# THE SHORT STORIES OF ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

A WRITER by accident—Robert Chambers. He went early in life to Paris, intending to be an artist, got so far as to exhibit several pictures in the Salon, and by chance wrote a little sketch of the Quartier Latin. It excited immediate attention, and the result has been to make this man's life work literature instead of painting. There followed in 1895 the "King in Yellow," a book of wonderfully fascinating tales, and since then he has written volumes, mostly short stories. As a glance at the librarian's records at any public library will show, there is a constant call for his works, and the weekly magazine with the widest circulation in America depends very largely upon him for fiction. Perhaps the best American writer of short stories; certainly the most popular.

Undeniably, he owes success to his startling power of invention. This man conceives the most thrilling plots and works them out through a train of the most novel and unexpected happenings. His imagination seems unbounded. He does not confine himself to the actualities nor even to the possibilities of life; rather he seizes upon the impossible, the supernatural. Sometimes, even, this fantastic wildness goes so far as to sweep a real, existing setting away into a flood of pure romanticism; but not often. Chambers weaves a tragic modern story on a rug of Babylon; he revels in the long-buried secrets of the past; he gains the atmosphere of mystery by a skilful suggestion of the wonders of Persia and the ancient East; he brings heroines back to life through the power of love; he shows us the wizened old dwarf who fights bloody battles with his demoniacal cat and carries on the startling trade of Repairer of Reputations. These are but a few of his creations. Add the innumerable stories to be drawn from real life, and the magnitude and richness of the treasure at his command is evident.

This limitless faculty for invention is his great gift. It

yields him plots without number, and conjoined to this is his remarkable skill in the actual writing of a story—when he takes the trouble to use it. Here his early art training shows. As a painter applies his colors, emphasizing the salient points and skilfully blending shade into shade and all into harmony, so Chambers can bring into prominence those parts that lend credibility to the whole, even though the theme be perilously near the inconceivable. With the cunning use of carefully limited explanation and detail, with the knowledge of what not to mention as well as what to mention, he gains a powerful though very subtle suggestion. The reader sees more than is written, and sees exactly what Chambers wants him to see. He has that rare faculty, which every author seeks and few possess, of guiding the average reader's mind.

And more. In these additional points he is skilled—in describing nature, in portraying characters and in their conversation. In the first of these he is generally good, sometimes excellent. He should be, for he knows nature through long and earnest study, the consequence of his love of the outdoor world. An enthusiastic sportsman, his many papers on the haunts and habits of animals and birds have gained him a reputation for observing closely—a quality priceless in a writer. He is a man who sees. He is no dilettante, no sportsman by fashion or indolence. His knowledge of many lands was not gained from a car window. When he will, he can paint a scene in the very colors of nature. This is from one of his magazine stories: "Through the still September sunshine ripened leaves drifted down through interlaced branches, and the whispering rustle of their fall filled the forest silence. The wood road, carpeted with brilliant leaves, wound through second growth, following the edge of a dark, swift stream, then swept westward among the pines, where the cushion of brown needles deadened every step, and where there was no sound save the rustle of a flock of rose-tinted birds half buried in the feathery fronds of white pine. Again the road curved eastward,

skirting a clift of slate rocks, through which the stream rushed with the sound of a wind-stirred woodland."

The people of his pen are altogether human and as a rule lovable. He has said that he does not care for "a man that is not manly, a woman that is not womanly, nor a dog that is not doggy." And here, in writing for the general public, he is wise. The hero and heroine need not be paragons; but to us they are germane and tangible. And how many authors create a living hero, only to wreck him by the introduction of carelessly drawn minor characters, unnatural, impossible? Not so Chambers. Who cannot nod his head and chuckle: "I've met that kind," when he sees the Reverend Beezeley, his inquisitive spouse and the tortured Mrs. Dr. Meeke in "Yo Espero," or the irate little major, damning his way across the deck in "Pasque Florida?"

Finally, conversation. In his stories you can often hear the people talk, so natural and unforced are their words. He is always clever, always entertaining, stating here and there a bit of the lighter philosophy of life. "Wisdom aerated by wit," as Watson said of Lowell. The repartee is sometimes too continuously brilliant to be natural, just as his backgrounds are often too thoroughly colored with the romantic to be substantiated, but it passes unnoticed in the reader's appreciative mental laughter. Conversation is a vital particular in the making of a story, and Chambers in this is inimitable.

All these things, then, are his to command. And here are the elements to make a truly great writer of short stories. Take the "King in Yellow" and we feel his power. Here is something entirely original. The idea of a book, a play, in whose words "the essence of purest poison lurks"; a play that drives a man mad when he reads it, yet which he must read if he but begin. Here is the gruesome watchman from whose "soft mushy fist" one of the fingers drops into a man's hand. Here the Yellow Sign brings awful death upon its shuddering possessor. Here a viper bites a lover

as he crushes his love to his breast; when he revives he stumbles upon her crumbling grave—"But upon the icy slab lay a woman's glove still warm and fragrant." In these pages Chambers has used his every talent, humanizing them with flashes of a realism like that of Zolá or Gorki. Here we see him as he can be, inspired and artistic.

But as this was his earliest serious work, the conclusion is perfectly obvious. Here is a man who at the very beginning promised us—everything! And since that time his short stories have lapsed into respectable mediocrity. The exquisite "Bridal Pair," the mystical "Tree of Heaven"—these and a few more have renewed the promise; but the fulfilment has not come. After the flush of vigorous youth had gone, Swinburne passed as a poet. So Chambers, with almost parallel gifts, is passing as a story-writer. It is probable that he has never tried to do his best. One thing, however, is certain—that he has been trading his literary reputation for large sums of money and a certain paltry kind of "fame" (the variety that reaches its height with the appearance of your name in red on the cover), in some unblushingly mediocre short stories for the weekly with the widest circulation in America. This "literature," of which he has been turning out a fixed number of words per week, is about as much live literature as the skin which a snake sheds is live snake. This skin, be it remembered, undergoes a process of decay. The snake is evidently ashamed of it, for it crawls away and grows a beautiful new skin. Let Chambers produce no more literary refuse; but use his recognizedly brilliant talents to give the world a worthy successor to the "King in Yellow,"—not a book of the day, but a book for the years.

*Frank G. Marsh.*