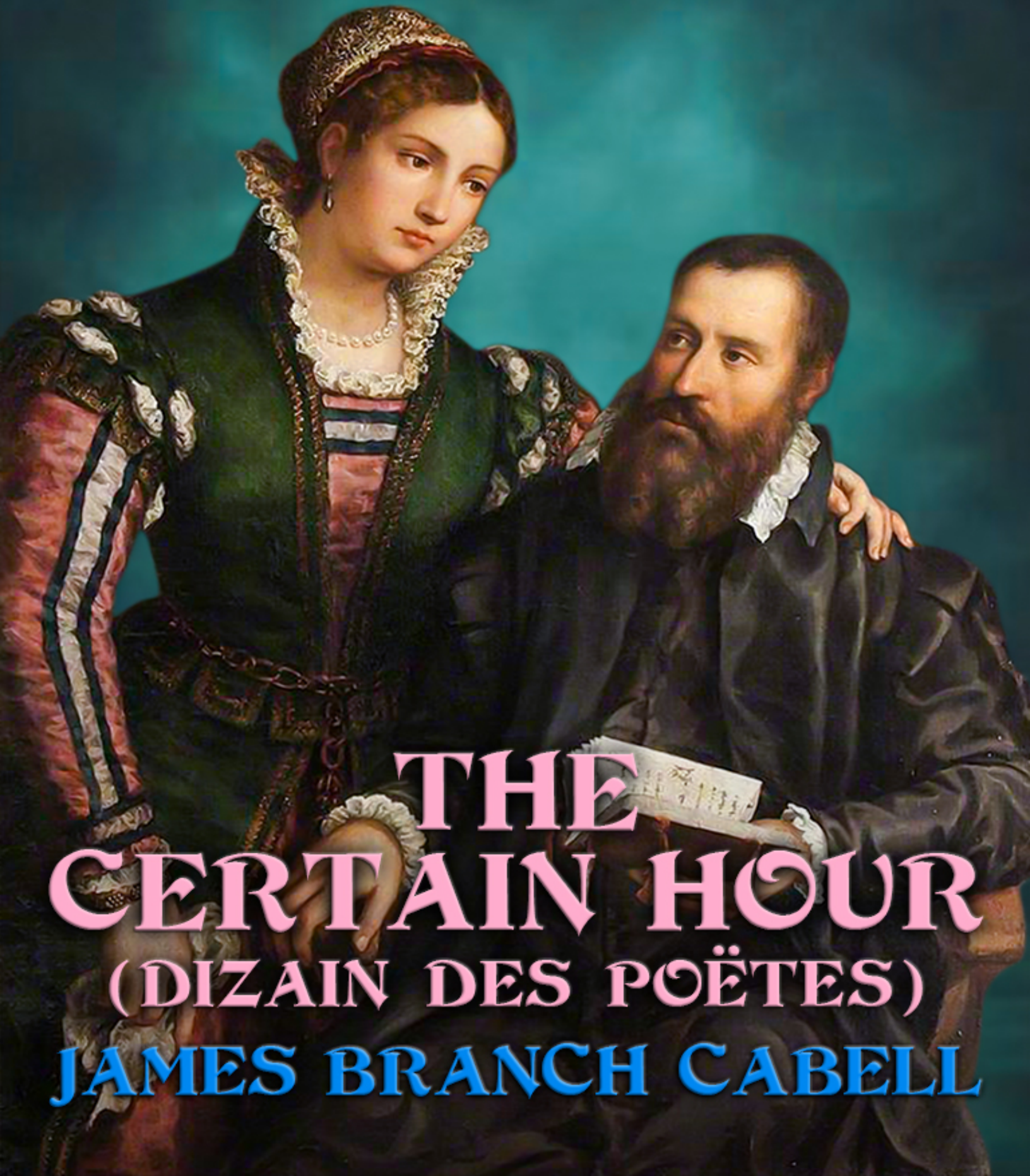
CLASSICS TO GO



THE CERTAIN HOUR

(DIZAIN DES POËTES)

JAMES BRANCH CABELL

THE CERTAIN HOUR

(Dizain des Poëtes)

James Branch Cabell

TO
ROBERT GAMBLE CABELL II

In Dedication of The Certain Hour

Sad hours and glad hours, and all hours, pass over;
One thing unshaken stays:
Life, that hath Death for spouse, hath Chance for lover;
Whereby decays

Each thing save one thing:—mid this strife diurnal
Of hourly change begot,
Love that is God-born, bides as God eternal,
And changes not;—

Nor means a tinseled dream pursuing lovers
Find altered by-and-bye,
When, with possession, time anon discovers
Trapped dreams must die,—

For he that visions God, of mankind gathers
One manlike trait alone,
And reverently imputes to Him a father's
Love for his son.

BALLAD OF THE DOUBLE-SOUL

"*Les Dieux, qui trop aiment ses faceties cruelles*"—PAUL VERVILLE.

In the beginning the Gods made man, and fashioned the sky and the sea,
And the earth's fair face for man's dwelling-place, and
this was the Gods' decree:—

"Lo, We have given to man five wits: he discerneth folly and sin;
He is swift to deride all the world outside, and blind
to the world within:

"So that man may make sport and amuse Us, in battling
for phrases or pelf,
Now that each may know what forebodeth woe to his
neighbor, and not to himself."

Yet some have the Gods forgotten,—or is it that subtler mirth
The Gods extort of a certain sort of folk that cumber the earth?

For this is the song of the double-soul, distortedly two in one,—
Of the wearied eyes that still behold the fruit ere the seed be sown,
And derive affright for the nearing night from the light
of the noontide sun.

For one that with hope in the morning set forth, and knew never a fear,
They have linked with another whom omens bother; and
he whispers in one's ear.

And one is fain to be climbing where only angels have trod,
But is fettered and tied to another's side who fears that
it might look odd.

And one would worship a woman whom all perfections dower,
But the other smiles at transparent wiles; and he quotes
from Schopenhauer.

Thus two by two we wrangle and blunder about the earth,
And that body we share we may not spare; but the Gods
have need of mirth.

So this is the song of the double-soul, distortedly two in one.—
Of the wearied eyes that still behold the fruit ere the seed be sown,

And derive affright for the nearing night from the light
of the noontide sun.

AUCTORIAL INDUCTION

"*These questions, so long as they remain with the Muses, may very well be unaccompanied with severity, for where there is no other end of contemplation and inquiry but that of pastime alone, the understanding is not oppressed; but after the Muses have given over their riddles to Sphinx,—that is, to practise, which urges and impels to action, choice and determination,—then it is that they become torturing, severe and trying.*"

From the dawn of the day to the dusk he toiled,
Shaping fanciful playthings, with tireless hands,—
Useless trumpery toys; and, with vaulting heart,
Gave them unto all peoples, who mocked at him,
Trampled on them, and soiled them, and went their way.

Then he toiled from the morn to the dusk again,
Gave his gimcracks to peoples who mocked at him,
Trampled on them, deriding, and went their way.

Thus he labors, and loudly they jeer at him;—
That is, when they remember he still exists.

Who, you ask, *is this fellow*?—What matter names?
He is only a scribbler who is content.

FELIX KENNASTON.—The Toy-Maker.

AUCTORIAL INDUCTION

WHICH (AFTER SOME BRIEF DISCOURSE OF FIRES AND FRYING-PANS) ELUCIDATES THE INEXPEDIENCY OF PUBLISHING THIS BOOK, AS WELL AS THE NECESSITY OF WRITING IT: AND THENCE PASSES TO A MODEST DEFENSE OF MORE VITAL THEMES.

The desire to write perfectly of beautiful happenings is, as the saying runs, old as the hills—and as immortal. Questionless, there was many a serviceable brick wasted in Nineveh because finicky persons must needs be deleting here and there a phrase in favor of its cuneatic synonym; and it is not improbable that when the outworn sun expires in clinkers its final ray will gild such zealots tinkering with their "style." Some few there must be in every age and

every land of whom life claims nothing very insistently save that they write perfectly of beautiful happenings.

Yet, that the work of a man of letters is almost always a congenial product of his day and environment, is a contention as lacking in novelty as it is in the need of any upholding here. Nor is the rationality of that axiom far to seek; for a man of genuine literary genius, since he possesses a temperament whose susceptibilities are of wider area than those of any other, is inevitably of all people the one most variously affected by his surroundings. And it is he, in consequence, who of all people most faithfully and compactly exhibits the impress of his times and his times' tendencies, not merely in his writings—where it conceivably might be just predetermined affectation—but in his personality.

Such being the assumption upon which this volume is builded, it appears only equitable for the architect frankly to indicate his cornerstone. Hereinafter you have an attempt to depict a special temperament—one in essence "literary"—as very variously molded by diverse eras and as responding in proportion with its ability to the demands of a certain hour.

In proportion with its ability, be it repeated, since its ability is singularly hampered. For, apart from any ticklish temporal considerations, be it remembered, life is always claiming of this temperament's possessor that he write perfectly of beautiful happenings.

To disregard this vital longing, and flatly to stifle the innate striving toward artistic creation, is to become (as with Wycherley and Sheridan) a man who waives, however laughingly, his sole apology for existence. The proceeding is paltry enough, in all conscience; and yet, upon the other

side, there is much positive danger in giving to the instinct a loose rein. For in that event the familiar circumstances of sedate and wholesome living cannot but seem, like paintings viewed too near, to lose in gusto and winsomeness. Desire, perhaps a craving hunger, awakens for the impossible. No emotion, whatever be its sincerity, is endured without a side-glance toward its capabilities for being written about. The world, in short, inclines to appear an ill-lit mine, wherein one quarries gingerly amidst an abiding loneliness (as with Pope and Ufford and Sire Raimbaut)—and wherein one very often is allured into unsavory alleys (as with Herrick and Alessandro de Medici)—in search of that raw material which loving labor will transshape into comeliness.

Such, if it be allowed to shift the metaphor, are the treacherous by-paths of that admirably policed highway whereon the well-groomed and well-bitted Pegasi of Vanderhoffen and Charteris (in his later manner) trot stolidly and safely toward oblivion. And the result of wandering afield is of necessity a tragedy, in that the deviator's life, if not as an artist's quite certainly as a human being's, must in the outcome be adjudged a failure.

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II

And this much said, it is permissible to hope, at least, that here and there some reader may be found not wholly blind to this book's goal, whatever be his opinion as to this book's success in reaching it. Yet many honest souls there be among us average-novel-readers in whose eyes this

volume must rest content to figure as a collection of short stories having naught in common beyond the feature that each deals with the *affaires du coeur* of a poet.

Such must always be the book's interpretation by mental indolence. The fact is incontestable; and this fact in itself may be taken as sufficient to establish the inexpediency of publishing *The Certain Hour*. For that "people will not buy a volume of short stories" is notorious to all publishers. To offset the axiom there are no doubt incongruous phenomena—ranging from the continued popularity of the Bible to the present general esteem of Mr. Kipling, and embracing the rather unaccountable vogue of "O. Henry";—but, none the less, the superstition has its force.

Here intervenes the multifariousness of man, pointed out somewhere by Mr. Gilbert Chesterton, which enables the individual to be at once a vegetarian, a golfer, a vestryman, a blond, a mammal, a Democrat, and an immortal spirit. As a rational person, one may debonairly consider *The Certain Hour* possesses as large license to look like a volume of short stories as, say, a backgammon-board has to its customary guise of a two-volume history; but as an average-novel-reader, one must vote otherwise. As an average-novel-reader, one must condemn the very book which, as a seasoned scribbler, one was moved to write through long consideration of the drama already suggested —that immemorial drama of the desire to write perfectly of beautiful happenings, and the obscure martyrdom to which this desire solicits its possessor.

Now, clearly, the struggle of a special temperament with a fixed force does not forthwith begin another story when the locale of combat shifts. The case is, rather, as when—with certainly an intervening change of apparel—Pompey fights Caesar at both Dyrrachium and Pharsalus, or as

when General Grant successively encounters General Lee at the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, Cold Harbor and Appomattox. The combatants remain unchanged, the question at issue is the same, the tragedy has continuity. And even so, from the time of Sire Raimbaut to that of John Charteris has a special temperament heart-hungrily confronted an ageless problem: at what cost now, in this fleet hour of my vigor, may one write perfectly of beautiful happenings?

Thus logic urges, with pathetic futility, inasmuch as we average-novel-readers are profoundly indifferent to both logic and good writing. And always the fact remains that to the mentally indolent this book may well seem a volume of disconnected short stories. All of us being more or less mentally indolent, this possibility constitutes a dire fault.

Three other damning objections will readily obtrude themselves: *The Certain Hour* deals with past epochs—beginning before the introduction of dinner-forks, and ending at that remote quaint period when people used to waltz and two-step—dead eras in which we average-novel-readers are not interested; *The Certain Hour* assumes an appreciable amount of culture and information on its purchaser's part, which we average-novel-readers either lack or, else, are unaccustomed to employ in connection with reading for pastime; and—in our eyes the crowning misdemeanor—*The Certain Hour* is not "vital."

Having thus candidly confessed these faults committed as the writer of this book, it is still possible in human multifariousness to consider their enormity, not merely in this book, but in fictional reading-matter at large, as viewed by an average-novel-reader—by a representative of that potent class whose preferences dictate the nature and main trend of modern American literature. And to do this, it

may be, throws no unsalutary sidelight upon the still-existent problem: at what cost, now, may one attempt to write perfectly of beautiful happenings?

III

Indisputably the most striking defect of this modern American literature is the fact that the production of anything at all resembling literature is scarcely anywhere apparent. Innumerable printing-presses, instead, are turning out a vast quantity of reading-matter, the candidly recognized purpose of which is to kill time, and which—it has been asserted, though perhaps too sweepingly—ought not to be vended over book-counters, but rather in drugstores along with the other narcotics.

It is begging the question to protest that the class of people who a generation ago read nothing now at least read novels, and to regard this as a change for the better. By similar logic it would be more wholesome to breakfast off laudanum than to omit the meal entirely. The nineteenth century, in fact, by making education popular, has produced in America the curious spectacle of a reading-public with essentially nonliterary tastes. Formerly, better books were published, because they were intended for persons who turned to reading through a natural bent of mind; whereas the modern American novel of commerce is addressed to us average people who read, when we read at all, in violation of every innate instinct.

Such grounds as yet exist for hopefulness on the part of those who cordially care for *belles lettres* are to be found elsewhere than in the crowded market-places of fiction, where genuine intelligence panders on all sides to ignorance and indolence. The phrase may seem to have no very civil ring; but reflection will assure the fair-minded

that two indispensable requisites nowadays of a pecuniarily successful novel are, really, that it make no demand upon the reader's imagination, and that it rigorously refrain from assuming its reader to possess any particular information on any subject whatever. The author who writes over the head of the public is the most dangerous enemy of his publisher—and the most insidious as well, because so many publishers are in private life interested in literary matters, and would readily permit this personal foible to influence the exercise of their vocation were it possible to do so upon the preferable side of bankruptcy.

But publishers, among innumerable other conditions, must weigh the fact that no novel which does not deal with modern times is ever really popular among the serious-minded. It is difficult to imagine a tale whose action developed under the rule of the Caesars or the Merovingians being treated as more than a literary *hors d'oeuvre*. We purchasers of "vital" novels know nothing about the period, beyond a hazy association of it with the restrictions of the schoolroom; our sluggish imaginations instinctively rebel against the exertion of forming any notion of such a period; and all the human nature that exists even in serious-minded persons is stirred up to resentment against the book's author for presuming to know more than a potential patron. The book, in fine, simply irritates the serious-minded person; and she—for it is only women who willingly brave the terrors of department-stores, where most of our new books are bought nowadays—quite naturally puts it aside in favor of some keen and daring study of American life that is warranted to grip the reader. So, modernity of scene is everywhere necessitated as an essential qualification for a book's discussion at the literary evenings of the local woman's club; and modernity of scene, of course, is almost always fatal to the permanent worth of fictitious narrative.

It may seem banal here to recall the truism that first-class art never reproduces its surroundings; but such banality is often justified by our human proneness to shuffle over the fact that many truisms are true. And this one is pre-eminently indisputable: that what mankind has generally agreed to accept as first-class art in any of the varied forms of fictitious narrative has never been a truthful reproduction of the artist's era. Indeed, in the higher walks of fiction art has never reproduced anything, but has always dealt with the facts and laws of life as so much crude material which must be transmuted into comeliness. When Shakespeare pronounced his celebrated dictum about art's holding the mirror up to nature, he was no doubt alluding to the circumstance that a mirror reverses everything which it reflects.

Nourishment for much wildish speculation, in fact, can be got by considering what the world's literature would be, had its authors restricted themselves, as do we Americans so sedulously—and unavoidably—to writing of contemporaneous happenings. In fiction-making no author of the first class since Homer's infancy has ever in his happier efforts concerned himself at all with the great "problems" of his particular day; and among geniuses of the second rank you will find such ephemeralities adroitly utilized only when they are distorted into enduring parodies of their actual selves by the broad humor of a Dickens or the colossal fantasy of a Balzac. In such cases as the latter two writers, however, we have an otherwise competent artist handicapped by a personality so marked that, whatever he may nominally write about, the result is, above all else, an exposure of the writer's idiosyncrasies. Then, too, the laws of any locale wherein Mr. Pickwick achieves a competence in business, or of a society wherein Vautrin becomes chief of police, are upon the face of it extra-mundane. It suffices that, as a general rule, in fiction-

making the true artist finds an ample, if restricted, field wherein the proper functions of the preacher, or the ventriloquist, or the photographer, or of the public prosecutor, are exercised with equal lack of grace.

Besides, in dealing with contemporary life a novelist is goaded into too many pusillanimous concessions to plausibility. He no longer moves with the gait of omnipotence. It was very different in the palmy days when Dumas was free to play at ducks and drakes with history, and Victor Hugo to reconstruct the whole system of English government, and Scott to compel the sun to set in the east, whenever such minor changes caused to flow more smoothly the progress of the tale these giants had in hand. These freedoms are not tolerated in American noveldom, and only a few futile "high-brows" sigh in vain for Thackeray's "happy harmless Fableland, where these things are." The majority of us are deep in "vital" novels. Nor is the reason far to seek.

IV

One hears a great deal nowadays concerning "vital" books. Their authors have been widely praised on very various grounds. Oddly enough, however, the writers of these books have rarely been commended for the really praiseworthy charity evinced therein toward that large long-suffering class loosely describable as the average-novel-reader.

Yet, in connection with this fact, it is worthy of more than passing note that no great while ago the *New York Times'* carefully selected committee, in picking out the hundred best books published during a particular year, declared as to novels—"a 'best' book, in our opinion, is one that raises an important question, or recurs to a vital theme and

pronounces upon it what in some sense is a last word." Now this definition is not likely ever to receive more praise than it deserves. Cavilers may, of course, complain that actually to write the last word on any subject is a feat reserved for the Recording Angel's unique performance on judgment Day. Even setting that objection aside, it is undeniable that no work of fiction published of late in America corresponds quite so accurately to the terms of this definition as do the multiplication tables. Yet the multiplication tables are not without their claims to applause as examples of straightforward narrative. It is, also, at least permissible to consider that therein the numeral five, say, where it figures as protagonist, unfolds under the stress of its varying adventures as opulent a development of real human nature as does, through similar ups-and-downs, the Reverend John Hodder in *The Inside of the Cup*. It is equally allowable to find the less simple evolution of the digit seven more sympathetic, upon the whole, than those of Undine Spragg in *The Custom of the Country*. But, even so, this definition of what may now, authoritatively, be ranked as a "best novel" is an honest and noteworthy severance from misleading literary associations such as have too long befogged our notions about reading-matter. It points with emphasis toward the altruistic obligations of tale-tellers to be "vital."

For we average-novel-readers—we average people, in a word—are now, as always, rather pathetically hungry for "vital" themes, such themes as appeal directly to our everyday observation and prejudices. Did the decision rest with us all novelists would be put under bond to confine themselves forevermore to themes like these.

As touches the appeal to everyday observation, it is an old story, at least coeval with Mr. Crummles' not uncelebrated pumps and tubs, if not with the grapes of

Zeuxis, how unfailingly in art we delight to recognize the familiar. A novel whose scene of action is explicit will always interest the people of that locality, whatever the book's other pretensions to consideration. Given simultaneously a photograph of Murillo's rendering of *The Virgin Crowned Queen of Heaven* and a photograph of a governor's installation in our State capital, there is no one of us but will quite naturally look at the latter first, in order to see if in it some familiar countenance be recognizable. And thus, upon a larger scale, the twentieth century is, pre-eminently, interested in the twentieth century.

It is all very well to describe our average-novel-readers' dislike of Romanticism as "the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass." It is even within the scope of human dunderheadedness again to point out here that the supreme artists in literature have precisely this in common, and this alone, that in their masterworks they have avoided the "vital" themes of their day with such circumspection as lesser folk reserve for the smallpox. The answer, of course, in either case, is that the "vital" novel, the novel which peculiarly appeals to us average-novel-readers, has nothing to do with literature. There is between these two no more intelligent connection than links the paint Mr. Sargent puts on canvas and the paint Mr. Dockstader puts on his face.

Literature is made up of the re-readable books, the books which it is possible—for the people so constituted as to care for that sort of thing—to read again and yet again with pleasure. Therefore, in literature a book's subject is of astonishingly minor importance, and its style nearly everything: whereas in books intended to be read for pastime, and forthwith to be consigned at random to the wastebasket or to the inmates of some charitable institute, the theme is of paramount importance, and ought to be a serious one. The modern novelist owes it to his public to

select a "vital" theme which in itself will fix the reader's attention by reason of its familiarity in the reader's everyday life.

Thus, a lady with whose more candid opinions the writer of this is more frequently favored nowadays than of old, formerly confessed to having only one set rule when it came to investment in new reading-matter—always to buy the Williamsons' last book. Her reason was the perfectly sensible one that the Williamsons' plots used invariably to pivot upon motor-trips, and she is an ardent automobilist. Since, as of late, the Williamsons have seen fit to exercise their typewriter upon other topics, they have as a matter of course lost her patronage.

This principle of selection, when you come to appraise it sanely, is the sole intelligent method of dealing with reading-matter. It seems here expedient again to state the peculiar problem that we average-novel-readers have of necessity set the modern novelist—namely, that his books must in the main appeal to people who read for pastime, to people who read books only under protest and only when they have no other employment for that particular half-hour.

Now, reading for pastime is immensely simplified when the book's theme is some familiar matter of the reader's workaday life, because at outset the reader is spared considerable mental effort. The motorist above referred to, and indeed any average-novel-reader, can without exertion conceive of the Williamsons' people in their automobiles. Contrariwise, were these fictitious characters embarked in palankeens or droshkies or jinrikishas, more or less intellectual exercise would be necessitated on the reader's part to form a notion of the conveyance. And we average-novel-readers do not open a book with the intention of

making a mental effort. The author has no right to expect of us an act so unhabitual, we very poignantly feel. Our prejudices he is freely chartered to stir up—if, lucky rogue, he can!—but he ought with deliberation to recognize that it is precisely in order to avoid mental effort that we purchase, or borrow, his book, and afterward discuss it.

Hence arises our heartfelt gratitude toward such novels as deal with "vital" themes, with the questions we average-novel-readers confront or make talk about in those happier hours of our existence wherein we are not reduced to reading. Thus, a tale, for example, dealing either with "feminism" or "white slavery" as the handiest makeshift of spinsterdom—or with the divorce habit and plutocratic iniquity in general, or with the probable benefits of converting clergymen to Christianity, or with how much more than she knows a desirable mother will tell her children—finds the book's tentative explorer, just now, amply equipped with prejudices, whether acquired by second thought or second hand, concerning the book's topic. As endurability goes, reading the book rises forthwith almost to the level of an afternoon-call where there is gossip about the neighbors and Germany's future. We average-novel-readers may not, in either case, agree with the opinions advanced; but at least our prejudices are aroused, and we are interested.

And these "vital" themes awake our prejudices at the cost of a minimum—if not always, as when Miss Corelli guides us, with a positively negligible— tasking of our mental faculties. For such exemption we average-novel-readers cannot but be properly grateful. Nay, more than this: provided the novelist contrive to rouse our prejudices, it matters with us not at all whether afterward they be soothed or harrowed. To implicate our prejudices somehow, to raise in us a partizanship in the tale's progress, is our

sole request. Whether this consummation be brought about through an arraignment of some social condition which we personally either advocate or reprehend—the attitude weighs little—or whether this interest be purchased with placidly driveling preachments of generally "uplifting" tendencies—vaguely titillating that vague intention which exists in us all of becoming immaculate as soon as it is perfectly convenient—the personal prejudices of us average-novel-readers are not lightly lulled again to sleep.

In fact, the jealousy of any human prejudice against hinted encroachment may safely be depended upon to spur us through an astonishing number of pages—for all that it has of late been complained among us, with some show of extenuation, that our original intent in beginning certain of the recent "vital" novels was to kill time, rather than eternity. And so, we average-novel-readers plod on jealously to the end, whether we advance (to cite examples already somewhat of yesterday) under the leadership of Mr. Upton Sinclair aspersing the integrity of modern sausages and millionaires, or of Mr. Hall Caine saying about Roman Catholics what ordinary people would hesitate to impute to their relatives by marriage—or whether we be more suavely allured onward by Mrs. Florence Barclay, or Mr. Sydnor Harrison, with ingenuous indorsements of the New Testament and the inherent womanliness of women.

The "vital" theme, then, let it be repeated, has two inestimable advantages which should commend it to all novelists: first, it spares us average-novel-readers any preliminary orientation, and thereby mitigates the mental exertion of reading; and secondly, it appeals to our prejudices, which we naturally prefer to exercise, and are accustomed to exercise, rather than our mental or idealistic faculties. The novelist who conscientiously bears these two facts in mind is reasonably sure of his reward, not merely