PETER SNOOK

IN a late number of the Democratic Review, there appeared a very excellent paper (by Mr. Duyckinck) on the subject of Magazine Literature — a subject much less thoroughly comprehended here than either in France or in England. In America, we compose, now and then, agreeable essays and other matters of that character — but we have not yet caught the true Magazine spirit — a thing neither to be defined nor described. Mr. Duyckinck's article, although piquant, is not altogether to our mind. We think he places too low an estimate on the capability of the Magazine paper. He is inclined to undervalue its power — to limit unnecessarily its province — which is illimitable. In fact it is in the extent of subject, and not less in the extent or variety of *tone*, that the French and English surpass us, to so good a purpose. How very rarely are we struck with an American Magazine article, as with an absolute novelty — how frequently the foreign articles so affect us! We are so circumstanced as to be unable to *pay* for elaborate compositions — and, after all, the true invention is elaborate. There is no greater mistake than the supposition that a true originality is a mere matter of impulse or inspiration. To originate, is carefully, patiently, and understandingly to combine. The few American Magazinists who ever think of this elaborate at all, cannot afford to carry it into practice for the paltry prices offered them by our periodical publishers. For this and other glaring reasons, we are behind the age in a *very* important branch of literature — a branch which, moreover, is daily growing in importance — and which, in the end (not far distant), will be the *most* influential of all the departments of Letters.

We are lamentably deficient not only in invention proper, but in that which is, more strictly, *Art*. What American, for instance, in penning a criticism, ever supposes himself called upon to present his readers with more than the exact stipulation of his title — to present them with a criticism and *something beyond?* Who thinks of making his critique a work of art in itself — independently of its critical opinions? — a work of art, such as are all the more elaborate, and most effective reviews of Macaulay? Yet, these reviews we have evinced no incapacity to appreciate, when presented. The best American review ever penned is miserably ineffective when compared with the notice of Montagu's Bacon — and yet this latter is, in general, a piece of tawdry sophistry, owing everything to a consummate, to an exquisite arrangement — to a thorough and just sufficiently comprehensive diffuseness — to a masterly *climacing* of points — to a style which dazzles the understanding with its brilliancy — but not more than it misleads it by its perspicuity — causing us so distinctly to comprehend that we fancy we coincide — in a word to the perfection of Art — of all the art which a Macaulay can wield, or which is applicable to any criticism that a Macaulay could write.

It is, however, in the composition of that class of Magazine papers which come, properly, under the head of *Tales*, that we evince the most remarkable deficiency in skill. If we except first Mr. Hawthorne — secondly, Mr. Simms — thirdly, Mr. Willis — and fourthly, one or two others, whom we may as well put mentally together without naming them — there is not even a respectably skilful tale-writer on this side the Atlantic. We have seen, to be sure, many very well-constructed stories — individual specimens — the work of American Magazinists; but these specimens have invariably appeared to be happy accidents of construction; their authors, in subsequent tales, having always evinced an incapacity to construct.

We have been led to a comparison of the American with the British ability in tale-writing, by a perusal of some Magazine papers, the composition of the author of “Chartley,” and “The Invisible

Gentleman." He is one of the best of the English journalists, and has some of the happiest peculiarities of Dickens, whom he preceded in the popular favor. The longest and best of this tales, properly so called, is "Peter Snook," and this presents so many striking points for the consideration of the Magazininst, that we feel disposed to give an account of it in full.

Peter Snook, the hero, and the *beau idéal* of a Cockney, is a retail linen-draper in Bishopgate street. He is of course a stupid and conceited, although at bottom a very good little fellow, and "always looks as if he was frightened." Matters go on very thrivingly with him, until he becomes acquainted with Miss Clarinda Bodkin, "a young lady owning to almost thirty, and withal a great proficient in the mysteries of millinery and mantua-making." Love and ambition, however, set the little gentleman somewhat beside himself. "If Miss Clarinda would but have me," says he, "we might divide the shop, and have a linen-drapery side, and a haberdashery and millinery side, and one would help the other. There'd be only one rent to pay, and a double business — and it would be so comfortable, too!" Thinking thus, Peter commences a flirtation, to which Miss Clarinda but doubtfully responds. He escorts the lady to White Conduit House, Bagnigge Wells, and other genteel places of public resort — and finally is so rash as to accede to the proposition on her part, of a trip to Margate. At this epoch of the narrative, the writer observes that the subsequent proceedings of the hero are gathered from accounts rendered by himself, when called upon, after the trip, for explanation.

It is agreed that Miss Clarinda shall set out alone for Margate — Mr. Snook following her, after some indispensable arrangements. These occupy him until the middle of July, at which period, taking passage in the "Rose in June," he safely reaches his destination. But various misfortunes here await him, — misfortunes admirably adapted to the meridian of Cockney feeling, and the capacity of Cockney endurance. His umbrella, for example, and a large brown paper parcel, containing a new pea-green coat and flower-patterned embroidered silk waistcoat, are tumbled into the water at the landing-place, and Miss Bodkin forbids him her presence in his old clothes. By a tumble of his own, too, the skin is rubbed from both his shins for several inches, and his surgeon, having no regard to the lover's cotillion engagements, enjoins on him a total abstinence from dancing. A cock-chafer, moreover, is at the trouble of flying into one of his eyes, and (worse than all) a tall military-looking shoemaker, Mr. Last, has taken advantage of the linen-draper's delay in reaching Margate, to ingratiate himself with his mistress. Finally, he is cut by Last, and rejected by the lady, and has nothing left for it, but to secure a homeward passage in the "Rose in June."

In the evening of the second day after his departure, the vessel drops anchor off Greenwich. Most of the passengers go ashore, with the view of taking the stage to the city. Peter, however, who considers that he has already spent money enough to no purpose, prefers remaining on board. "We shall get to Billingsgate," says he, "while I am sleeping, and I shall have plenty of time to go home and dress, and go into the city and borrow the trifle I may want for Pester and Company's bill, that comes due the day after to-morrow." This determination is a source of much trouble to our hero, as will be seen in the sequel. Some shopmen who remain with him in the packet, tempt him to unusual indulgences in the way first, of brown stout, and, secondly, of positive French brandy. The consequence is, that Mr. Peter Snook falls, thirdly, asleep, and, fourthly, overboard.

About dawn on the morning after this event, Ephraim Hobson, the confidential clerk and factotum of Mr. Peter Snook, is disturbed from a sound sleep by the sudden appearance of his master. That gentleman seems to be quite in a bustle, and delights Ephraim with an account of a whacking wholesale order for exportation just received. "Not a word to anybody about the

matter," exclaims Peter, with unusual emphasis. "It's such an opportunity as don't come often in a man's life-time. There's a captain of a ship — he's the owner of her too; but never mind! there a'nt time to enter into particulars now, but you'll know all by and bye — all you have to do, is to do as I tell you — so come along!"

Setting Ephraim to work, with directions to pack up immediately all the goods in the shop, with the exception of a few trifling articles, the master avows his intention of going into the city "to borrow enough money to make up Pester's bill, for to-morrow." "I don't think you'll want much, Sir," replied Mr. Hobson with a self-complacent air. "I've been looking about long-winded 'uns you see, since you've been gone, and have got Shy's money and Slack's account, which we'd pretty well given up for a bad job, and one or two more. There, — there's the list — and there's the key to the strong box, where you'll find the money, besides what I've took at the counter." Peter at this seems well pleased, and shortly afterwards goes out, saying, he cannot tell when he'll be back, and giving directions that whatever goods may be sent in during his absence, shall be left untouched till his return.

It appears that, after leaving his shop, Mr. Snook proceeded to that of Jobb, Flashbill & Co., (one of whose clerks, on board the "Rose in June," had been very liberal in supplying our hero with brandy on the night of his ducking) looked over a large quantity of ducks and other goods, and finally made purchase of "a choice assortment," to be delivered the same day. His next visit was to Mr. Bluff, the managing partner in the banking-house where he usually kept his cash. His business now was to request permission to overdraw a hundred pounds for a few days.

"Humph," said Mr. Bluff, "money is very scarce; but — Bless me! — yes — it's he! Excuse me a minute, Mr. Snook, there's a gentleman at the front counter whom I want particularly to speak to — I'll be back with you directly." As he uttered these words, he rushed out, and, in passing one of the clerks on his way forward, he whispered, "Tell Scribe to look at Snook's account, and let me know directly." He then went to the front counter, where several people were waiting to pay and receive money. "Fine weather this, Mr. Butt. What! you're not out of town like the rest of them?"

"No," replied Mr. Butt, who kept a thriving gin-shop, "no, I sticks to my business — make hay while the sun shines — that's my maxim. Wife up at night — I up early in the morning."

The banker chatted and listened with great apparent interest till the closing of a huge book on which he kept his eye, told him that his whispered order had been attended to. He then took a gracious leave of Mr. Butt, and returned back to the counting-house with a slip of paper, adroitly put in his hand while passing, on which was written, "Peter Snook, Linen Draper, Bishopgate Street — old account — increasing gradually — balance: £153 15*s*. 6*d*. — *very* regular." "Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Snook," said he, "but we must catch people when we can. Well, what is it you were saying you wanted us to do?"

"I should like to be able to overdraw just for a few days," replied Peter.

"How much?"

"A hundred."

"Won't fifty do?"

"No, not quite, sir."

"Well, you're an honest fellow, and don't come bothering us often; so, I suppose we must not be too particular with you for this once."

Leaving Bluff, Mr. Snook hurries to overtake Mr. Butt, the dealer in spirits, who had just left the banking-house before himself, and to give that gentleman an order for a hogshead of the best gin. As he is personally unknown to Mr. Butt, he hands him a card on which is written, “Peter Snook, linen and muslin ware house, No. —, Bishopgate Street within,” &c., &c., and takes occasion to mention that he purchases at the recommendation of Mr. Bluff. The gin is to be at Queenhithe the same evening. The spirit-dealer, as soon as his new customer has taken leave, revolves in his mind the oddity of a linen draper's buying a hogshead of gin, and determines to satisfy himself of Mr. Snook's responsibility by a personal application to Mr. Bluff. On reaching the bank, however, he is told by the clerks that Mr. Bluff, being in attendance upon a committee of the House of Commons, will not be home in any reasonable time — but also that Peter Snook is a perfectly safe man. The gin is accordingly sent; and several other large orders for different goods, upon other houses, are promptly fulfilled in the same manner. Meantime, Ephraim is busily engaged at home in receiving and inspecting the invoices of the various purchases as they arrive, at which employment he is occupied until dusk, when his master makes his appearance in unusually high spirits. We must here be pardoned for copying some passages:

“Well, Ephraim,” he exclaimed, “this looks something like business! You haven’t had such a job this many a day! Shop looks well now, eh?”

“You know best, sir,” replied Hobson. “But hang me if I a'nt frightened. When we shall sell all these goods. I’m sure I can’t think. You talked of having a haberdashery side to the shop; but if we go on at this rate, we shall want another side for ourselves; I’m sure I don’t know where Miss Bodkin is to be put.”

“She go to Jericho!” said Peter, contemptuously. “As for the goods, my boy, they’ll be gone before to-morrow morning. All you and I have got to do is to pack ’em up; so, let us turn to and strap at it.”

Packing was Ephraim's favorite employment, but, on the present occasion, he set to work with a heavy heart. His master, on the contrary, appeared full of life and spirits, and corded boxes, sewed up trusses, and packed huge paper parcels with a celerity and an adroitness truly wonderful.

“Why, you don’t get on, Hobson,” he exclaimed; “see what I've done! Where's the ink-pot? — oh, here it is!” and he proceeded to mark his packages with his initials, and the letter G below. “There,” he resumed, “P. S. G.: that's for me, at Gravesend. I’m to meet the Captain and owner there; show the goods — if there's any he don’t like, shall bring ’em back with me; get bills — bankers’ acceptances for the rest; see ’em safe on board; *then* — but *not before*, mind that, Master Ephraim! No, no, keep my weather eye open, as the men say on board the “Rose in June.” By-the-bye, I havn’t told you yet about my falling overboard whap into the river.”

“Falling overboard!” exclaimed the astonished shopman, quitting his occupation to stand erect and listen.

“Ay, ay,” continued Peter — “see it won’t do to tell you long stories *now*. There — mark that truss, will you? Know all about it some day. Lucky job though — tell you that: got this thundering order by it. Had one tumble, first going off, at Margate. Spoilt my peagreen — never mind — that was a lucky tumble, too. Hadn’t been for that, shouldn’t so soon have found out the game a certain person was playing with me. She go to Jericho!”

But for the frequent repetition of this favorite expression, Ephraim Hobson has since declared he should have doubted his master's identity during the whole of that evening, as there was something very singular about him, and his strength and activity in moving the bales, boxes, and trusses, were such as he had never previously exhibited. The phrase condemning this, that, or the other thing or person to “go to Jericho,” was the only expression that he uttered, as the shopman said, “naturally,” and Peter repeated that whimsical anathema as often as usual.

The goods being all packed up, carts arrive to carry them away; and, by half-past ten o'clock, the shop is entirely cleared, with the exception of some trifling articles, to make show on the shelves and counters. Two hackney coaches are called. Mr. Peter Snook gets into one with a variety of loose articles, which would require too much time to pack, and his shopman into another with some more. Arriving at Queenhithe, they find all the goods previously sent, already embarked in the hold of a long-decked barge, which lies near the shore. Mr. Snook now insists upon Ephraim's going on board, and taking supper and some hot rum and water. This advice he follows to so good purpose, that he is at length completely bewildered, when his master, taking him up in his arms, carries him on shore, and there setting him down, leaves him to make the best of his way home as he can.

About eight next morning, Ephraim awaking, of course, in a sad condition, both of body and mind, sets himself immediately about arranging the appearance of the shop “so as to secure the credit of the concern.” In spite of all his ingenuity, however, it maintains a poverty-stricken appearance; — which circumstance excites some most unreasonable suspicions in the mind of Mr. Bluff's clerk, upon his calling at ten with Pester & Co.'s bill (three hundred and sixteen pounds, seventeen shillings), and receiving by way of payment, a check upon his own banking house for the amount — Mr. Snook having written this check before his departure with the goods, and left it with Ephraim. On reaching the bank, therefore, the clerk inquires if Peter Snook's check is good for three hundred and sixteen pounds odd, and is told that it is not worth a farthing, Mr. S. having overdrawn for a hundred. While Mr. Bluff and his assistants are conversing on this subject, Butt, the gin-dealer, calls to thank the banker for having recommended him a customer — which the banker denies having done. An explanation ensues and “stop thief!” is the cry. Ephraim is sent for, and reluctantly made to tell all he knows of his master's proceedings on the day before — by which means a knowledge is obtained of the other houses, who (it is supposed) have been swindled. Getting a description of the barge which conveyed the goods from Queenhithe, the whole party of creditors now set off in pursuit.

About dawn the next morning they overtake the barge, a little below Gravesend — when four men are observed leaving her, and rowing to the shore in a skiff. Peter Snook is found sitting quietly in the cabin, and, although apparently a little surprised at seeing Mr. Pester, betrays nothing like embarrassment or fear.

“Ah, Mr. Pester! is it you? Glad to see you, sir! So you've been taking a trip out o’ town, and are going back with us? We shall get to Billingsgate between eight and nine, they say; and I hope it won’t be later, as I've a bill of yours comes due to-day, and I want to be at home in time to write a check for it.”

The goods are also found on board, together with three men in the hold, gagged and tied hand and foot. They give a strange account of themselves. Being in the employ of Mr. Heaviside, a lighterman, they were put in charge of “The Flitter” when she was hired by Peter Snook for a trip to Gravesend. According to their orders they took the barge, in the first instance, to a wharf near Queenhithe and helped to load her with some goods brought down in carts. Mr. Snook

afterwards came on board, bringing with him two fierce looking men, and “a little man with a hooked nose.” (Ephraim.) Mr. S. and the little man, then, “had a sort of a jollification” in the cabin, till the latter got drunk and was carried ashore. They then proceeded down the river, nothing particular occuring till they had passed Greenwich Hospital, when Mr. S. ordered them to lay the barge alongside a large black sided ship. No sooner was the order obeyed than they were boarded by a number of men from said ship, who seized them, bound them, gagged them and put them in the hold.

The immediate consequence of this information is, that Peter is bound, gagged, and put down into the hold in the same manner, by way of retaliation, and for safe keeping on his way back to the city. On the arrival of the party a meeting of the creditors is called. Peter appears before them in a great rage and with the air of an injured man. Indeed his behavior is so *mal à propos* to his situation as entirely to puzzle his interrogators. He accuses the whole party of a conspiracy.

“Peter Snook,” said Mr. Pester solemnly, from the chair, “that look does not become you after what has passed. Let me advise you to conduct yourself with propriety. You will find that the best policy, depend on’t.”

“A pretty thing for you, for to come to talk of propriety!” exclaimed Peter; “you, that seed me laid hold on by a set of ruffins, and never said a word, nor given information a’terwards! And here have I been kept away from business I don’t know how long, and shut up like a dog in a kennel; but I look upon’t you were at the bottom of it all — you and that fellow with the plum-pudding face, as blowed me up about a cask of gin! What you both mean by it, I can’t think; but if there's any law in the land, I’ll make you remember it, both of you — that's what I will!”

Mr. Snook swears that he never saw Jobb in his life except on the occasion of his capture in “The Flitter,” and positively denies having looked out any parcel of goods at the house of Jobb, Flashbill & Co. With the banker, Mr. Bluff, he acknowledges an acquaintance — but not having drawn for the two hundred and seventy pounds odd, or having ever overdrawn for a shilling in his life. Moreover he is clearly of opinion that the banker has still in his hands more than a hundred and fifty pounds of his (Mr. Snook's) money. He can designate several gentlemen as being no creditors of his, although they were of the number of those from whom large purchases had been made for the “whacking” shipping out, and although their goods were found in “The Flitter.” Ephraim is summoned, and testifies to all the particulars of his master's return, and the subsequent packing, cart-loading and embarkation as already told — accounting for the extravagances of Mr. Snook as being “all along of *that* Miss Bodkin.”

“Lor’, master, hi's glad to see you agin,” exclaimed Ephraim. “Who'd ha’ thought as ’twould come to this?”

“Come to what?” cried Peter. “I’ll make ’em repent of it, every man Jack of ’em, before I've done, if there's law to be had for love or money!”

“Ah, sir,” said Ephraim, “we'd better have stuck to the retail. I was afraid that shipping consarn wouldn’t answer, and tell'd you so, if you recollect, but you wouldn’t harken to me.”

“What shipping concern?” inquired Peter, with a look of amazement.

“La! master,” exclaimed Ephraim, “it aint of any use to pretend to keep it a secret now, when everybody knows it. I didn’t tell Mr. Pester, though, till the last, when all the goods was gone out of the shop, and the sheriff's officers had come to take possession of the house.”

“Sheriff's officers in possession of my house!” roared Peter. “All the goods gone out of the shop! What do you mean by that, you rascal? What have you been doing in my absence?” And he sprang forward furiously, and seized the trembling shopman by the collar with a degree of violence which rendered it difficult for the two officers in attendance to disengage him from his hold.

Hereupon, Mr. Snap, the attorney retained by the creditors, harangues the company at some length, and intimates that Mr. Snook is either mad or acting the madman for the purpose of evading punishment. A practitioner from Bedlam is sent for, and some artifices resorted to — but to no purpose. It is found impossible to decide upon the question of sanity. The medical gentleman, in his report to the creditors, confesses himself utterly perplexed, and, without giving a decision, details the particulars of a singular story told him by Mr. Snook himself, concerning the mode of his escape from drowning after he fell overboard from the “Rose in June.” “It is a strange, unlikely tale to be sure,” says the physician, “and if his general conversation was of that wild, imaginative, flighty kind which I have so often witnessed, I should say it was purely ideal; but he appears such a plain-spoken, simple sort of a person, that it is difficult to conceive how he could invent such a fiction.” Mr. Snook's narration is then told, not in his very words, but in the author's own way, with all the particulars obtained from Peter's various recitations. We give it only in brief.

Upon tumbling overboard, Mr. Snook (at least according to his own story) swam courageously as long as he could. He was upon the point of sinking, however, when an oar was thrust under his arm, and he found himself lifted in a boat by a “dozen dark-looking men.” He is taken on board a large ship, and the captain, who is a droll genius, and talks in rhyme somewhat after the fashion of the wondrous Tale of Alroy, entertains him with great cordiality, dresses him in a suit of his own clothes, makes him drink in the first place, a brimmer of “something hot,” and afterwards plies him with wines and cordials of all kinds, at a supper of the most magnificent description. Warmed in body and mind by this excellent cheer, Peter reveals his inmost secrets to his host, and talks freely and minutely of a thousand things; of his man Ephraim and his oddities; of his bank account; of his great credit; of his adventures with Miss Bodkin; of his prospects in trade; and especially of the names, residences, etc. etc., of the wholesale houses with whom he is in the habit of dealing. Presently, being somewhat overcome with wine, he goes to bed at the suggestion of the captain, who promises to call him in season for a boat in the morning, which will convey him to Billingsgate in full time for Pester and Co.'s note. How long he slept is uncertain — but when he awoke a great change was observable in the captain's manner, who was somewhat brusque, and handed him over the ship's side into the barge where he was discovered by the creditors in pursuit, and which he was assured would convey him to Billingsgate.

This relation, thus succintly given by us, implies little or nothing. The result, however, to which the reader is ingeniously led by the author, is, that the real Peter Snook has been duped, and that the Peter Snook who made the various purchases about town, and who appeared to Ephraim only during the morning and evening twilight of the eventful day, was, in fact, no other person than the captain of “the strange, black-sided ship.” We are to believe that, taking advantage of Peter's communicativeness, and a certain degree of personal resemblance to himself, he assumed our hero's clothes while he slept, and made a bold and nearly successful attempt at wholesale peculation.

The incidents of this story are forcibly conceived, and even in the hands of an ordinary writer would scarcely fail of effect. But, in the present instance, so unusual a tact is developed in the

narration, that we are inclined to rank “Peter Snook” among the few tales which (each in its own way) are absolutely faultless. It is a Flemish home-piece of the highest order — its merits lying in its chiaro 'scuro — in that blending of light and shade and shadow, where nothing is too distinct, yet where the idea is fully conveyed — in the absence of all rigid outlines and all miniature painting — in the not undue warmth of the coloring — and in a well subdued exaggeration at all points — an exaggeration never amounting to caricature.