

The Auction Room of Letters

By Arthur Waugh

“THE present position of the literary man in England is very much that of an auctioneer. He offers his goods for sale; other people, middlemen, come and bid for them, and the prize goes to the highest bidder.” I have not the exact words by me as I write; nor, in a case of this sort, do exact words matter very greatly. It is at least true that to this effect, and essentially with this intention, a leading man of letters has within the last month delivered himself upon the art which he espouses, that he asks us to accept, as an illustration or parallelism, this comparison of his calling with the huckstering of the auctioneer, and that such a pronouncement appears, if one may conjecture assent from a harmonious silence, to be received without disapproval by a large number of his fellow-artists.

Now in the *obiter dicta* of distinguished men there is often more food for reflection than is evident at first sight, and this playful—or was it perhaps a reproachful?—metaphor of auctioneer and public, carries a good deal more of import on its back than “many such like as’es of great charge,” which are bruited abroad into fame from day to day. It contains in little the whole story of the present position of authorship; it reflects the past, it forebodes the future, and it adorns its tale by pointing a strenuous moral

moral which these few pages will do their best to indicate. For the situation, which one is first inclined to laugh away as ridiculous, has its serious side as well, and it is a question whether the time has not arrived when we should take the literary auctioneer at his own valuation, and write him off the books.

The first thing that strikes one, I suppose, is the consideration of how immensely things have changed in the last few years to make such utterance as that which opens this paper possible. Except for a few dingy and detached houses here and there, houses which seem to break out in the centre of our trim red-brick lines of villadom—like ghosts to trouble joy—except for these (and they are few), Grub Street is no more. We all remember, or our fathers at least have declared unto us, the old-world vision of the publisher. He was a Colossus, set up at the receipt of custom, under whose huge legs the wretched authors, petty men, peeped about, striving to rivet his attention with humble tributes of carefully copied manuscript. For such as he regarded there remained hard terms and an invidious reputation. To-day all this is changed. It is now the author (have we not received it on his own authority?) who mounts into the rostrum, hammer in hand, and having at his side a bundle of type-writing, distributes to the struggling middlemen a printed synopsis of the material on offer, and proceeds to start the bidding with a wholesome reserve price. Then the publishers continue one against the other, pitting royalty against royalty, advance against advance, till down comes the hammer and off go the copy and the profits. Nor, mark you, is the auctioneer contented yet; the open market, he says, is still not open enough for his desires. It seems that these men of business do not know the secrets of their own beggarly trade (have we not this, too, on the authority of the author?). They are the victims of a miserable niggardliness which forbids them to bid to the value of the material

material. Soon the auctioneer will do without them. He will out into the square, with twenty thousand copies of his novel in bales behind him, and will sell them to the surging public himself, like a cheap-jack on bank holiday. Then, even if he tires in the mid-summer heat, and is so sadly overwrought at night that his hand declines the pen, he will still have had his reward, he will have sold himself without favour, and the family stocking will gape with shekels. Faugh! "an ounce of civet, good apothecary!" The air grows heavy.

We have had enough, I fancy, of this picture. In drawing it, I doubt not, the author who is responsible for my elaboration did so with more sincere regret for current circumstances than could ever be felt by an alien to his art; he merely stated a fact, and that indisputable. There is, moreover, no possible profit in lingering over trivial bickerings which the complacency of one party and the self-advertisement of another have dragged into the full view of the public press. Here, at least, the future may be trusted to take care of its own; there can be but one end. The purpose of this paper is otherwise. It may be well, perhaps, to consider by what steps the author reached the rostrum, what he is doing there for art, and where he will find himself when in the whirligig of time he is forced to descend. Finally, it may be asked how all this is likely to serve letters in the future, and what sort of literature is likely to be produced under such conditions. For every man who sets pen to paper, be he Laureate or the humblest journalist, *must*, so far as he is worthy of his calling, prefer the welfare of literature to the gains of his own exchequer, and much of the lamentable policy which has ushered in this new era of letters has been due, it is but fair to suppose, to an honest but misdirected desire to further her claims to recognition. Is she, then, we may ask, likely to benefit

by this perpetual insistence upon pecuniary reward? And if not, where will she suffer?

The increase in the author's emolument has been traced to many sources; yet the most likely origin has been strangely overlooked. A little reflection, however, will show that the growth in prices has advanced *pari passu* with the multiplication of periodical literature. Forty or fifty years ago there were comparatively few magazines, and the novelist was obliged to work in the large. His every output was a full-length novel: the making of this took time, and the rate of production was slow. By sure degrees, however, the taste for snippet literature has grown and grown; one magazine after another has leapt into success, and the demand for the short story has become paramount. At the same time competition has arisen. Each new magazine desires to open with the best names: no author, however prolific, could keep pace with the whole field: it becomes necessary, therefore, for editor to bid against editor. The booths are set up, and business is astir. Meanwhile, more and more material is forthcoming: the short stories are collected into books: the many serials seek their publishers. Obviously, therefore, the number of these industrious middlemen must increase; the same interests come to the surface, and there follows a further competition to secure book-rights. Then follows the question of time. Editors begin to look ahead. If they cannot have Mr. X.'s next story, they invite a *lien* upon the next but one, and in a very short time the author finds himself bound far into the future. Here, then, by the simplest method of evolution, we have the prevalent problems of competition and literary mortgage. And very far afield have these things led us of late.

The air is full of rumours, the papers of paragraphs, which bear evidence to the strain of rivalry between men of business reacting
upon

upon authorship. We are told of one author who has bound himself to the end of the century to produce stories of one kind and another to fit the dates of his editors. Year in, year out, in sickness or in health, in the heat of summer and the bite of winter, is that author fixed to his desk, pen in hand, covering reams of foolscap, for the satisfaction of contracts entertained without the prejudice of circumstance. We know of another author, exploited by a far-seeing editor, whose work was so universally advertised by paragraph and table-talk, that actually before his first book was in proof at the printers' it had been lauded by half the papers in London as a coming wonder. Nor do exceptional examples of this kind stand unsupported by a common environment. The very conversation of literature is changed: its view of its own privileges is translated. When two men of letters are discussing a third, do they set themselves to speak of the literary quality of his last volume, of its sincerity, its distinction, its place in the progress of thought? Nine times out of ten the subject that chiefly interests them is the rate of pay which he receives per thousand words. Indeed, that same phrase, "per thousand words" has slain ten thousand reputations. You might range the living novelists now, in a list of their own recital, apportioning their fame by that "rate per thousand words." Indeed, to hear and to read of some of them, one verily believes that there are authors who think, feed, and dream upon this rate of theirs, until they are half sick with green jealousy when they hear that A. and B. have "gone up" by a guinea this month, while they themselves have declined by a shilling. And this, too, is called literary ambition.

Indeed, the reader of these random observations will by this time have noticed, it may be with amusement, that they tend to treat literature as though it were solely confined to the modern novel.

novel. For the present context this must be the case. The concerns of the auction-room are so far centred upon fiction alone. For, as we have already noticed, this activity of the middleman is necessarily dependent on the demand of the mob, and while it is probable that more books are being read in this year of grace than in any of its predecessors, it is also certain that at no time has the general public been so blind to the claims of literary merit. For poetry it has no taste and absolutely no judgment. If it is told sufficiently often that a certain poem is fine literature, it will in time come to believe it, much as it takes its religious tenets on trust, because it has heard them so often promulgated. In neither case can it appreciate for itself. For criticism, sociology, philosophy it has no ear; it seeks amusement, and it buys the latest story. Hence it comes that it is the field of fiction alone that is given over to profitable money-making; hence, too, it follows that the successful novelist has come to regard the six-shilling novel as the only vehicle of literary expression, and has taken himself rather more seriously than circumstances have demanded.

Nevertheless, from a purely insular point of view he is, beyond doubt, a very important person. It is ungracious in an Englishman to reflect, even in passing, upon his motherland, still it is difficult to avoid the confession that Napoleon's definition of us was regrettably true in its essentials. We are, by nature, a nation of shopkeepers, and the thing that sells best among us has gained a spurious but incalculable importance. The novelist, therefore, has now his day, and he is making the best of it. He looms large in the public gaze: he fills columns of the public prints: the work he produces is, by virtue of its popularity, *the* literature of the hour. It only remains to concede the situation, and to consider whether, 'under the progress of present circumstances, it is likely to be the literature of the future.

A literary

A literary critic, himself no less distinguished than the novelist whose words are serving us for a text, has recently expressed his view of the probable complications in store for the novelist. He said, if my memory stands good, that the prevalence of the pecuniary estimate was resulting in a pressure all along the line, that the author, in demanding high terms of the publisher, was pressing him to such a degree that he was, in turn, forced to press the bookseller, and that the final result would be that the public would refuse to respond, and that the old machinery would be thrown out of gear. Well, there may be truth in this, but there is a good deal to be said on the other side. The publisher, after all, is no sucking-dove, no shorn lamb which needs our poor protection, if his grasp of business principles is insufficient to keep him out of unprofitable bargains, he can only thank his own indiscretion if he finds himself in eventual liquidation. He starts business as a business-man, and as a business-man he must be judged. He is fairly sure to take care of himself. On the contrary, it is the novelist who must look to his own interests: for it is they and not the publishers that are in jeopardy. We have seen how this eternal care for pence results in injudicious contracts; let us now see whether these contracts will not, in reaction, end in a lack even of those miserable pence for which they were contrived. We are all slow to learn by experience, but really the tardiness of the novelist is amazing. You would suppose that, with the field of literature scattered, as it is, with dead and dying reputations, the author would begin to lose some confidence in the constancy of his public, but it is just this fickleness that he is slowest to comprehend. He makes one immense, phenomenal success, and in a flash the world is all before him. He will plant vineyards and oliveyards, he will store up his grain in goodly garners; he will live happily for ever after. And all the while at his

his ear Experience is whispering unheard, "Thou fool! this night shall thy fame be required of thee."

The British public is the most fickle body that ever drew together for mutual protection, and in nothing is it more fickle than in its literary predilections. The idol of its afternoon is an outcast by sunset, and the only possibility of retaining its favour lies in an assiduous and heart-whole study of its inclination. The novelist who is to continue popular must work with every instinct clear, every faculty alive; he must change his course and tack with the popular breeze; his eye must follow every cloud, be it no larger than a man's hand, for the least shadow on the horizon grows in an hour into a tempest. During the last few years there has been success upon success that promised stability: one reputation has trod upon another's heels, has passed, and lost outline. There is scarcely a prominent novelist of twelve years ago who enjoys an equal favour to-day. All this your optimist adventurer forgets. He forgets, too, that those grinding contracts of his will press upon him at the very hour when he is least in trim for work, that in their obligation he is bound, in course of time, to turn out material unworthy of his best, and that the public, reminded of this by its critics—reminded, too, by a certain sense of selection which, to do it justice, it has acquired in its study of fiction—will have no compunction, in the hour of his distress, in bowing him to the door. Then the publisher, too, will desert his auction-room, and his occupation will be gone.

You cannot serve Art and Mammon; indeed, it is hard enough to serve Mammon alone, for any length of time, with any consistency of return. And if the novelist is likely, by mixing himself overmuch with business interests to compass his own financial ruin, is it probable that he will contrive, in the stress of his daily avocations of the rostrum, to leave behind him the name of an
artist,

artist, a reputation that can endure? No man deserving the name of author ever yet wrote a book without some faint hope that it might outlast himself; that he might be raising, if not the fabric, at least the pedestal of a "monument more enduring than brass." Yet no book ever lived, it is safe to say, that was thrown off in feverish haste to satisfy the demands of an importunate publisher. Nowadays, the word 'Dignity' is supposed to carry with it the trail of the prig: still, every profession, sincerely followed, is capable of dignified repute. Where, then, in all this turmoil of the market, is the boasted dignity of letters?

If ever a calling existed in England whose record was studded with things noble and of good report, it is the calling that can boast the service of Shakspeare, of Milton, of Goldsmith, and of Wordsworth. Surely the shadows of the great must move restlessly in shame by Stratford Church and Chalfont stream when they learn that the literary man is, upon his own confession and at his own desire, translated into an unctuous auctioneer. But shame should not be confined to the dead: it is high time that it infected the living. There are signs, fortunately, that it is even now doing so. It may be, indeed, that we ourselves are beginning to appreciate that the new era of letters is not so much decadent as vulgar; it may even prove that the next development of the problem will be a return to taste and a recrudescence of dignity. If so, the uses of perversity will have gained another example, and the cause of literature will have been served by what at present appears the least promising of its issues.