

THE LITERARY ASPIRANT

HILDA RIDLEY

SOME months ago, a provocative article by William Arthur Deacon appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, of Toronto. In it Mr. Deacon pointed out the merits and demerits of a literary form of "scientific merchandising" that is based on an appeal to the "mass mind." Here we have the clue to a phenomenon that is daily becoming more familiar: the exchange of the old-time author, with academic standards, for the up-to-the-minute writer, who is, first and foremost, a business man, realistically intent upon adapting himself to the requirements of the commercial press. After all, to write acceptably for the "mass mind" is largely a matter of business acumen. And that is why we sometimes find authentic poets and original writers in garrets, while their more astute brothers and sisters of the pen are making sales. Yet it is astonishing how many young writers still harbour illusions about authorship. The other day I read in a popular magazine the following rather pathetic lines by one of them:

I'm a writer. Now, if you were very naive, you might think editors just naturally love writers. But they don't; they dislike them intensely . . . The sum which I have spent on postage is adding up to a small fortune.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the ordinary editor *does* rather dislike the casual, would-be contributor is that men of this type often overlook the "formula" by which he runs his magazine. Every popular publication has its special brand of contributions based on a careful estimate of the requirements of the "mass mind". A good circulation, with its corollary, advertising, is the reward of sedulous adherence to this policy. Yet many young writers still seem to imagine that "playing the sedulous ape" to the classics (as recommended by Robert Louis Stevenson) is the passport to literary achievement. These are really the victims of a tradition evolved in a very different epoch. Such ingenuous souls, fresh from schools that continue to support the tradition, invest the publishing world with romance, and look upon editors and publishers as infallible judges of the best in literature. The truth is that there is a wide divergence between the values of the past and those of the present. As for the "spacious days" when writers and artists of ability won the support of "patrons", they are gone for ever. Instead of winning the good

will of a "patron" whose discernment was evinced by his avocation, the writer of the present must earn the approbation of an editor or reader employed by a commercial concern dedicated to strictly business methods. "To-day the craft of letters has been turned into a strictly commercial transaction," laments the late Mary Webb, of posthumous fame, "and books are manufactured with the prompt neat aplomb of a pot of factory jam. Those must have been great days when it was a hall-mark of nobility to have written a book; when nobody wrote except for the love of it; when no mediocre work was turned out. . ."

Yes, indeed, to write for the popular press of to-day is rather a different thing from writing "for the love of it,"—and the young writer should choose from the outset which master he will serve. If he wishes to succeed quickly, he will "play the sedulous ape" not to the masters of literature, but to the vendors of contributions to the current press.

Possibly, however, an aspirant may be one whose mind is set on far horizons. He refuses to conform, not mainly because he lacks business intelligence, but because he feels that, as an individual, he has a message to impart. Suppose that this writer has genuine talent,—even genius—his chances of success are rather remote. The *media* through which his work may become known are circumscribed. A few "quality" magazines survive, but these serve the interests of a cultured minority. Contributors are carefully selected, and they are often the members of a privileged staff. Year after year, we witness the rise and demise of small, independent magazines whose editors declare that they have but one desire,—to discover original talent. Sometimes, in turning the pages of these derelicts of a decade or so ago, one is impressed by the rare quality of a poem, so flawless in execution and so vital in substance that one marvels. Again, one is struck by the delicate construction, the insight into character evinced by the writer of a short story. Surely the names of such writers must have become well known. But no!—the signatures evoke no recognition. These creators of vital beauty are 'to fame unknown,'—and the world is the poorer, perhaps, because they were effectually silenced. One thinks of the work of Katherine Mansfield, which might so easily have suffered a similar fate. Like other writers of paramount originality, she expressed herself through the *media* of small, short-lived publications, edited by youthful enthusiasts. Thus some of her first stories appeared in a literary magazine called *The Blue Review* which lasted for about

18 months. This was edited by herself and John Middleton Murry. Mr. Murry relates in a Memoir:

When *The Blue Review* died in July 1913, Katherine Mansfield had no place to write in . . . No home could be found for any of her stories till she and D. H. Lawrence and I produced three numbers of a little magazine called *The Signature*, written wholly by ourselves. *The Signature* died within two months, and again K. M. had no place to write till I became editor of *The Athenaeum* in 1919.

This last editorship of her husband was the fortunate circumstance that saved Katherine Mansfield for posterity. To the paper, says Mr. Murry, Katherine Mansfield contributed "weekly criticisms of novels which then began to be famous, and a little later a story each month." Then, for the first time, the publishers began to ask to collect her stories.

Such an experience offers an eloquent plea for the existence of small, privately printed journals, edited with vision. And, although the bright presages of future fulfilment that one sometimes finds in the contents of such journals may not be realized (in the sense of attracting wide recognition), they are in themselves "things of beauty" and cannot die. The joy of creating even one stanza of a poem that approximates to one's conception of perfection surpasses all other joys,—and this is the reward that awaits the authentic artist who fails to attain "the sad solace of a little fame." It was the main reward of Katherine Mansfield, who lived only two years after her work had won recognition.

So the youthful aspirant for literary success should clarify the issues that confront him. If he happens to be one with some justification for the belief that he has a peculiar message to deliver, he should act with the "sad lucidity of soul" with which fate frequently endows such a person. He should look for kindred minds among those intellectual groups that sometimes have the temerity to publish their own organs,—and he should contribute to these. Through such a process, his work may or may not become widely known,—but he will at least preserve his soul. And there is always the chance that he may attain posthumous fame.

The word "posthumous" suggests Mary Webb, the author of *Precious One* and other unique novels of belated recognition. She, like Katherine Mansfield, frequently contributed to small, obscure publications that brought her work to the notice of a discerning few. It is to one of these few that we are indebted for

the following story, which has to do with a literary function that Mary Webb attended while visiting the Edwin Pughs in London:

The star of the evening was a woman novelist. The hall was packed from floor to platform, and although Mr. Pugh was able to find seats for his wife and Mary Webb, he had to sit on the floor. From that lowly place he heard speaker after speaker not only beslaver the novelist who was the guest, but almost every other popular woman novelist. He waited in vain to hear the name of Mary Webb,—who, in his firm belief, was the greatest of them all. He could tolerate it no longer. He scrambled to his feet and told a surprised audience that, though the women novelists who had been mentioned by name were all worthy of respect, there was a far greater novelist than any of them, and her name, he shouted, was Mary Webb . . . Away at the back of the hall Mary Webb was weeping on his wife's shoulder for sheer joy . . . whilst he was back in his lowly place, wondering if he hadn't made a colossal fool of himself . . . Fortunately Mary Webb was too excited after that even to hear the few tepid sentences of the faint praise that spells damnation that followed the outburst.