

ON THE KIND OF FICTION CALLED MORBID



THIS is a poison-bad world for the romancer, this Anglo-Saxon world," wrote Robert Louis Stevenson to Mr. Sidney Colvin : and if a popular writer with an obvious style, after his years of experience, came to this conclusion, we risk little in asserting that the same conclusion has been reached by many another writer whose style is not obvious, and who is not so popular. Amongst these, the man who would be always introducing the thin presence of Death is, without doubt, the most reviled ; we will have nothing of a fellow who comes to our feasts with a skull. And though we all agree that *Memento homo quia pulvis es* is a fine and wise saying, yet, i' faith! we are content to leave it at that ; and we clap the rogue who recalls it in the stocks. Nay! Ash Wednesday would have been long ago rubbed out of the calendar, save that we are careful not to understand the full significance of it ; just as we are careful not to understand the full significance of Good Friday.

The smiling gentleman who hails us in the street does not like to think that one day he must be dead ; archbishops are supposed not to like a dwelling on that ; and a certain parson of easy life, whose business it is to preach mortality, when invited by a plain writer to fall into a better acquaintance with the cold guide who shall lead him to the Eternal Hills, flies into a passion, calls my plain writer (of all things in the world!) *immoral*, and sits down, raging, to write insolent letters to the papers. But (you will ask), do not these people give a man the credit of his courage in facing what they dare not face? Well, no. For when a man has done the day's appointed labour, he stirs the fire, sinks into his armchair, and lo! in a trice he spurns the hearth and is off swinging the sword and aiding somewhat sulky damsels with De Marsac ; or, if he is of a cold habit of body, he wanders in lanes where the clover breathes, and John and Joan while away the white-winged hours a-wooning. Or again, he hies to the ball, and watches the tenderness with which my lord and the farmer's daughter take the floor. If, then, to this man

a person of wry visage and hearse-like airs comes offering a sombre story—why, up he leaps, grasps the intrusive fellow by the shoulders, and lands him in the street. No; it is certain that abnormal nerves are not understood or thought proper in the suburban villa: and they are not tolerated by the Press, which is almost the same thing. Even editors, those cocks that show how the popular wind blows, if they have no kicks, have few ha'pence for the writer of stories which are not sops to our pleasure. The thought of death is not pleasant! (folk may be imagined to exclaim); to escape that we laugh at sorry farces and the works of Mr. Mark Twain; and yet, here is a zany with a hatful of dun thoughts formed to make one meditate on one's tomb for a week!

Still, for him, poor devil! life is not all (as they say) beer and skittles. With an impatience of facility, he sets to work sedulously on a branch of art which he is pleased to consider difficult; it cannot be pleasant work, since it progresses with shudders and cold sweats; it cannot be easy, since it is acknowledged to be no easy thing to turn the blood from men's faces. He is even charmed by the fancy that he is driving his pen to a very high measure. He may (by chance) be right; he is possibly wrong; but I am glad to say I have yet to hear that Banquo's ghost at the feast, and Cæsar's ghost in the tent, are deemed infamous, or (as the cant goes) immoral. And, talking of Shakespeare, has it ever occurred to you how the critics would waggle their heads at "Romeo and Juliet," if it were presented to-day as a new piece by William Shakespeare, Esq.?

"As in a vault, an ancient receptacle,
Where, for these many hundred years, the bones
Of all my buried ancestors are pack'd;
Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
Lies festering in his shroud; where, as they say,
At some hours in the night spirits resort;—
Alack! alack! is it not like, that I,
So early waking,—what with loathsome smells,
And shrieks like mandrakes' torn out of the earth,
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad;—
O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
Environed with all these hideous fears?
And madly play with my forefathers' joints?
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud?
And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone,
As with a club, dash out my desperate brains?"

Methinks I see the words: "exotic," "morbid," "unhealthy," ready-made for that! Ah! how, then, can my modern writer expect to be suffered,

any more than we suffer an undertaker to send out cards setting forth the excellence of his wares. When he takes to the road, he must know that he is in for a weary and footsore journey: comely persons, in beautiful garments, with eyes full of invitation look down from bordering windows and jeer at his sober parade; he sees cool, shaded by-lanes which are never for him; others pass him on the road singing blithe, gamesome songs, and he is left to loiter. And be sure he travels in glum company: the stiff-featured dead, with their thin hands and strange smile, fall into step with him and tell him their dream-like tales. The poor dead, whom we all forget so soon on this sunny earth! I think they tell him that they have a kindness for those who perform the last offices for them: the dead villager for the barber and the crone, the dead peer for the undertakers who come by night to Belgrave Square. Perhaps it is from fear of the ghosts who attend the march, that the writers of awful stories are few and far between, up and down the world. And when we meet with such a one, whose head is humming like a top from the gray talk of his fellow-passengers, should we not thank (rather than stone) him for his sense of the decency of things, which prevents him from going tearing mad and holding the highway with a gun? I will wager that the recognition of this is all he asks of reward from the "poison-bad world for the romancer," for sticking with iron courage to the graveside, and refusing to engage in work less resolute, and more easy.

Yes, more easy; for it *is* more easy—if more degrading—to write a certain kind of novel. To take a fanciful instance, it is more easy to write the history of Miss Perfect: how, upon the death of her parents, she comes to reside in the village, and lives there mildly and sedately; and how one day, in the course of her walk abroad, she is noticed by the squire's lady, who straightway transports her to the Hall. And, of course, she soon becomes mighty well with the family, and the squire's son becomes enamoured of her. Then the clouds must gather: and a villain lord comes on the scene to bombard her virtue with clumsy artillery. Finding after months that her virtue dwells in an impregnable citadel, he turns to, and jibes and goads the young squire to the fighting point. And, presto! there they are, hard at it with bare steel, on the Norman beach, of a drizzling morning; and the squire is just pressing hot upon my lord, when—it's hey! for the old love, and ho! for the new—out rushes my Miss Perfect to our great amazement, and falls between the swords down on the stinging sands, in the sight of the toiling sea. Now I maintain, that a novel woven of these meagre threads, and set out in three volumes and a brave binding, would put up a good front at Mudie's;

would become, it too, after a while, morality packed in a box. For nowadays we seem to nourish our morals with the thinnest milk and water, with a good dose of sugar added, and not a suspicion of lemon at all.

You will note that the letter-writer says, the "*Anglo-Saxon* world"—Great Britain, say! and the United States; and it is well to keep in mind this distinction. In France, for example, people appear eager to watch how art triumphs over any matter. "Charles Baudelaire," says Hamerton, "had the poetical organization with all its worst inconveniences;" but one inconvenience he had not—the inconvenience of a timid public not interested in form, and with a profound hatred of the unusual: a public from which Edgar Poe, Beddoes, and Francis Saltus (to name but three) suffered—how poignantly! Let us cling by all means to our George Meredith, our Henry James—our Miss Rhoda Broughton, if you will; but then let us try, if we cannot be towards others, unlike these, if not encouraging, at the least not actively hostile and harassing, when they go out in the black night to follow their own sullen will-o'-the-wisps.

VINCENT O'SULLIVAN.