



Reminiscences of a Story-teller

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by

Wilkie Collins

The Wilkie Collins Society  
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WILKIE COLLINS.

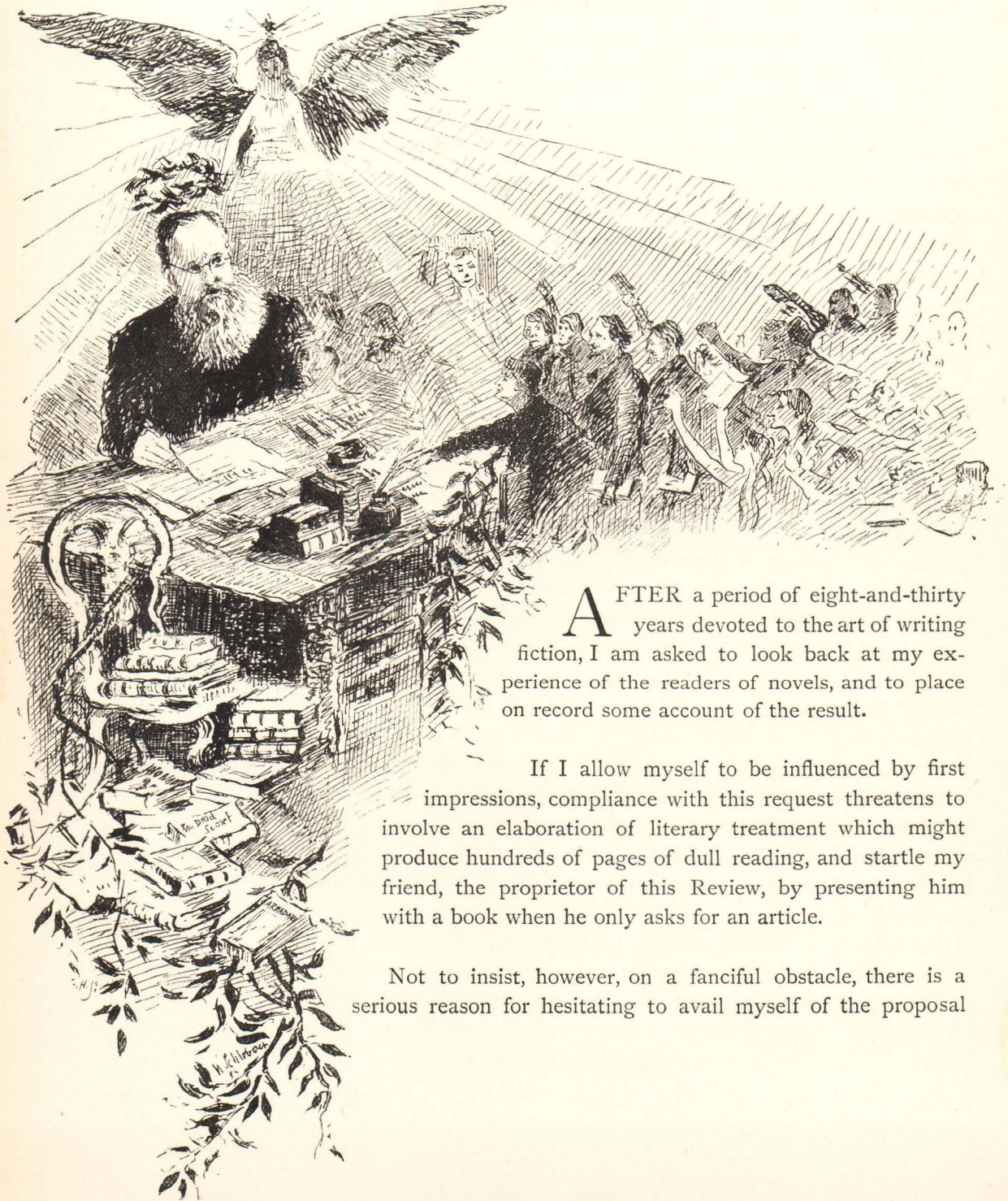
## REMINISCENCES OF A STORYTELLER

'Reminiscences of a Story-teller' originally appeared in the June 1888 issue of the Universal Review with the illustration by Willy Schlobach. Published almost at the end of Collins' career, between Little Novels and The Legacy of Cain, it is one of his rare autobiographical essays. When pressed for memoirs a few months later, in January 1889, he was to write to the American publisher, Edward Bok, '... we have had (to my mind) more "Reminiscences" latterly published in England than are really wanted. It will soon become a distinction not to have written ones autobiography'.

The lavishly produced Universal Review was founded and edited by the wealthy young journalist, Harry Quilter. It ran from May 1888 and other contributors included Samuel Butler, Alphonse Daudet, Victor Hugo and Quilter, himself. Some of the best known illustrators were Walter Crane, W.P.Frith, Sir Frederick Leighton and Carlo Perugini, Kate Dickens' second husband.

Collins and Quilter became good friends during the late 1880's and after Collins' death Quilter wrote a lengthy tribute, 'In Memoriam Amici', for the October 1889 issue of the Universal Review. He also tried without success to set up a permanent memorial to Wilkie in Westminster Abbey or St Paul's 'to secure some public recognition of Wilkie Collins' long service to literature'.

## Reminiscences of a Story-teller



AFTER a period of eight-and-thirty years devoted to the art of writing fiction, I am asked to look back at my experience of the readers of novels, and to place on record some account of the result.

If I allow myself to be influenced by first impressions, compliance with this request threatens to involve an elaboration of literary treatment which might produce hundreds of pages of dull reading, and startle my friend, the proprietor of this Review, by presenting him with a book when he only asks for an article.

Not to insist, however, on a fanciful obstacle, there is a serious reason for hesitating to avail myself of the proposal

with which I have been favoured. I should be insensible indeed if I did not gratefully feel my obligations to the kindness of readers at home and abroad. At the same time I must not forget that there are exceptions to rules in all human affairs—the modest affairs of a literary man even included. Some of my relations with readers (English readers for the most part) have not been always amicably maintained. I find these words prefixed, more than a quarter of a century since, to the first cheap editions of one of my early novels called 'Basil': 'On its appearance this work was condemned offhand by a certain class of readers as an outrage on their sense of propriety. Conscious of having designed and written my story with the strictest regard to true delicacy as distinguished from false, I allowed the purient misinterpretation of certain perfectly innocent passages in this book to assert itself as offensively as it pleased, without troubling myself to protest against an expression of opinion which aroused in me no other feeling than a feeling of contempt.' The conviction of the duty that I owed to my art, expressed in those terms, has remained my conviction to the present time. In the thousands of pages that I have written, I never remember to have asked myself: Will this passage be favourably received if the prying eyes of prudery discover my book? But if I am to write of readers of novels with anything approaching to a complete treatment of the subject, that section of the public which I now have in my mind must be included, or my record of experience will not be complete. Never having attached any importance to the opinions of these people, I have no inclination to notice them. I do not address them in my writings; neither do I care to remember them in this place.

Renouncing, for these reasons, any attempt at a serious presentation of the subject suggested to me, I think I see an alternative which permits me to gossip when I do not presume to instruct. What I might say in conversation with a friend can be said perhaps to many friends who will open these pages. They may accept a little light talk growing out of casual recollections, if they will kindly consent to be amused on easier conditions than I once encountered, when I was compelled to address my first audience in the bedroom at school.

The oldest of the boys, appointed to preserve order, was placed in authority over us as captain of the room. He was as fond of hearing stories, when he had retired for the night, as the Oriental despot to whose literary tastes we are indebted for 'The Arabian Nights'; and I was the unhappy boy chosen to amuse him. It was useless to ask for

mercy and beg leave to be allowed to go to sleep. 'You will go to sleep, Collins, when you have told me a story.' In the event of my consenting to keep awake and to do my best, I was warned beforehand to 'be amusing if I wished to come out of it with comfort to myself.' If I rebelled, the captain possessed a means of persuasion in the shape of an improved cat-o'-ninetails invented by himself. When I was obstinate, I felt the influence of persuasion. When my better sense prevailed, I learnt to be amusing on a short notice—and have derived benefit from those early lessons at a later period of my life. Like other despots, the captain had his intervals of generosity ; I owe to his system of rewarding me that 'passion for pastry' to which Byron tells us he was indebted for the privilege of reading Wordsworth's poetry. In after years, I never had an opportunity of reminding the captain that I had served my apprenticeship to story-telling under his superintendence. He went to India with good prospects, and died, poor fellow, a few years only after he had left school.

I have now to try if I can tell some stories of readers. Let me endeavour to be amusing at the other end of my life.

## II

Some years since, being one of the guests at a large dinner party, I discovered a variety among the groups of individuals known to civilised society under the name of novel-readers.

The master of the house presented me (unfortunately, as the event proved) to the lady whom I was to escort to the dinner-table. A lazy, genial, companionable man, he numbered among his many social accomplishments a cultivated taste for all that is most enjoyable in the best eating and drinking. 'There's a devilish good dinner to-day,' he whispered to me ; 'leave it to the lady to do all the talking.' Before I could say 'Thank you,' I was presented. It might have been due to hurry, or it might have been due to hunger, my friend's articulation failed to convey to me any accurate idea of the lady's name. Before we had been long seated together at dinner, I became aware that my predicament was her predicament also. And this was how it happened.

As well as I can remember, we had only arrived at that second act in the drama of dinner which may be called the fish act, when my neighbour began to talk of novels. To a man who has been hard at

work all day writing a novel, this interesting subject fails (especially in the hands of amateurs) to produce the effervescent freshness which stimulates the mind. I listened languidly. The lady's method of criticism divided the works of my colleagues into books that she liked and books that she hated. On my side, I made such polite answers as are consistent with proper attention to one's fish; and I really thought we three—I mean the lady, the fish, and the present writer—were getting on very well, when she suddenly turned to me, like a person inspired by a new idea, and said:

‘I hope you don't like Wilkie Collins's novels?’

The enviable faculty which can say the right thing on the spur of the moment is possessed by few people; and I am not one of that quick-witted minority. The nearest visible refuge I could see presented itself under the form of prevarication. I had only to remember that I had written the novels, and the reply was obvious:

‘I haven't read them.’

The lady sincerely congratulated me; she was apparently, though I had not noticed it hitherto, a kind-hearted woman. I ventured nevertheless to change the subject. When we had done with novels, one of us was silently contented, and the other talked. I think our politics were Conservative; and our fashionable views on the art of music preferred noise to tune. The dinner reached its end at last; the ladies left us to our wine; and, in due time, we too rose from the table and followed them upstairs.

The moment I entered the drawing-room the mistress of the house made a signal to me with her fan. We sat down together in a distant corner, and I heard a confession. My friend's wife began by acknowledging that she had made a sad mistake. ‘But it is really not my fault,’ she pleaded. ‘When we left the dining-room, the lady whom you took down to dinner mentioned you to me as a pleasant intelligent sort of man. “I didn't catch the name,” she said, “when your husband introduced us; who is he?” I innocently told her who you were—and provoked, to my utter amazement, an outburst of indignation. It seems that she had expressed an opinion about your books——.’ There we both burst out laughing; but the serious part of it was still to come. My reply was declared by the angry lady to have been unworthy of a gentleman. ‘A well-bred man,’ she said, ‘would have mentioned his



name.' This was surely a matter of opinion? I persisted in claiming for myself the modest merit of good intentions. My impulse was to spare the lady the embarrassment which she might possibly have felt if I had let her discover that I was the writer of the books which she hoped that I hated. My hostess agreed with me. 'The best of it is,' she said, 'that this curious friend of mine wasn't able to answer me, when I asked how it was that your books had failed to please her. She said: "Oh, how should I know?"' This quaint reply interested me: it exhibited a state of mind which I had hitherto unaccountably overlooked. Assisted by the experience of later years I have discovered that the readers who like a book or dislike a book without knowing why are fairly represented, in respect of numbers, among the readers of novels. There is undoubtedly something to be said in favour of this independent frame of mind. Disputatious people are not able to entrap you into an argument; inquisitive people find it useless to ask for your reasons; you and your novel are on strictly confidential terms, and you keep your secret.

At the same time it is not to be denied that those persons who can give their reasons—by means generally of letters to the author—for offering or refusing a friendly welcome to a work of fiction, are readers who interest the novelist, although they write as strangers to him. Whether they are critics who praise or critics who blame—whether they are foolish and spiteful or wise and generous—they at least pay the writer of the book the compliment of taking him into their confidence. Sometimes they bear witness unconsciously to the extraordinary coincidences which so often present themselves in real life. Sometimes they write autobiography without knowing it, and present their own characters as freely to a stranger as if they were writing to their oldest and dearest friend.

I remember hearing from a reader (apparently apt to take offence) that he had closed 'The Woman in White' before he had got half way through the story because I had committed 'a violation of the sanctity of private life.' This gentleman's house and estate happened to be situated in one of the few English counties which I have never seen. I had not heard of his name, or of the name of his house; none of my friends, when I made inquiries, had the honour of knowing him. I was accused, nevertheless, of privately entering his park, and availing myself of certain defects in the scenery (left unimproved through want of pecuniary means) for the purely selfish purpose of writing a piece of picturesque description. My offence will be found, by anyone who

cares to look for it, at page 157 of the edition of the novel in one volume. The character named 'Miss Halcombe' is supposed to be writing a description of a stagnant piece of water in the grounds of a house called Blackwater Park, and she expresses herself in these terms: 'The lake had evidently once flowed to the place on which I stood, and had been gradually wasted and dried up to a third of its former size. I saw its still, stagnant waters a quarter of a mile away from me in the hollow, separated into pools and ponds by twining reeds and rushes and little knolls of earth. . . . Nearer to the marshy side of the lake I observed, lying half in and half out of the water, the rotten wreck of an old overturned boat, with a sickly spot of sunlight glimmering through a gap in the trees on its dry surface, and a snake basking in the midst of the spot, fantastically coiled and treacherously still.' Every word of this description, my correspondent assured me, applied to *his* lake—diminished, as I had treacherously discovered, to a third of its original size. The pools of stagnant water were his pools; the old overturned boat was his boat; the spot of sunlight shone on it through the trees, and the snakes basked in the warm light! Here, in short, was one of the strange coincidences, found constantly in the world of reality, reviled as improbabilities in the world of fiction. I made no attempt to reply in my own defence. In the first place, my correspondent would have refused to believe me; in the second place, I was not in the least angry with him. Had he not been so good as to inform me, on his own authority, that I had written a description which was true to nature?

I may also thank 'Count Fosco' for having laid me under similar obligations. He has introduced me to more of the readers who, when they dislike a story, can tell the reason why. A bourgeois of Paris, reading 'The Woman in White,' in a French translation, wrote to say that he had flung the book to the other end of the room on discovering that 'Fosco' was an absolutely perfect likeness of himself. He naturally insisted on receiving satisfaction for this insult, leaving the choice of swords or pistols to me as the challenged person. Information, on which he could rely, had assured him that I meditated a journey to Paris early in the ensuing week. A hostile meeting might, under such circumstances, be easily arranged. His letter ended with these terrible words: 'J'attendrai Monsieur Vilkie avec deux témoins à la gare.' Arriving at Paris, I looked for my honourable opponent. But one formidable person presented himself whom I could have wounded with pleasure—the despot who insisted on examining my luggage.

A lady was so good as to inform me of another objection to the same story. She considered it to be the work of an incompetent writer, and here again 'Count Fosco' was to blame. When he made his appearance on the scene the feebleness of that conception of the character of a villain had destroyed my fair correspondent's interest in the novel. If I thought of trying again, she would be glad if I would call on her. From her own experience she would undertake to provide me with literary materials for the presentation of the most tremendous scoundrel that had ever darkened the pages of fiction. 'You may depend on my observing the strictest truth to nature,' the lady wrote, 'for the man I have in my eye is my husband.' But one incident was required to make this proposal complete, and that incident was not wanting. Her husband was a friend of mine.

Let me not forget to do justice to a select few among the readers of novels. Here we find those excellent Christians who return good for evil. Letters, in this case, arrive accompanied by a gift, at the sight of which humanity shudders. It is known to the martyrs of literature as a manuscript. Your last work, the letter informs you, has been read with the deepest interest, accompanied (alas!) by a feeling of regret. The central idea of your story happens, by an extraordinary coincidence, to have been exactly the idea which occurred to your reader. 'Let me not shock you, dear sir, by describing toil uselessly endured, and noble aspirations completely thrown away. I make you a present of my poor work. It may suggest improvements in your next edition. Or, your well-known kindness of heart may induce you to give the public an opportunity of judging between the first effort of a young person and the matured work of the great master. Any remuneration which the publisher may offer, under your advice, will be gratefully accepted by yours truly.' Mine truly is sometimes an unhappy man who has been compelled to pawn his clothes, or sometimes a mother of a family who has employed her humble pen in the intervals of domestic anxiety. People talk about pathos. Ah! here it is, isn't it?

Then, again, there is the truly considerate reader.

He may only appear at intervals, but he claims notice, in respect of his polite aversion to troubling you with a letter. The considerate reader knows what large demands on your valuable time must be made by correspondence, and he will call on you personally. Speaking for myself, I view him with a feeling of reluctant admiration; he represents,

so far as my observation extends, the only entirely fortunate human being to be found on the face of the earth. Other people whom it is not convenient to receive, on certain days, you can succeed in keeping out of the house when your servant says: 'Not at home.' The considerate reader who calls on you is the favourite child of spiteful chance, and gets into your house by lucky accident. For example, the servant who opens your door happens to have gone out for a few minutes. In those minutes, the favourite of fortune rings at the bell, and is let in by the other servant who has not received instructions. Or, perhaps, you wish to see a person who is to call on a matter of business, at a given time, and the servant is told when to expect the arrival of the visitor. He has encountered an obstacle, and he is late by five minutes for his appointment. In those minutes the reader who will not trouble you with a letter arrives and says, 'How lucky to have found you at home!' Even when you are going out yourself, your chances of escape are not always favourable. As you open your door, a smiling stranger ascends the step from the street. 'Surely, I have the pleasure of seeing Mr. Collins?' And he will have the honour of accompanying Mr. Collins, whichever way that unlucky man may be going, for a few minutes only. These are not beggars in search of money. Perish the thought! They only want your interest for a son who is a candidate for this or that, or for an interesting young creature eager for a career in life open to a woman. Sometimes a romantic incident has taken place. A member of the family has mysteriously disappeared. To obtain the customary police assistance in tracing the fugitive is beyond the means of anxious relatives. You, who have invented such wonderful plots, need only exert your imagination and find the clue. Or, perhaps, an incautious young man, with the prospect before him of an excellent marriage, has been misled, while he happened to be taking a holiday in Scotland, by an audacious creature who declares that she is his lawful wife. 'You once wrote a novel about Scotch marriages. Oh, sir, it held everybody at home breathless from the first page to the last! All I want to know is—the law about Scotch marriages.' And these people, differing from each other in language and manner and personal appearance, all agree in having made the same formidable discovery. Your own books have turned traitors to you, and have informed the considerate reader that you have a kind heart.

Well, well! let us not permit ourselves to be annoyed by small troubles. How infinitely preferable to reflect on the compensations which present themselves in the literary career! It is in the power of

a writer to cheer the hearts of readers of a certain way of thinking, on the easiest imaginable terms. All that the novelist need do is to make a mistake—the more inexcusable the better—in the course of telling his story. To quote only one, among other instances (I regret to say) within my own experience, a little story of mine was published some time since, relating events which were supposed to happen in the year 1817. With that date confronting me, in my own writing, I was sufficiently careless, or sufficiently stupid, to represent my characters as travelling from place to place by railway. Now, everybody knows, including our old friend the typical Schoolboy, that the first railway on which carriages ran, drawn by a steam engine, was the Stockton and Darlington Railway, opened in 1825. I was the one ignorant exception to the general rule. Never before or since have I received letters brightened by such delightfully good spirits as the letters in which certain readers informed me that they had discovered my blunder. They were quite charmed with their favourite literary man for giving them this opportunity. Some of the theories which they advanced, in satirical explanation of the circumstances which might have pleaded my excuse, showed surprising ingenuity. It was plain that I could not possibly have been in a position to consult the most ordinary works of reference. Perhaps I was living in a tent in the great desert of Sahara. Or I was enjoying an Arctic drive on a sledge, on my way to the North Pole. Or I was lost in the recesses of a cavern in the Caucasus, and was writing, by the light of my last torch, with a gallant resolution to keep up my spirits under the prospect of being buried alive. One correspondent only addressed me seriously; he was a young man who described himself as ‘a mine of information.’ He suggested living with me (on a sufficient salary), so as to be always at hand, and able to enlighten me on a subject at any hour of the day or night. If I would make an appointment he would call with pleasure, and submit himself to examination. The bare idea of this living encyclopædia getting into the house, and dropping useful information all the way along the hall and up the stairs, put an end to the amusement which I had derived from the other letters. If that young man is still alive, and if his object was to frighten me, I beg to offer him the congratulations which celebrate and sweeten success.

Even the circumstances accompanying a journey by railway sometimes lead to the discovery of new varieties among readers. I once travelled in the same carriage with a dexterous old lady who was carrying on two different employments at one and the same time.

While she was knitting industriously, she was also engaged in reading a book. It lay on her lap, and her accommodating companion turned over the pages. After a while the work seemed to lose its hold on the interest of the venerable reader. She shut it up. The companion said: 'Don't you like your book?' The old lady pronounced sentence in a strong Northern accent: 'Poor stoof.' As she handed the volume to her companion I recognised the illustration. Far be it from me to deny that the novel might have been poor stuff. Shall I also acknowledge that I hated the old lady? No, no; nothing quite so bad as that; let me say that she sank in my estimation. Poor humanity—and when it is literary humanity, poorest of all!

On another occasion I encountered a mitigated severity of criticism. My travelling companions were a clergyman, portly and prosperous, accompanied by two daughters. Before long, Papa fell asleep. After a sly look at him, one of the young ladies opened her travelling bag and took out a book. She dropped the book, and I picked it up for her. It was a cheap edition of 'The New Magdalen.' She reddened a little as she thanked me. I observed with interest the soft round object, sacred to British clap-trap—the cheek of the young person—and I thought of a dear old friend, praised after his death by innumerable humbugs, who discovered the greatness of his art in its incapability of disturbing the complexion of young Miss. The clergyman's daughter interested me; she was really absorbed over her reading. Papa began to snore, and failed to interrupt her. Her sister got tired of looking out of window at the landscape, and put a question: 'Is it interesting?' The fair reader answered: 'It's perfectly dreadful.' The sister tried another question: 'Who is the new Magdalen?' 'Oh, my dear, it's impossible to speak of her; wait till you read it yourself.' Time went on and Papa showed symptoms of returning to a state of consciousness. The new Magdalen instantly disappeared, and the young person caught me looking at her cheek. It reddened a little again. Alas for my art! It was worse than 'poor stoof' this time; it was stuff concealed from Papa, stuff which raised the famous Blush, stuff registered on the Expurgatory Index of the national cant. Who will praise the new Magdalen when I am dead and gone? Not one humbug—thank God!

Are there readers still left whose portraits have not yet been painted in these pages?

No. The readers who still remain are not asked to sit for their

likenesses; and for this reason—the painter is doubtful if he could do them justice. He is now in the presence of an audience which makes the only literary reputations that last—the intelligent readers of the civilised world. They represent all nations and all ranks. Whether they praise or whether they blame, their opinions are equally worth having. They not only understand us, they help us. Many a good work of fiction has profited by their letters when they write to the author. Over and over again he has been indebted to their stores of knowledge, and to their quick sympathies, for information of serious importance to his work which he could not otherwise have obtained. When a novel extends its influence over more than one public and more than one country, it is still their doing. They are heard to speak of the story among themselves, and their words give reasons for the faith that is in them. In places of private assembly and in places of public amusement, their opinions flow, in ever-widening circles, over the outlying mass of average readers, and send them on their way to the work of art, when they might stray to the false pretence. In one last word, our intelligent readers are our truest and best friends, when we are worthy of them. Their influence has raised fiction to the great place that it occupies in the front of Literature.

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