

THE POSE NOVEL

I watched the little spurts of flame jet out from between the writhing pages of my manuscript, watched the sheets coil up in their fiery anguish and start one from another. I helped the fire to the very vitals of the mass by poking the brittle heap, and at last the sacrifice was over, the flames turned from pink to blue and died out, the red glow gave place to black, little luminous red streaks coiled across the charred sheets and vanished at the margins, and only the ashes of my inspiration remained. The ink was a lustrous black on the dull blackness of the burnt paper. I could still read this much of my indiscretion remaining, "He smiled at them all and said nothing."

"Fool!" I said, and stirred the crackling mass into a featureless heap of black scraps. Then with my chin on my fists and elbows on knees I stared at the end of my labours.

I suppose, after all, there has been some profit out of the thing. Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do, and one may well thank Heaven it was only a novel. Still, it means many days out of my life, and I would be glad to find some positive benefit accruing. Clearly, in the first place, I have eased my mind of some execrable English. I am cleaner now by some dozen faulty phrases that I committed and saw afterwards in all the nakedness of typewriting. (Thank Heaven for typewriting! Were it not for that, this thing had gone to the scoffing

of some publisher's reader, and another had known my shame.) And I shall not write another pose novel.

I am inclined to think these pose novels the wild oats of authorship. We sit down in the heyday of our youth to write the masterpiece.

Obviously, it must be a novel about a man and a woman, and something as splendid as we can conceive of in that way. We look about us. We do not go far for perfection. One of the brace holds the pen and the other is inside his or her head; and so Off! to the willing pen. Only a few years ago we went slashing among the poppies with a walking-stick, and were, we said boldly and openly, Harolds and Hectors slaying our thousands. Now of course we are grown up to self-respect, and must needs be a little disingenuous about it. But as the story unfolds there is no mistaking the likeness, in spite of the transfiguration. This bold, decided man who performs such deeds of derring-do in the noisome slum, knocks down the burly wife-beater, rescues an unmistakable Miss Clapton from the knife of a Lascar, and is all the while cultivating a virtuous consumption that stretches him on an edifying, pathetic, and altogether beautiful deathbed in the last chapter----My dear Authorling, cry my friends, we hear the squeak of that little voice of yours in every word he utters. Is that what you aspire to be, that twopence-coloured edition of yourself? Heaven defend you from your desires!

Yet there was a singular fascination in writing the book; to be in anticipation my own sympathetic historian, to joy with my joys yet to come, and sorrow with my sorrows, to bear disaster like a man, and at

last to close my own dear eyes, and with a swelling heart write my own epitaph. The pleasure remained with me until I reached the end. How admirably I strutted in front of myself! And I and the better self of me that was flourishing about in the book--we pretended not to know each other for what we were. He was myself with a wig and a sham visiting card, and I owed it to myself to respect my disguise. I made him with very red hair--my hair is fairly dark--and shifted his university from London to Cambridge. Clearly it could not be the same person, I argued. But I endowed him with all the treasures of myself; I made him say all the good things I might have said had I thought of them opportunely, and all the noble thoughts that occurred to me afterwards occurred to him at the time. He was myself--myself at a premium, myself without any drawbacks, the quintessence and culmination of me. And yet somehow when he came back from the typewriter he seemed a bit of an ass.

Probably every tadpole author writes a pose novel--at least I hope so for the sake of my self-respect. Most, after my fashion, burn the thing, or benevolent publishers lose it. It is an ill thing if by some accident the tadpole tale survives the tadpole stage. The authoress does the feminine equivalent, but I should judge either that she did it more abundantly or else that she burned less. Has she never swept past you with a scornful look, disdained you in all the pride of her beauty, rippled laughter at you, or amazed you with her artless girliness? And even after the early stages some of the trick may survive, unless I read books with malice instead of charity. I must confess, though, that I have a weakness for finding mine author among his puppets. I conceive

him always taking the best parts, like an actor-manager or a little boy playing with his sisters. I do not read many novels with sincere belief, and I like to get such entertainment from them as I can. So that these artless little self-revelations are very sweet and precious to me among all the lay figures, tragedy and comedy. Since the deception is transparent I make the most of the transparency, and love to see the clumsy fingers on the strings of the marionettes. And this will be none the less pleasant now that I have so narrowly escaped giving this entertainment to others.

I suppose this stage is a necessary one. We begin with ignorance and the imagination, the material of the pose novel. Later come self-knowledge, disappointments and self-consciousness, and the prodigals of fiction stay themselves upon the husks of epigram and cynicism, and in the place of artless aspiration are indeed in plain black and white very desperate characters. It is after all only another pose--the pose of not posing. We, the common clay of the world of letters, must needs write in this way, because we cannot forget our foolish little selves in our work. But some few there are who sit as gods above their private universes, and write without passion or vanity. At least, so I have been told. These be the true artists of letters, the white windows upon the truth of things. We by comparison are but stained glass in our own honour, and do but obstruct the view with our halos and attitudes. Yet even Shakespeare, the critics tell us--and they say they know--posed in the character of Hamlet.

After all, the pose novel method has at times attained to the level of literature. Charlotte Brontë might possibly have found no other topic had she disdained the plain little woman with a shrewish tongue; and where had Charles Kingsley been if the vision of a curate rampant had not rejoiced his heart? Still, I am not sorry that this novel is burned. Even now it was ridiculous, and the time might have come when this book, full of high, if foolish aims, and the vain vast promise of well-meaning youth, had been too keen a reproach to be endured. Three volumes of good intentions! It is too much. There was more than a novel burning just now. After this I shall be in a position to take a humorist's view of life.