

The Great American Novel Never Will Come

James Huneker, the Famous Critic, Discussing Certain Phases of Modern Fiction, Says There May Be Thousands but Not One

By James Huneker

I.
WHEN the supreme master of the historical novel modestly confessed that he could do the "big bow-wow strain," but to Jane Austen must be accorded the palm of exquisite craftsmanship, there was then no question upon the critical map of the so-called "great American novel." Sir Walter Scott—to whom such authors of historical novels as Chateaubriand and his "Martyrs," the "Salammbô" of Flaubert, and that well-nigh perfect fiction, "The History of Henry Esmond," by Thackeray, yield precedence—might have achieved the impossible: the writing of a library, epitomizing the social history of These States—as Walt Whitman would say. After Scott no name but Balzac's occurs to the memory—Balzac, who laid all France under his microscope; (and France is all of a piece, not the checkerboard of nationalities we call America;) even the mighty Tolstoy would have balked the job. And if these giants fail, what may be said of their successors? The idea of a great American novel is an "absolute," and nature abhors an absolute, despite the belief of metaphysicians to the contrary. Yet the notion still obtains and inquests are held from time to time, and the opinions of contemporary novelists are taken toll of; as if each man and woman could give aught else but their own side of the matter, that side which is rightfully enough personal and provincial. The question is, after all, an affair for critics, and the great American novel will be in the plural; thousands perhaps. America is a chord of many nations, and to find the keynote we must play much and varied music.

While a novelist may be cosmopolitan at his own risk, a critic should be ever so. The sublime tenuities of Henry James, like the black music of Michael Artzibashev, are questions largely temperamental. But the Russian is all Slavic, and no one would maintain that Mr. James shows a like ingrained nationalism. Nevertheless, he is American, though dealing only with a certain side of American life, the cosmopolitan phase. At his peril an American novelist sails Eastward to describe the history of his countrymen abroad. With the critic we come upon a different territory. He may go gadding after new mud-gods, (the newest god invented by man is always the greatest,) for the time being, and return to his native heath mentally refreshed and broadened by his foreign outing. Not so the maker of fiction. Once he cuts loose his balloon he is in danger of not getting back home again.

Mr. James is a splendid case for us; he began in America and landed in England, there to stay. Our other most felicitous example of cosmopolitanism is Henry Blake Fuller, the author of "The Cavalier Pensieri Vani" and "The Châtelaine de la Trinité." After those charming excursions into a rapidly vanishing Europe Mr. Fuller reversed the proceeding of James; he returned to America and composed two novels of high artistic significance, "The Cliff Dwellers" and "With the Procession," which, while they continued the realistic tradition of William Dean Howells, were also the forerunners of a new movement in America. It is not necessary to dwell now on "The Last Refuge," or on that masterly book of spiritual parodies, "The Puppet-Booth." But Mr. Fuller did not write the great American novel. Neither did Mr. Howells, nor Mr. James. Who has? No one. Is there such a thing? Without existing it might be described in Celtic fashion, this mythical work, as pure fiction. Let us admit for the sake of argument that if it were written by some unknown monster of genius, it would like Lewis Carroll's Shark turn into a Boojum.

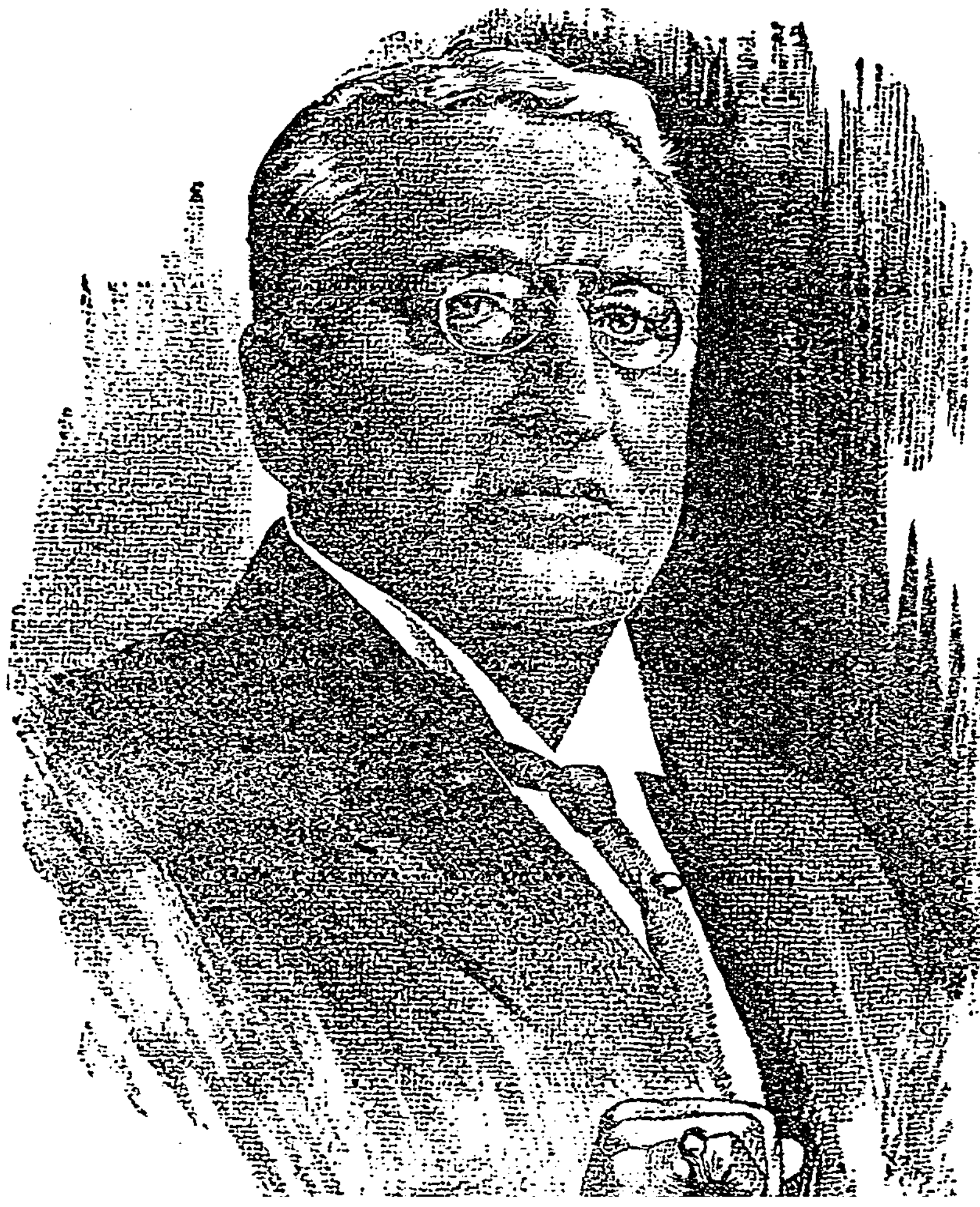
Henry James has said that no one is compelled to admire any particular sort of writing; that the province of fiction

is all life, and he has also wisely remarked that "when you have no taste you have no discretion, which is the conscience of taste," and may we add, when you have no discretion you perpetrate the shocking fiction with which America is deluged at this hour. We are told that the new writers have altered the old canons of bad taste, but "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." A liquorish sentimentality is the ever threatening rock upon which the bark of young American novelists goes to pieces. (Pardon the mixed metaphor!) Be sentimental and you will succeed! We agree with Dostoevsky that in fiction, as well as in life, there are no general principles, only special cases. But these cases,

should be. The United States of Fiction. America is Cosmopolis.

II.

As to the Puritanism of our present novels one may dare to say in the teeth of youthful protestants that it is non-existent. The pendulum has swung too far the other way. And as literary artists are rare, the result has not been reassuring. Zola seems prudish after some experiments of the younger crowd. How badly they pull off the trick! How coarse and hard and heavy their touch! Most of these productions read like stupid translations from a dull French original. They are not immoral, only vulgar. As old Flaubert used to say: such books are false, nature is not like that. How keen-



James Gibbons Huneker
From Photo © by Aimé Dupont.

could they not be typical? even if there are not types, only individuals. And are men and women so enthralled by the molasses of sentimentalism in life? Have the motion-pictures hopelessly deranged our critical values?

I know that in America charity covers a multitude of mediocrities, nevertheless I am loath to believe that all one reads in praise of wretched contemporary fiction is meant in earnest.

Well, chacun à ses dégoûts! The "thrilling" detective story, the romantic sonorities of the ice cream-soda woman novelist?—with a triple-barreled name, as Rudyard Kipling put it once upon a time—or that church of Heavenly Ennui, the historical novel—what a cemetery of ideas, all of them. An outsider must be puzzled by this tumult of tasteless writing and worse observation. However, history in fiction may be a cavalcade of shining shadows, brilliant, lugubrious, dull, or joyful happenings; but where Thackeray succeeded multitudes have failed. Who shall bend the bow of that Ulysses? Native talent, subtle and robust, we possess in abundance; thus far it has cultivated with success its own parochial garden—which is as it

ly he saw through the humbug of "free-love"—a romantic tradition of George Sand's epoch—may be noted in his comment that Emma Bovary found in adultery all the platitudes of marriage. Ah! that much despised, stupid, venerable institution, marriage! How it has been flouted since the days of Rousseau—the father of false romanticism and that stupefying legend, the "equality" of mankind. (O! the beautiful word, "equality," invented for the delectation of rudimentary minds.) For a century and more fiction has played with the theme of concubinage. If the Nacquet divorce bill had been introduced a decade or so before it was in France, what would have become of the theatre of Dumas fils, or later, of the misunderstood woman in Ibsen's plays? All such tribal taboos make or unmake literature.

So, merely as a suggestion to ambitious youngsters, let the novelist of the future in search of a novelty describe a happy marriage, children, a husband who doesn't drink or gamble, a wife who votes, yet loves her home, her family, and knows how to cook. What a realistic bombshell he would hurl into the camp of sentimental Socialists, and them that be-

lieve a wedding certificate is like Balzac's "La Peau de Chagrin"—a document daily shrinking in happiness. Absurdities make martyrs, but of all the absurd and ineffectual martyrdoms that of running off with another's wife is usually the crowning one. "I don't call this very popular pie," said the little boy in Richard Grant White's story; and the man in the case is usually the first to complain of his bargain in pastry.

However, categories are virtually an avowal of mental impotence, and all marriages are not made in heaven. In the kingdom of morality there are many mansions. When too late you may sport with the shade—not in the shade—of Amaryllis, and perhaps elbow epigrams as a lean consolation. That is your own affair. Paul Verlaine has told us that "J'ai vécu énormément," though his living enormously did not prove that he was happy. Far from it. But he had at least the courage to live his life and relate his terrors. American novelists may agree with Dostoevsky that "everything in the world always ends in meanness"; or with Dr. Pangloss that all is for the best in the best of possible worlds. An affair of temperament. But don't mix the values. Don't confuse intellectual substances. Don't smear a fact with treacle and call it truth. Above all, don't preach. Impiety is an indiscretion, yet, don't be afraid to tell the truth. From Jane Austen and Walter Scott, the parents of the modern English novel, to "The House of Mirth" and "Sister Carrie"—two modern instances—fiction has thrived best on naked truth. All the rest is sawdust, tripe-selling, and sentimentalism. Didn't Mr. Roundabout declare in one of his famous papers that "Figs are sweet, but fictions are sweeter"? In our land we can't get the latter sweet enough. Altruism, Brotherhood of Man Uplifting, Chewing Gum! These are the shibboleths of the "nouvelles couches sociales." Prodigious!

III.

J. K. Huysmans declared that in the land of books there are no schools; no idealism, realism, symbolism; only good writers and bad. Whistler said the same about painting and painters. Setting aside the technical viewpoint of such dicta, we fancy that our "best sellers" do not preoccupy themselves with the "mere writing" of their fictions, but they have developed a formidable faculty of preaching. Old-fashioned fiction that discloses personal charm, that delineates manners, or stirs the pulse of tragedy—not melodrama—is vanishing from publishers' lists. Are there not as many charming men and women perambulating the rind of the planet as there were in the days when Jane Austen or Turgenyev wrote? We refuse to believe there are not; but there is little opportunity, in a word, no market, for the display of these qualities. The novel with a purpose, generally an unpleasant purpose, has usurped the rule of the novel of character and manners. Boanerges, not Balzac, now occupies the pasteboard pulpit of fiction.

I quoted Henry James to the effect that all life is the province of the novelist. Nevertheless, the still small garden wherein is reared the tender solitary flower does but ill represent the vaster, complicated forest of common humanity. The ivory tower of the cultivated egoist is not to be unduly admired; rather Zola's "La Terre" with its foul facts than a palace of morbid art. Withal, the didactic side of our fiction is overdone. I set it down to the humbug about the "masses" being opposed to the "classes." Truly a false antithesis. As if the French bourgeois was not a product of the revolution, (poor bourgeois, always abused by the novelists.) As if a poor man suddenly enriched doesn't prove, as a rule, the hardest taskmaster to his own class. Consider the new-rich film-picture owners, the munition-makers, the manufacturers of motor cars, and other endearing luxuries. What a study they afford the students of manners. A new generation has arisen. Its taste, intelli-

gence, and culture; its canned manners, canned music—preferably pseudo-African—canned art, canned food, canned literature; its devotion to the mediocre—what a field for our aspiring young “secretaries to society.” —

Cheap prophylactics, political and religious—for religion is fast being butchered to make the sensational evangelists’ holiday—are in vogue. They affect our fiction-mongers, who burn to avenge wrongs, write novels about the “down-trodden masses,” and sermons on social evils—evils that have always existed, always will exist. Like the knife grinder, story they have none to tell. Why write fiction, or what they are pleased to call fiction? Why not join the brave brigade of agitators and pamphleteers? The lay-preachers are carrying off the sweepstakes. For them Mr. Howells is a superannuated writer. Would there were more like him in continence of speech, wholesomeness of judgment, nobility of ideals, and in the shrewd perception of character.

Fiction, too, is a fine art, though this patent fact has escaped the juvenile Paul Prys, who are mainly endeavoring to arouse class against mass. It’s an old dodge, this equality theory, as old as Beelzebub, Lord of Flies. When all fruit fails, welcome envy and malicious slandering. When you have nothing else to write about, attack your neighbor, especially if he hath a much-coveted vineyard. Max Stirner, least understood of social philosophers, wrote, “Mind your own business,” and he forged on the anvil of experience a mighty leading motive for the conduct of life. But our busy little penmen don’t see in this golden motto a sufficient sentimental appeal. It doesn’t flatter the “masses.” Mr. Bryan a few years ago told us that we were all middle class. What is mid-

dle class? In Carlyle’s day it was a “gigman”; in ours is it the owner of a “flivver”?

This twaddle about “democratic art” is the bane of our literature. There is only good art. Whether it deals with such “democratic” subjects as “L’Assomoir” or “Germinie Lacerteux,” or such “aristocratic” themes as those of D’Annunzio and Paul Bourget, it is the art thereof that determines the product. I hold no brief for the sterile fiction that is enrolled under the banner of “Art for Art.” I go so far as to believe that a novelist with a beautiful style often allows that style to get in the way of human nature. Stained-glass windows have their use, but they falsify the daylight. A decorative style may suit pseudo-mediaeval romances, but for twentieth century realism it is sadly amiss. Nor is the arterio-sclerotic school of psychological analysis to be altogether commended. It has been well-nigh done to death by Stendhal, Meredith, James, and Bourget; and it is as cold as a star. Flaubert urged as an objection to writing a novel proving something that the other fellow can prove precisely the opposite. In either case selection plays the rôle.

The chief argument against the novel “with a purpose”—as the jargon goes—is its lack of validity either as a document or as art. A novel may be anything, but it must not be polemical. Zola has been, still is, the evil genius of many talented chaps who “sling ink,” not to make a genuine book, but to create a sensation. Such writers lack patience, art, and direction. They always keep one eye on the box office. Indeed, the young men and women of the day, who are squandering upon paper their golden genius, painfully resemble in their productions the dime novels once published by the

lamented Beadle or the lucubrations in the Saturday weeklies of long ago. But in those publications there was more virility. The heroes then were not well-dressed namby-pambies; the villains were villainous; the detectives detected real crimes, and were not weavers of metaphysical abstractions like your latter-day miracle workers of an impossible Scotland Yard; and the girls were girls, neither neurasthenic, nor did they outgolf all creation. Other days, other plays. The “new” novelists still deal with the same raw material of melodrama. Their handling of love episodes has much of the blaring brass quality of old-fashioned Italian opera. And they loudly twang the strings of sloppy sentiment, which evoke not music, but mush and moonshine. And these are our “motion-masters” today.

IV.

There can be no objection to literature and life coming to grips. Letters should touch reality. Many a sturdy blow has been struck at abuses by penmen masquerading behind fiction. No need to summon examples. As for realism—I deny there are commonplace people. Only those writers are commonplace that believe in the phrase. It is one of the paradoxes of art that the commonplace folk of Thackeray, Flaubert, or Anthony Trollope who delight us between covers would in life greatly bore us. The ennui is artistically suggested, though not experienced by the reader. It is the magic of the novelist, his style and philosophy, that make his creations vital.

Dostoevsky says there are no ugly women—to be sure he puts the expression in the mouth of the old sensualist Karamazov—and as a corollary I maintain that nothing is uninteresting if painted by a master hand, from carrots to Chopin. And as for the historical novel,

there is “Sentimental Education” as a model, if you desire something epical in scale and charged with the modern ironic spirit. A Flaubertian masterpiece, this book, with its daylight atmosphere; the inimitable sound, shape, gait, and varied prose rhythms of its sentences, its marvelous gallery of portraits executed in the Dutch manner of Hals and Vermeer, its nearness to its environment, and its fidelity to the pattern of life. It is a true “historical” novel, for it is real—to employ the admirable simile of Mr. Howells.

No need to transpose the tragic gloom of Artzibashef to America; we are an optimistic peoples, thanks to our air and sky, political conditions, and the immigration of sturdy peasant folk. Yet we, too, have our own peculiar gloom and misery and social problems to solve. We are far from being the “Shadow land” of fiction, as a certain English critic said. When last year I praised in these columns the dissonant art of Michael Artzibashef it was not with the idea that either his style or his pessimism should be aped. That way unoriginality lies. But I do contend that in the practice of his art, its sincerity, its profundity, he might be profitably patterned after by the younger generation. Art should elevate as well as amuse. Must fiction always be silly and shallow? It need be neither sordid nor didactic.

William James put the matter in a nutshell when he wrote that “the whole atmosphere of present-day Utopian literature tastes mawkish and dishwatery to people who still keep a sense of life’s more bitter flavors.” And on this fundamentally sound note I must end my little sermon—for I find that I have been practicing the very preaching against which I warned embryo novelists. But, then, isn’t every critic a lay-preacher?