

A THOUSAND OF THE BEST NOVELS

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NEWARK, NEW JERSEY
1904

W. V. Bishop
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INTRODUCTION.

Much of the best literature is fiction. Shakespeare's fancy did not burden itself with facts. His history was far less accurate than Winston Churchill's. His imagination waited on his humor, as alway in the fabulist. Dogberry's original would be harder to find than David Harum's. All dramas are novels plus a playwright's stage directions. Poetry is fiction first, and then poetry. Chaucer began the great line of English story-tellers; and Hardy and Barrie, and scores of others, are their worthy followers.

If printing was a happy thought and books are not a curse, then novels must be praised. They belong, with the dramas and the poems, among the good things which make our heritage; which unite men by community of thought and feeling; which make it a joy to have the art of reading; and give us simple pleasures, strong emotions, knowledge of our fellows, and sympathy with all mankind.

One may live well and be happy and read no stories; but most are wiser, happier and worth more to their fellows for the novels they have read.

There is much discussion of the novel and most of it quite profitless. To no two men does life seem the same. Each, if he writes, must report that which he sees. One talks of realism, and professes to give us a transcript of life as it truly is; and forgets that the life which truly is, for him, is a life no other ever saw or ever can see, and that his own vision set out in words of his own choosing is a part of his own self, and real to no other mind.

It pleases some to write the fanciful romances. They lay the scene in fairy land, in Caesar's Rome, in Cromwell's England, or in a Kansas country town, as is to them easy and attractive. If well done they seem true to fact as one reads them. They portray men and women who seem like the men and women of our daily experience. Between this good romance and the best of realistic novels, who can draw a line of separation?

And shall the novel have no purpose? May it not try to make a little history more real? To enforce a moral? To plead for some reform? To expose some abuse, gird at some folly, satirize some weakness? To these questions the sufficient answer is the abounding fact. If trees may grow and birds may sing then novels may be as their writers please. Moreover, supply follows demand. Many like their history, sermons, satires, psychology, and all their studies of their fellowmen set forth in fiction, and dramas, poetry and the novel are straightway produced. Why quarrel with this? And why beat the air with a vain discussion of forms, influences and rules and principles? Tom Sawyer is a good story, but its moral is not easily found. Many have found morals in King Lear, and call it also a good tale. Neither story is true. To say both are realistic makes neither better worth reading. To condemn either because it differs from the other is absurd. To read discussions of either by one less a poet than Shakespeare or less a humorist than Twain is a waste of time.

And yet, some novels are surely better than others, as well as different from them; it is wise to read chiefly the better ones; and how shall we distinguish if one does not compare? Are there not principles of literary criticism which one may learn, and then may apply and then may see fiction humbly classify itself into best, good, poor and bad before one's eyes? Because novels pass from the best to the worst by an infinite series of minute gradations are we estopped from saying of any one, this is in the upper ranks, of another, this is in the lower ranks? Within certain limits, yes. Is there no way of telling a good novel when you see one? No, there is not.

Here are poems, plays and stories. Their prime purpose is to please. If that statement seems to set too high a value on pleasure and to underestimate teaching and preaching, then we can at least say that if novels do not please they are not read and fail at all points. If they please a few, they are in so far good; if they please many we may call them better. How shall we arrive at a more definite estimate? Is the best poet he who is most read? May we insist that in the rating of the poet's work the character of his readers be considered as well as their number? May a poem or a story prove its greatness by its popularity? Does it lose its greatness as its popularity wanes? Have we a supreme court of fiction?

The conclusion of the whole matter is simple. We cannot make rules for pleasures, or regulate taste by laws. Tastes, feelings, pleasures come by nature, and they come differently to every one. They do not come by reason and they do not change to order. A good general guide in art, in belles-lettres, in fiction, poetry and drama is this: Those things which have pleased the most people for the longest time are the better. The better book is the one that gives the greater pleasure, and those that have long given pleasure not only deserve praise for work done but deserve to be reported as likely to continue to give pleasure. Further, those persons are likely to be better judges of the pleasure-giving capacities of a book who have read many books, who take delight in reading, and so have shown themselves to be sensitive to such matters as style, plot and characterization. The old books, then, which have long been read and enjoyed are probably worth reading again. And of the newer books those are more likely to be worth reading which people with experience, sensitive temperament and brains say are good.

This is a preface to a list of good novels. The compilers of it have not assumed to be judges; but have selected from the old books those that seem best as judged by their more frequent use by people of taste and sense, and from the newer books those which the best current criticism points out as best worth while. Accordingly, we call it a list of a thousand of the best novels. It has been selected by the best rule we could discover, the rule of experience.

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The library buys some of the new novels as issued from month to month and year to year. Most of them lose their popularity in a few months. Copies of them accumulate on the shelves, and the titles swell the catalog. As they wear out they must be replaced, if still in the catalog; and yet they are little wanted. To meet these difficulties we propose to revise the whole list, omit those little used, select good editions of the titles remaining on the list thus reduced and try to keep a good supply of them on hand. The thousand titles herewith form the foundation of such a shortened list. Not all the other 4000 titles now on the shelves will be dropped; but many of them will be, gradually; some will be transferred to literature, and some will be retained and their

cards kept in the catalog. This list meanwhile will be widely circulated, being offered as a sufficiently large collection for ordinary use. New novels will be purchased as issued as heretofore and the thousand titles will be reprinted in about a year, with such omissions and additions as criticism and good new books make advisable.

We have omitted some of those older books which are in every library, which no gentleman's library should be without, which everyone knows of and very few read. It seemed unnecessary to reprint their titles here.

We wished to cover the whole field and have thought it proper to omit a good many titles from the long lists of such acknowledged masters as Scott, Balzac and Hardy and to put in books by lesser men. Thus we may have lowered the grade of the whole a little; but have, we hope, by covering a wider range of writers, made it more interesting.

We have come down to date. And because we wish the list to be attractive to the average reader in the average library, we have admitted a good many recent books whose worth is still open to question.

Books for young people, not popular with the elders, we have reserved for a brief supplementary list. The same is true of fairy tales, folk-lore and books of humor not carrying a strong thread of story.

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On a list of all the novels in the Newark library, about 5000 titles, a D was placed opposite all titles found in the list of about 1800 novels for old and young compiled by the Denver public library in 1896. This Denver list was formed by selecting about half of the 3500 titles which had been purchased by that library during the previous seven years.

On the same list an S was then marked opposite all titles found in a list of novels compiled by the City Library, Springfield, Mass., in 1901. This Springfield list was formed by selecting about 1800 novels for adults from a list of about ten thousand gathered during the previous 40 years.

On the same list an A was then marked opposite all titles found in the list of novels for adults, about 800 titles, forming part of the list of 8000 books for small libraries compiled by the Ameri-

can Library Association for the St. Louis Exhibition. This was done from galley proofs, not from the final list.

Then the librarian, the first assistant, and the chiefs of the reference and delivery departments and the reading room in the Newark library marked, on this same Newark list, their several initials opposite the 1000 titles they each preferred.

The Newark list was then marked in the same way for a thousand titles, by Miss Medlicott, reference librarian of the City Library, Springfield, Mass.

It was then checked by Leypoldt and Iles' list of books for girls and women and their clubs.

With these several marks as a basis, and following them in most cases, the Newark library then selected about 700 titles as a first draft of the final list. To these titles were added full names, publishers and prices.

Most of the marks placed as above described were gathered opposite a total of about 1400 titles. Of these the 700 selected for a basis were only half. It has been interesting to note that the selection of the 300 titles to complete the 1000 was much the more difficult part of the task. It seems that about 700 novels may be classed as obviously "good." We think almost any reader would put about 700 of the books in this list in a list of the thousand best which he might compile. About the other 300, opinions would widely differ.

These 700 were sent, with a note of explanation, to a number of the librarians of the State, with the request that they criticize and add. On the basis of their replies a few titles were dropped from the first 700. From the titles suggested for addition—few in number—and from the rejected 700 of the first 1400, 300 were finally chosen.

The completed list of a thousand titles was then put in type and galley proofs were sent to all those who criticized the first proof, and to several others. A few changes were made on the basis of the criticisms returned with these proofs.

JOHN COTTON DANA.

Newark, N. J., Dec., 1904.

