

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

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The evolution of the English novel by Francis Hovey Stoddard

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FRANCIS HOVEY STODDARD

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BY

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CHAPTER I

THE EVOLUTION OF THE NOVEL

IN every discussion of tendencies the term *evolution* claims a place with almost the insistence of a prescriptive right. No other term localizes the phenomena so definitely, and conveys so promptly the notion of progress in a general line of tendency. Nevertheless, I think most of us would, if we could, rather avoid the term than insist upon it in literary discussion. For the use of the word *evolution* seems to involve a very elaborate theory. In the title of this chapter—The Evolution of the Novel—the idea suggested indicates that we can name the earlier forms out of which the true novel has been evolved; can arrange

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the novels in existence to illustrate the later development; and can trace the steps of the progress. It is with some reluctance that I have used such a demanding title. Development in literature, easy to suggest as a probable law, easy to infer in respect to particular forms, is extremely difficult of demonstration when the great movements are under consideration. Literature as a whole does not exhibit the regular and sequential development which a theory of literary evolution would imply. It is quite true that in minor matters, especially in tracing the growth of literary ideas, one easily reaches suggestive results. For example, we may find in the "Divine Comedy" of Dante the completed form of a literary method common in the Middle Ages. In the "Inferno" we have a Vision; we can look back and find the "Vision of St. Paul" and other visions to which this one of Dante may be said to be a legitimate sequel. Dante visits Hell under guidance, and views it from a bridge. In an earlier vision Ferseus visits Hell, led by an angel; and in the "St. Patrick's Purgatory"