

OBSERVATIONS

BY SARAH B. HARRIS

Two Novels

THE vogue of the historical novel is at last waning. Slashed doublets, gauntlet gloves, castellated operatic boots and Odds wats are going out. Everything wears out, but this fashion has lasted over time. The Meisterschaft system flourished for a time as the newly discovered royal path to the attainment of foreign languages.

The vogue of the historical novel is partly due to the desire for culture coupled with an unwillingness to apply one's mind to knowledge. Fair ladies and amiable gentlemen with ideals of polish still unattained, think that in the Waverly novels they will learn all about the history of England without having to suffer the drudgery of committing genealogical tables, and if they read the novels whose scenes are laid in the American revolutionary or pre-revolutionary period they fancy it will have the same effect as a university course in American history. And for those who have a gift of concealing what they do not know and displaying every shred of what they do know perhaps the diluted and conventionalized history found in the historical romance is quite strong enough. To have one target and hit it in the center is better and much less wearisome to the spectator who is watching the marksman than to fire with a scattering load in the general direction of several targets with no perceptible effect on any of them.

There are novelists who elect to mix history with a love story who would make excellent historians, so painstaking, patient, fairminded and clear-sighted are they. On the other hand there are historians like Lord Maccauley who would have made in his day—which was a day of fine writing and of Addisonian periods—a distinguished novelist. Lord Maccauley had the novelist's virtue and the historian's fault of getting interested in the men and women whose biographies and public and private careers he made it his business to investigate. He made heroes, heroines and villains of his kings, queens and commoners. In fact Lord Maccauley is the author of the best historical novels ever written. But to the end of time and catalogs they will continue to occupy the historical alcove of the library.

The unpretensions but interesting stories issued by Harper and Brothers, called the American Novel series, are in the way of a return to an exclusive consideration of the unmixed heart-interest. If the scene be laid in a time that is gone it is a matter of atmosphere and not of historical detail. Men and women long past the age when the love motif, except retrospectively and as a matter of keeping vows made in youth, is of any personal importance or influence, still like to read love stories, prefer them indeed to detective tales and Monte Cristo dramas of the impossible. The most commonplace, bandy-legged, middle-aged party is to himself, in the isolated desert where everyone dwells, forever a hero of romance and the pivotal center of a thrilling love story. The more insignificant the man actually is, the more time he has to work out the important part he plays in the melodrama that no one but himself knows anything about. Hence the popularity of the love story though all the possible combinations have long ago been exhausted.

"When Love is Young" is a story of a young man who is convinced that he was born to achieve great things in literature. He falls in love as a boy and falls out and in again with the types that appeal to the various stages of a young man's development. Roy Rolfe Gilson, the author, appears to be a very young man. He has the naivete of youth, the conviction that he is born

to large accomplishment. It appears in confidential interviews with the several young ladies who intermittently please his hero to the point of matrimony. That brave strut of youth? Those who have failed and those who have succeeded observe it with amusement. Older candidates for fortune conceal their hopes and convictions, but youth forever offers its unripe future to the maiden.

The most interesting part of the book is the story of the hero's boyhood, schooldays and schoolmates. The chapter on the sentimental stock exchange, when Robbie Dale and his chum have reached stocks and bonds in the arithmetic shows that they immediately applied their knowledge: "You see," the promoter explained, "it's this way: you take the name of one of the girls—say Violet. Supposing Violet comes to school in the morning and she's nice to you, smiles or says 'Hello' or anything like that—why she goes up. But if she's flip or thinks she's smart—why she drops. See?"

Without pretending to make a study of anything in character or economics, such stories are the recreation of an hour. They are in literature what the light opera is in the drama, and they perform the notable function of recreation.

"The Debatable Land" in the same series makes a more comprehensive study of type. There is a description of a battle which recalls the Red Badge of Courage, and you get the sickening odor of carnage. It is a love story of modern American life. In the man called Morgan Map, Arthur Colton, the author, has portrayed a certain kind of American of frequent occurrence, but his portrait has not before been painted. So masculine that he has no intuition whatever, blunt, impervious, masterful, he gets his way by the energy of his own impetus. Not given to reflection any more than the original perfectly developed plesiosaurus, he is continually stepping on what he considers obstructions that are really higher forms of animal life. Morgan Map decides to marry a young woman. Her opposition has no more effect upon him than to make him more determined. He had one virtue. He is never ineffectual. He has bulk and a consciousness of power. He is no more introspective than a Corliss engine, but he occupies the center of the stage and he has the courage of his size, energy and simplicity. "That Morgan proposed a Napoleonic career for himself, that he proposed to dominate, to break through limits and oppositions, to drive a path through the jam of men wide enough for his shoulders to work in, was merely his own candid statement. A man was an engine for covering ground and arriving at ends, and malice was burned-out slack, likes and dislikes mostly whims."

The two books are love stories for a summer's day, but with a difference. "When Love Was Young" is subjective, written by a youngster for the love of writing, who has made the hero out of himself. "The Debatable Land" is an objective, scholarly study of types.

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Books of Knowledge

In the days of old when children were taught to read without the aid of charts or elaborate primers it is not recorded that teaching and learning were easier and quicker. Mature minds forget the ductility and mobility of a child's imagination. Poised lightly, a child's imagination is loosed without effort. The little Indian girl hugs a rudely-painted bone or stick wrapped in rags and it is to her a little paopoe. The imagination of the most civilized grown-up woman requires an art gallery, a stirring drama or something equally stimulating to produce the

same amount of illusion that the little Indian experiences without effort. In the days of the Franklin primer with illustrations of heavy outline pictures made like those with which George Ade illustrates his modern fables, whatever was lacking was supplied by the coloratura imaginations of our little great-grandfathers and mothers.

The kindergarten children of today are taught with colored balls and little colored jackstraws, cubes and cones. And parents are suddenly surprised by their children's exact knowledge of colors and shades of colors. So far as intellectual effort is concerned the children think they are playing. When books displace the kindergarten toys they, too, are brightly colored, and the youngsters are broken into the drudgery of learning before they realize the experiment that is being tried on them. "The Holton Primer" is a transition book from the kindergarten to the first grade. It has the binding of a story book. Every half-page is a picture in black and white or colors of babies, kittens, dogs, autumn leaves, flowers, fruit, et cetera. The letter-press is double-lead and the type is great-primer. For the tender, uncalled-for feet of little children perhaps it is best that the path of learning should appear to be lined with flowers and only gently inclined upwards. They stray into it at first because it looks more attractive than any other path. As they travel further and further from the starting point the royal road gets steeper and steeper and to get any view at all requires climbing. There are those who argue that the kindergarten unfits the children for effort and teaches them that the teacher will find a way of insinuating knowledge. The sturdy students that kindergarten children become and the bravery with which they attempt problems that old-fashioned pupils had to be coaxed to undertake is a sufficient answer to this criticism. The Holton Primer, compiled by Miss M. A. Holton, is an attractive book. The first lessons are made up of gossip about objects which the child sees constantly about him and with whose names he is perfectly familiar. He has already gone part of the way and when he finds he has been hypnotized into learning something he is surprised that learning is so easy and so pleasant.

"Child Stories from the Masters," by Maud Menefee, is a collection of stories, adapted to children, taken from the masterpieces of painters, dramatists and poets. Pippa from Browning's "Pippa Passes," the story of Mignon from Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, Siegfried from Wagner's Niebelungen, the story of how Margaret led Faust through the perfect world, the story of Saul and David and several others are told with poetic effect. The mysteries, poetry, aspirations of life haunt Miss Menefee's narrative style. The curious, un-named influences that tug at a child and disappear with the beautiful mists that hid things from our youth, are strengthened by such stories as Miss Menefee tells in the way she has told them. The stories are illustrated by photographs from pictures by Greuze, Le Febvre, Rosetti, Watts, Millet, Correggio, and Murillo.

There is a period in a boy's life and in a girl's too, when the craving for tales of adventure is only satiated by stories of heroes of not too fantastic and mythical a character to be imitated. The average uninspired earthy gamin likes tales of Indians and Indian killers better than those of Greek heroes and gods because he has perhaps a pair of moccasins, an arrow or two, enough turkey feathers for the construction of a head-dress and a little red paint. The Nebraska boys who follow a trail stealthily bending over and remaining carefully hidden in the deepest part of the draws are stepping in trails which living Indians have trod in the chase. The nearer savagery attracts the boys more than the myths of Horatio at the bridge because they can visualize it more clearly. The days of the mailed warrior, the spear and the shield are gone. Boys fashion swords and pistols out of wood and fall into the pigeon-toed stride of an Indian scout. They jeer at the casque, the

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