

The Compleat Novelist.

BY JAMES PAYN.



HAVE for years been subject to inquiries from persons utterly unknown to me (except that their name is Legion) as to how fame and fortune (but especially the latter) are to be won by writing novels. The college where the art of "How to write fiction" is to be taught, though well ventilated, is not yet, it appears, built. There are professors, but they have not regularly set to work; they resemble Ministers without portfolios, a class of statesmen the nature of whom is a puzzle to many persons; there are even books—handbooks, primers—published



on this subject, but they do not seem to have fulfilled their mission as guides to the Temple of Fame. Modesty and probability alike suggest that no advice of mine will be more successful. The service demanded of me is, in fact, rather a large order. The idea seems to be that the profession of a novelist (though Heaven knows we are no

conjurers) is similar to that of those *prestidigitateurs* who, after a performance, are prepared for a consideration to inform the curious how it is done. Still, as the inquirers are so numerous, and as that section of the public (though fast diminishing) which does not write novels seems also to take an interest in the subject, I propose to give a hint or two on it which may probably prove serviceable. The theme itself is by no means dull, and has features in it which are even amusing. I need not say that the correspondents who ask: "How to write Fiction," though they have probably written reams of it, have published nothing. When a man—and especially a woman—has done *that*, he wants advice from nobody, and exceedingly resents



it being offered. These, however, are all Peris (most of them female ones) standing more or less "disconsolate" at the gate of Eden (situated in Paternoster Row), whose "crystal bar" has proved immovable even to their tears.

"How shall I sit down to write a novel?" inquires one, pathetically, who obviously desires instruction from the very beginning. There is a greater choice about



this than she probably imagines. I knew one novelist who, while pursuing his trade, never sat down at all, but stood at a desk—which is how, not his legs, but his shoulders "got bowed." Another walks "to and fro" (like the Devil) seeking for ideas. A bishop, the other

day, revealed to us the fact that he always wrote on his knees; but the work, we conclude, was a devotional one, and not a



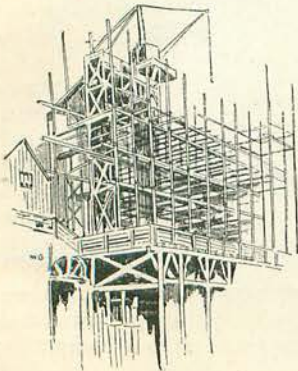
novel. One popular story-teller, to my personal knowledge, used to write upon his stomach (*i.e.*, lying upon it), with his reference books around him, like a sea beast among rocks.

This preliminary settled, however, my fair inquisitress asks me how to begin. This is an inquiry the importance of which is apt to be underrated, and, though an initial one, should not be the first. The first should be: "What shall I write about?" It is amazing how many of our story-tellers, and especially of the female ones, begin story-telling without having a story to tell. They start off, often at great speed, and sometimes too fast, but in no particular direction. "Where are you going to, my pretty maid?" is a question which, in their turn, might be asked of them. They are certainly not "going a-milking," if their milch cow is the public. It is fair



to say, however, that almost all beginners, whether male or female, fall into this error. Yet it is only geniuses who can write brilliantly about nothing. "There is no preparation, there is no mechanic," is a statement only applicable to great magicians. Think how the greatest novelists have, sooner or later, had to give their attention to plot! There have been, of course, some very fine character-novels; but these have not been written by beginners; to delineate character requires above all things experience and observation. As a general rule the advice that should be given to all budding novelists is: "Don't be in a hurry to blow. If you have no story to tell, wait till you get one."

The necessity indeed of having the plot of one's novel—or at all events the skeleton of it—arranged beforehand, is surely as obvious, when one comes to think of it, as that of knowing the lines of a ship,



or the plan of a building, before commencing their construction. Few of us, having determined to build our own houses without the aid of an architect, have not come to grief; I know one enterprising person who forgot the stairs.

If you only want a bungalow—a cottage on the ground floor—of course, this doesn't so much matter; and similarly, the smaller the story the less there need be of plot; but some sort of plan to work upon—subject to alteration and with plenty of room for additions—you must have. The question, of course, arises: How to get it? But this must be answered by the inquirer himself. It must depend upon some incident or circumstance more or less dramatic, which has made a deep impression on the writer's mind; it may have originated there (which is the better way) or it may have been communicated to it, but the impression must be deep. Moreover, it should not be recent; the longer he reflects upon it, as the cow chews the cud, the more likely he is to succeed with it. Half-a-dozen lines suffice in the first instance for the germ of the story. They look bald enough, but there are potentialities in them for those who can use them, just as music, the poet tells us, lies in the eggs of the nightingale. As the born story-teller dwells on them, they expand page after page. New incidents, new situations, new characters gradually present themselves as in some magic mirror. The two former may be the offspring of the imagination, but the latter should owe their being to memory: they should be studies from real life. Great care must, however, be taken to prevent recognition. The appearance, the neighbourhood, the profession of those portrayed should altogether differ from what they are in reality. Great distress of mind as respects this matter has been caused by many an undesigned coincidence, and all traces of personal resemblance should be concealed as carefully as an Indian hides his trail.

Whatever may be the merits of novels of character, it is certain that they do not appeal to the great world of readers as those do which deal with dramatic situations and incidents. As the life of the body is the blood, so the life of the novel is its "story." My correspondents seem to treat this as easy to procure; but they are mistaken. There are many people indeed who protest they



have any amount of plots to give away; "just the very thing to write about"; but as John Leech used to say when a poor joke was suggested to him for *Punch*: "Admirable indeed, my dear fellow, but it does not lend itself to illustration." Not one tenth of the stories suggested by our friends are suitable materials for a novel.

Singular as it may appear, before the beginning of a story is attempted, the writer who wishes to do the best for himself, and is not afraid of taking pains, should fix upon the end of it. However long may be the journey, and tired may be the horses, the post-boy who has any self-respect will always "Keep a gallop for the avenue."

He is well aware of the advantage, as regards remuneration, of leaving a good impression at the last. While as for the post-boy who doesn't know his way, nor even the place for which he is bound, it is obvious that he doesn't understand his business. I am convinced that the best novels,



not "sensational" ones only, but those of sustained interest, have been composed, so to speak, backwards. The having the *denouement*, perhaps the catastrophe, well on one's mind from the first, is a precaution similar to that which is taken by a public speaker who, whatever he forgets, is careful not to lose sight of his peroration. He well knows that is what he has to lead up to, and that upon the nature of it will chiefly depend his success. However well he may have got on up to that point, if his conclusion is lame and impotent, his speech will be a failure. Moreover, the foreknowledge of the end

suggests much of the proper course of events in a story. This is hardly to be understood by one who is not a novelist. Perhaps I may be forgiven the apparent egotism of an allusion to "Lost Sir Massingberd"—a small thing, but mine own—to which I venture to allude only as an illustration.



An ancient tree, which though perfect to the eye was hollow, suggested a novel method of disappearance. A man might climb into it and fall through, hands over head, without possibility of extrication. Only his muffled cries for help might be heard in the wood for hours without recognition. This was obviously not a position in which to leave one's hero, but a very good way of disposing of one's villain. The wicked baronet of the story was drawn from life; but he never would have been drawn at all except for the tree. He was buried—not in elm, if I remember right, but in oak—before he was born. In thinking the story out before putting pen to paper, the other characters introduced themselves, quite naturally.

If the conclusion of a story occurs to one as striking and dramatic, it must not be put aside, of course, on the ground of its being melancholy; but as a general rule I would warn young novelists against "bad endings"; it is their weakness to indulge in them just as it



is that of young poets to rhyme about premature death. Youth has the "trick of melancholy." A few readers may sympathize

with this feeling, but the majority exceedingly resent an unhappy termination to a story in which they have been interested. Some persons will not open a novel suspected of this drawback, and I have known even books like the "Bride of Lammermoor" to remain unread in consequence. What right has a man to pen a story like Turganief's "On the Eve" to make generations of his fellow-creatures miserable? What lesson is to be learnt from it save the inscrutable cruelty of Fate? Who is the better—or even the wiser—for it?

Trollope was, on the whole, a kindly writer, but who does not resent the absurd scruples he puts into the mouth of Lily Dale which make the life-long fidelity of Johnny Eames futile? Take, on the other hand, Mrs. Oliphant's equally simple story of "A Rose in June." There is sadness enough in it, but how much more naturally and satisfactorily is the course of true love brought to its close.

At all events, whether the ending is good or bad, it ought to be concealed. There are some readers indeed who are so unprincipled as to look at (what used to be) the third volume first, just as children cannot keep their hands from the dessert when the soup is on the table; but this conduct is contemptible. Wilkie Collins thought it criminal. I shall never forget his distress of mind when, in the vanity of youth, I boasted to him of how I had guessed the secret of "The Moonstone" at an earlier date than he had intended.

The plot of the story having been decided upon, it is advisable to make a skeleton plan of it on large cardboard, with plenty of room for the filling in of such *dramatis personæ* as are deemed appropriate to it, and any incidents which may occur to the mind as likely to be suitable and attractive. The fictitious names of the characters should be placed side by side with the real ones, that their connection should not be lost sight of, while their idiosyncrasies and other recognisable qualities should be carefully avoided. It may, I hope, not be necessary, but it is still advisable to warn the neophyte against making use of the unfair advantage which publication gives him to satirize persons who may be obnoxious to him; this is too often done, in ignorance, perhaps, of the serious

consequences that may flow from it; but it is a most cowardly proceeding, like that of striking with a deadly weapon an unarmed enemy. When a satire becomes personal it is a lampoon. Even when no harm is intended, and recognition takes place, much distress of mind may be caused not only to the person satirized but to the satirist. There was little in Charles Dickens's writings to be repented of, but it is well known that he grievously regretted his delineation of Leigh Hunt as Harold Skimpole. Hunt's peculiarities were recognised at once, and the vices of Skimpole, which were not Hunt's at all, only too readily attributed to him. Apology in such cases is useless. *Litera scripta manet*; the mischief is done.

I may here say, though it is anticipating matters, that no man who wishes to be happy in his vocation should become a novelist who is so thin-skinned or impatient of censure as to take unfavourable criticisms as a personal affront, or seek to be "even" with the man who writes it. I have known some very unpleasant consequences arise from this

foolish indignation, especially where, as often happens, it has been misplaced, and the outrage has been attributed to the wrong man. By him who aspires to be a man of letters all personalities should be avoided, and especially by the writer of Fiction. If he wants to be uncivil, let him write an historical novel, and pitch into somebody who has been dead for a century or two.

Matters will become much too personal with him, whether he will or no, before he has done with novel writing: it necessitates a study of his fellow-creatures that will compel him to see faults where he would far rather be blind, and things distasteful in those he loves.

As for the scene of his story, I would recommend Scott, junior (if he will allow me to call him so), not to select foreign ones, however conversant he may be with them; the taste of the British novel reader is as insular as his dwelling-place, and he prefers to read of places he has visited, and of customs with which he is familiar. There have been some exceptions, but, as a rule, even our most popular novelists have lost something of their circulation when they have ventured on alien soil. With readers who have passed much of their time abroad, there is of course no objection



to this; they may even prefer it, as awakening pleasant memories; but they are but a small minority; the others best like to read of what they are familiar with, and are in a position to pass judgment on. The case is somewhat similar to that of foreign novels: those who can read them in the language they are written in take pleasure in them; but translations of them are not popular with the less accomplished. Wherever the scene of the novel is placed, however, it is absolutely necessary for the writer to become thoroughly acquainted with it. No time, or trouble, should be grudged in this matter. It is by no means, however, necessary to stay long in the chosen locality; on the contrary, the salient points which strike one on a first acquaintance are apt to be lost through familiarity with them, and it is these which strike the reader.

To pass from "place" to "period" I would observe that, though of late years there has been a great resuscitation of the historical novel, it is generally a mistake for writers who would be popular to place their story in a far back time. One or two have recently made a great success in so doing, but it is given to very few to clothe dry bones with flesh. It is of course necessary to study the period and to read much literature concerning it; and the too general result of this is to give to the composition the impression of "cram," of its having been "got up" for the occasion. The story that finds most readers is almost always a tale of to-day. They like to be in a position to criticise; to say this and that is contrary or in accordance with their own experience; that they have met, or not met, the characters described;

whereas for the vraisemblance of folks in armour who moved in society upon horseback, they are obliged to accept the author's *ipse dixit*.

Almost all young writers cast their fiction



in the autobiographical form, for indeed they are generally their own heroes. This has been done a few times only with success (as in the case of "David Copperfield"), even by great authors; with small ones it is a fatal



error. There is always a great deal too much about the author's boyhood, which, except to his mother, is absolutely uninteresting. "Boys will be boys," it is said by way of apology, and they need it. Some adults may want to have their school-days over again, which only shows they have forgotten them—but they don't want to

read of other people's school-days. There is nothing duller than the reminiscences of boyhood, except those of girlhood. Women writers scarcely ever allow their readers to escape from these narratives. They *will* begin with their heroine in short frocks, and sometimes in long clothes. She has her skipping-rope, with which we wish she would hang herself, and her girl friends, who are as unentertaining as herself, and her "yearnings." She yearns through a dozen chapters, while the



reader yawns. It would be such a relief if she would do something, even if it were to run away with the page. Children are charming (and so are dogs) when they leaven a story, but they should not be allowed, any more than in real life, to occupy too much of the attention. And whether in youth, or at any other period, there should be no ego in a novel. The introduction of self into it is fatal. Thackeray, it may be said, did it; but it was a mistake even in his case, and it is probable that Scott, junior, is not a Thackeray. Does he suppose that his puppets are so lifelike that it is necessary (like Bottom the weaver) to put his head outside the puppet-show to assure us that they are not really alive? Does he imagine that his tale has such a sustained interest that it can bear this solution of continuity? If he does, he possesses at least one quality which some people think is necessary to literary success—"a gude conceit of himself."

On the other hand, he should not be afraid of expressing his opinions; *while* young at the trade, it is better to do so through the mouths of his characters; but if this cannot appropriately be done, let him

state them, though always in an impersonal way. To students of fiction it is interesting to mark how, as authors gather strength, and gain their places in the world, they deliver their *obiter dicta* upon things in general.

I may here tell a secret, or at all events something not generally known, concerning popular, and presumably good, novelists. Sometimes, of course, their circulation wanes with their wits; old age has its natural effect upon their powers of imagination; but much more commonly their reputation decays through another attribute of old age, which is by no means unavoidable, namely, indolence. They flatter themselves they are sure of their public, which, indeed, is always faithful to them as long as can be reasonably expected, and even beyond it; and they no longer take the same pains to please as they used to do; they substitute recollection for observation, and trust to memory where they formerly drew from experience. It is irksome to them to take trouble. Now, though no definition of genius is so idiotic and absolutely contrary to the fact than that which describes it as "an infinite capacity for taking pains," if pains are not taken, even genius cannot in the end succeed, however fortunate it may be in the beginning. While if Scott, junior, is only a young person of talent and not a genius (as is possible), he may just as well hope to be a great engineer, if he takes no pains, as to be a novelist. It seems so easy to those who have never done it to succeed in fiction; story-telling appears such a holiday task to the outsider; but as a matter of fact it requires a great deal of application, observation, study, and, above all things, patience and perseverance. Only a few writers "awake to find themselves famous," and even these have generally had rather a long night.

The greatest bugbear in the eyes of the young novelist is the critic. This wicked creature is credited with an irreconcilable enmity to imaginative literature, and with a disposition to dance upon the bodies of all who follow it, but especially upon the young. *The exaggerated* fear in which he is held is in reality caused by his victims' exaggerated ideas of their own importance. If they knew what very little displacement was caused by

their plunge into Fiction, they would know how brief is the effect of any comments that may be made upon it. As a matter of fact, very few people read reviews, and the impression they create seldom endures beyond the week in which they appear; one review pushes the next out of recollection, as one pellet drives out another in a pop-gun. The harm wrought by an ill-natured, or what is called a "nasty," review—for, of course, we are not considering a just one, to which no objection should be made—depends chiefly upon whether the author vituperated is fool enough to read it. It is quite amazing how otherwise sensible persons are tempted to do this throughout their lives. I knew one very successful author who could never withstand the temptation to read what he had already heard was an "attack upon him" wherever it was. He used to buy the review or newspaper—thus actually increasing the resources of his enemy—and after having made himself thoroughly miserable with reading it, tear it into fragments. The other unpleasantness about unfavourable criticism is that one's friends always get hold of it, and perhaps send one a copy of it, explaining in a sympathetic letter how they "deplore it." This is scarcely what is called "backing" on the part of one's friends. The "Compleat Novelist" would be a misnomer indeed for a gentleman who embraces that profession with the fear of the critic before

his eyes. Let him lay to heart the admirable saying, "No man was ever written down except by himself."

When the skeleton of his story is finished he must be careful to avoid plumping it out by padding. He should be always marching on with his story and never "marking time," like a recruit at drill. Dissertations and disquisitions should be avoided. Where his characters indulge in reflection they should be as brief as epigrams, and, if possible, as pointed. There is nothing so tedious in fiction as a Hamlet hero.



As to the nature of the novel, that must, of course, depend upon the nature of the author, but it is certain that popularity most attends the writer who can attach Cupid to his chariot wheels. By far the majority of novel readers are the ladies, and they prefer, above all others, the love story. It is true that some of our greatest writers, Thackeray especially, and in a less degree Dickens, have not been very successful in their treatment of this matter, but genius has no laws. I have already apologized to Scott, junior, for taking it for granted that his gift is short of genius; if it were otherwise, he needs no teaching. But it is quite curious how independent is a writer who has a speciality for describing courtship of any other attractions. Trollope, who, of course, had many other gifts, could turn out whole volumes descriptive of the tender passion. The too faithful Johnny Eames is exhibited at the feet of his inamorata not only in one novel but several; his courtship has continuations; yet the ladies never tired of it. In these days, popularity has been sometimes obtained upon these lines after a fashion to which it is not necessary to allude; I will not suppose Scott, junior, to be capable of seeking the bubble reputation in dirty waters, as a mudlark dives

for pence. There are plenty of honest women and honourable men in the world, if he have the eyes to see them and the hand to draw them.

Still I would warn him against the diffuse descriptions of the young people whose course of true love he has set himself to narrate.

It will astonish him perhaps to learn that no novelist has as yet described the appearance of a heroine so as to be recognisable by his readers; the picture of her they make in their own minds will not be the one he would fain have suggested to them. At the very best it will be only such a likeness as may be gathered from a passport. Women writers will fill a dozen pages with their heroine's exquisite features (not forgetting the lobe of her ear), and a dozen more with her dress. This I do not recommend, and as for that latter

matter, though I understand it is attractive to female readers, Scott, junior, being a male, is certain to make a mess of it. Nor do I think it is advisable that he should "pan out" too much on the scenery; as a matter of fact, this is mostly skipped, but I may add concerning it, as of the portrait-painting, that unless there are very salient points about it, it fails to give the impression desired. Any one who visits the places described by even such a master of the pen as Walter Scott, must acknowledge that that is his first introduction to them; he has gained no familiarity with them through the printed page.

The chief point of a novelist's endeavours should be to give his story *sustained interest*. It is, of course, necessary, in a long one, to break the thread when he introduces new scenes and characters, but it should be picked up as soon as possible, and both old and new combined in it. There are many admirable works that can be taken up and laid down at any time, but this should not be the case with a novel. The aspiration of one of our greatest writers was "to cheat a schoolboy of his hour of play" (a much more difficult task, by-the-by, than to cheat him of an hour of work, which he

will cheerfully give up for almost any other occupation), and the ambition of a novelist, unless he is one of those who write "with a purpose," should be to—what some excellent people would call—"waste the time" of his readers; that is to say, to so fascinate them that they cannot lay his story down, or go to bed, until they have finished it; and no matter what may be his wit or wisdom, he will never accomplish this unless he has a story to tell them. And thus we come round to the point from which we started, the paramount necessity of a good plot. "A good plot," as Hotspur says, "and *full of expectation*, an excellent plot."

Lastly, neither time nor pains should be spared in the choice of title. This is very important, especially with a new writer. The same foolish persons who tell us that all the plots have been exhausted, will doubtless say that the titles also have already been appropriated. A great many of them have been so, as is evidenced by the number of novels that have had to change their



names between their serial publication and their book form in consequence. They are names, of course, of unknown novels, for no one would be so impudent as to take that of a well-known one—which their authors have not even thought it worth while to spend five shillings in registering. It is pretty certain that no court of law would award damages for doing what could not be helped, and what could not but result, if it had any result, in the advantage of the person (supposed to be) injured. Still, it is advisable to take every precaution possible to avoid this duplication. The title should indicate the nature of the story without revealing its secret, and should not be a proper name, which can attract nobody. "David Copperfield" and "Martin Chuzzlewit" are attractive to us, because we are all acquainted with their contents, but they are, as titles, colourless, and excite no curiosity. When Scott, junior, has attained fame, he can call his novel what he pleases.

Some care should be also taken with the names of the characters of a novel. Matters are improving in this respect, and we seldom read such obvious titles as were at one time common in fiction, reminding us of those in the "Pilgrim's Progress." The Faithfuls and Easies, the Gammons, the Quirks and Snaps, the Sir Harkaway Rotgut Wildfires, once so familiar to

us, would now be pronounced crude and extravagant. Dickens was almost the first to escape from them; his names were all taken from real life, either from what he read over shops or in the Post Office Directory. The exception is in "Nicholas Nickleby," where, however, there is an excellent name of the "Pilgrim's Progress" type—Sir Mulberry Hawke. Scott, junior, should take his names from the Directory, but be careful to put an out-of-the-way Christian name before them, so as to avoid the risk, if not of an action for libel, at least of some personal unpleasantness. People don't like being called "out of their names," but still more do they dislike their real ones stuck on to a bad character in a novel, like a lady's head on the body of a comic photograph.

In all that I have said of him, let Scott, junior, distinctly understand that I pretend to teach no method of making bricks without straw. If he has no natural turn for story-telling, no human being can give it to him; but if he has a bent that way—and not merely a passionate desire to see himself in print, which is a much commoner attribute—I have endeavoured to show him how he can utilize it; what he should give his attention to, and what he should avoid. I cannot promise him success, but I believe I have shown him the way in which he is most likely to attain it.

