

Chapter XVI -- A Great Novelist.

Who is the world's greatest novelist? When you get the opinion of an expert, find out what reasons lie behind his choice. Scott has a great vogue, but if Scott was great, Sienkiewicz was certainly greater. And when you examine the claims of critics for this or that novelist, keep Sienkiewicz in mind as the world's greatest novelist, and see whether any critic can shake your position.

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Sienkiewicz had all the qualities Scott ever possessed and had them in a higher degree. He wrote in a little known language, and he wrote for a denationalized people, and yet he became a world author in much less time than Scott. He was faithful to the old Christian principles, and the critics in general have had not a good word for him; yet the people have read him and will read him in spite of the critics.

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Austin Dobson's criticism of Sienkiewicz in the Contemporary Review was a wonderful tight-rope performance. What he said in one paragraph he invariably modified or took back in the next. One paragraph was absolutely shameless. It consisted of 250 words, beginning, "I have never read this book (Quo Vadis), and the other 240 words were devoted to a criticism of something he had never read.

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Dumas is a dancing master where Sienkiewicz is a general. The qualities which he has in common with Scott are the large canvas on which he paints his pictures the fine grouping and contrasting, the dramatic narrative, variety of incident and grasp of character. Scott selected popular themes and told pleasing tales. Sienkiewicz was a master in the art of condensing a narrative. Scott did not possess this, as it did not belong to the period in which he wrote. He possessed the power of analysis, which Scott had not, and he had greater elegance of fiction and style. His view into character was finer and deeper, and his grasp better. But his great power lay in the fact that he took the old, worn-out convention of love and beautified it, carrying it far beyond any previous effort, at a time when other writers were chafing under this convention, or using it simply as a peg to hang a story on.

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In Quo Vadis the author develops the pagan, almost bestial love, through the element of sacrifice, into a triumphant love. No novelist can come within a hundred miles of him in this respect. Sienkiewicz is an aggressive Catholic, and much against the will of the world he had forced it to accept the old Christian convention.

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Quo Vadis was translated into English by Jeremiah Curtin, and published by Brown and Co., of Boston. Not a critic had a good word for it, but hundreds of thousands of copies have been and will continue to be sold. The thesis of the book is how the Christian power ripped open the Old Roman Empire. In developing this thesis he did great good for the world. Sienkiewicz made the transformation of the people seem a natural thing. Above all, the book was a satire on modern paganism, and prophesied the ultimate triumph of Christianity.