer work which has since been done,' straight down to the airs that 'are no longer heard in the politer literary centres.'"

"Then from your own standpoint," I told him, "I think you ought to be thoroughly satisfied, for I do not know where you could find any more amusing reading than that."

"These few lines I have read you," he went on, "illustrate better than anything I could say what I consider the objectionable features of the modern novel and novelist. When I go home tired and get settled in front of the fire I don't care about being bothered with commonplace psychology, sociology, nor ethical intention. Ethical intention be hanged. What I want is a good story, to carry me out of New York and New Jersey for a while, and make me laugh, and perhaps make the children shed a few tears. And when I read to the youngsters to-night what I have just read to you I think there will be an outburst of indignation. Boz is too intimate a friend of my little ones, has sat with them too often around the fireside of a winter's night, for them to sit quietly and hear him abused. And I feel as warmly towards him as they do, for that matter."

"That is the true test, after all," I said. "If I could write a few books that would take such a hold upon the hearts of their readers as would make them indignant to hear me abused I should be willing to be thumped at forever by all the critics in the world."

"Hold upon the hearts!" he exclaimed. "Why, Drysdale, is there a household in all this land, a household, at least, where the people can read and write, where, if there should be a knock upon the door this stormy winter's night, and a cold, wet traveller should introduce himself by saying: 'I am the father of Little Nell and Agnes Wickfield; I am the friend of Mark Tapley, of Wilkins Micawber, of little David Copperfield, of Captain Cuttle, of Oliver Twist, of Betsey Trotwood, of Nicholas Nickleby, of poor Smike; I am the creator of the Artful Dodger, of Sampson Brass, of Barkis, who was willin', of Alfred Jingle, of Pecksniff, of Steerforth; I am the destroyer of Fagin, of Uriah Heep, of Quilp and of Squeers—is there a household, I ask you, where Charles Dickens would not be seized in loving arms and drawn in bodily and warmed at the fire, and feasted at the table and de-voured with the sparkling eyes of the children, and worried with the fond kindness of their parents?—and all this notwithstanding 'the truer work which has since been done?'"

"I think," I replied, "that it would be hard to find a household where Dickens would not be welcomed very much as you describe."

"But do you know," he asked me again, "of any of our modern writers—I mean writers now living—who have such a hold upon the hearts of their readers?"