A Psychological Counter−Current in Recent Fiction

William Dean Howells

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It is consoling as often as dismaying to find in what seems a cataclysmal tide of a certain direction a strong drift to the opposite quarter. It is so divinable, if not so perceptible, that its presence may usually be recognized as a beginning of the turn in every tide which is sure, sooner or later, to come. In reform, it is the menace of reaction; in reaction, it is the promise of reform; we may take heart as we must lose heart from it. A few years ago, when a movement which carried fiction to the highest place in literature was apparently of such onward and upward sweep that there could be no return or descent, there was a counter−current in it which stayed it at last, and pulled it back to that lamentable level where fiction is now sunk, and the word "novel" is again the synonym of all that is morally false and mentally despicable. Yet that this, too, is partly apparent, I think can be shown from some phases of actual fiction which happen to be its very latest phases, and which are of a significance as hopeful as it is interesting. Quite as surely as romanticism lurked at the heart of realism, something that we may call "psychologism" has been present in the romanticism of the last four or five years, and has now begun to evolve itself in examples which it is the pleasure as well as the duty of criticism to deal with.

I.

No one in his day has done more to popularize the romanticism, now decadent, than Mr. Gilbert Parker; and he made way for it at its worst just because he was so much better than it was at its worst, because he was a poet of undeniable quality, and because he could bring to its intellectual squalor the graces and the powers which charm, though they could not avail to save it from final contempt. He saves himself in his latest novel, because, though still so largely romanticistic, its prevalent effect is psychologistic, which is the finer analogue of realistic, and which gave realism whatever was vital in it, as now it gives romanticism whatever will survive it. In "The Right of Way" Mr. Parker is not in a world where mere determinism rules, where there is nothing but the happening of things, and where this one or that one is important or unimportant according as things are happening to him or not, but has in himself no claim upon the reader's attention. Once more the novel begins to rise to its higher function, and to teach that men are somehow masters of their fate. His Charley Steele is, indeed, as unpromising material for the experiment, in certain ways, as could well be chosen. One of the few memorable things that Bulwer said, who said so many quotable things, was that pure intellectuality is the devil, and on his plane Charley Steele comes near being pure intellectual. He apprehends all things from the mind, and does the effects even of goodness from the pride of mental strength. Add to these conditions of his personality that pathologically he is from time to time a drunkard, with always the danger of remaining a drunkard, and you have a figure of which so much may be despaired that it might almost be called hopeless. I confess that in the beginning this brilliant, pitiless lawyer, this consciencelessly powerful advocate, at once mocker and poseur, all but failed to interest me. A little of him and his monocle went such a great way with me that I thought I had enough of him by the end of the trial, where he gets off a man charged with murder, and then cruelly snubs the homicide in his gratitude; and I do not quite know how I kept on to the point where Steele in his drunkenness first dazzles and then insults the gang of drunken lumbermen, and begins his second life in the river where they have thrown him, and where his former client finds him. From that point I could not forsake him to the end, though I found myself more than once in the world where things happen of themselves and do not happen from the temperaments of its inhabitants. In a better and wiser world, the homicide would not perhaps be at hand so opportunely to save the life of the advocate who had saved his; but one consents to this, as one consents to a great deal besides in the story, which is imaginably the survival of a former method. The artist's affair is to report the appearance, the effect; and in the real world, the appearance, the effect, is that of law and not of miracle. Nature employs the miracle so very sparingly that most of us go through life without seeing one, and some of us contract such a prejudice against miracles that when they are performed for us we suspect a trick. When I suffered from this suspicion in "The Right of Way" I was the more vexed because I felt that I was in the hands of a connoisseur of character who had no need of miracles.

I have liked Mr. Parker's treatment of French−Canadian life, as far as I have known it; and in this novel it is one of the principal pleasures for me. He may not have his habitant, his seigneur or his cure down cold, but he makes me believe that he has, and I can ask no more than that of him. In like manner, he makes the ambient, physical as well as social, sensible around me: the cold rivers, the hard, clear skies, the snowy woods and fields, the little frozen villages of Canada. In this book, which is historical of the present rather than the past, he gives one a realizing sense of the Canadians, not only in the country but in the city, at least so far as they affect each other psychologically in society, and makes one feel their interesting temperamental difference from Americans. His Montrealers are still Englishmen in their strenuous individuality; but in the frank expression of character, of eccentricity, Charley Steele is like a type of lawyer in our West, of an epoch when people were not yet content to witness ideals of themselves, but when they wished to be their poetry rather than to read it. In his second life he has the charm for the imagination that a disembodied spirit might have, if it could be made known to us in the circumstances of another world. He has, indeed, made almost as clean a break with his past as if he had really been drowned in the river. When, after the term of oblivion, in which he knows nothing of his past self, he is restored to his identity by a famous surgeon too opportunely out of Paris, on a visit to his brother, the cure, the problem is how he shall expiate the errors of his past, work out his redemption in his new life; and the author solves it for him by appointing him to a life of unselfish labor, illumined by actions of positive beneficence. It is

something like the solution which Goethe imagines for Faust, and perhaps no other is imaginable. In contriving it, Mr. Parker indulges the weaker brethren with an abundance of accident and a luxury of catastrophe, which the reader interested in the psychology of the story may take as little account of as he likes. Without so much of them he might have made a sculpturesque romance as clearly and nobly definite as "The Scarlet Letter"; with them he has made a most picturesque romantic novel. His work, as I began by saying, or hinting, is the work of a poet, in conception, and I wish that in some details of diction it were as elect as the author's verse is. But one must not expect everything; and in what it is, "The Right of Way" satisfies a reasonable demand on the side of literature, while it more than meets a reasonable expectation on the side of psychological interest. Distinctly it marks an epoch in contemporary noveling, and mounts far above the average best toward the day of better things which I hope it is not rash to image dawning.

II.

I am sure I do not merely fancy the auroral light in a group of stories by another poet. "The Ruling Passion," Dr. Henry Van Dyke calls his book, which relates itself by a double tie to Mr. Parker's novel through kinship of Canadian landscape and character, and through the prevalence of psychologism over determinism in it. In the situations and incidents studied with sentiment that saves itself from sentimentality sometimes with greater and sometimes with less ease, but saves itself, the appeal is from the soul in the character to the soul in the reader, and not from brute event to his sensation. I believe that I like best among these charming things the two sketches—they are hardly stories—"A Year of Nobility" and "The Keeper of the Dight," though if I were asked to say why, I should be puzzled. Perhaps it is because I find in the two pieces named a greater detachment than I find in some others of Dr. Van Dyke's delightful volume, and greater evidence that he has himself so thoroughly and finally mastered his material that he is no longer in danger of being unduly affected by it. That is a danger which in his very quality of lyrical poet he is most liable to, for he is above all a lyrical poet, and such drama as the chorus usually comments is the drama next his heart. The pieces, in fact, are so many idyls, and their realism is an effect which he has felt rather than reasoned his way to. It is implicational rather than intentional. It is none the worse but all the better on that account, and I cannot say that the psychologism is the worse for being frankly, however uninsistently, moralized. A humor, delicate and genuine as the poetry of the stories, plays through them, and the milde macht of sympathy with everything human transfers to the pleasant pages the foresters and fishermen from their native woods and waters. Canada seems the home of primitive character; the seventeenth century survives there among the habitants, with their steadfast faith, their picturesque superstitions, their old world traditions and their new world customs. It is the land not only of the habitant, but of his oversoul, the good cure, and his overlord the seigneur, now faded economically, but still lingering socially in the scene of his large possessions. Their personality imparts a charm to the many books about them which at present there seems to be no end to the making of; and such a fine touch as Dr. Van Dyke's gives us a likeness of them, which if it is idealized is idealized by reservation, not by attribution.

III.

Mr. William Allen White's method is the reverse of Dr. Van Dyke's. If he has held his hand anywhere the reader does not suspect it, for it seems, with its relentless power of realization, to be laid upon the whole political life of Kansas, which it keeps in a clutch so penetrating, so comprehensive, that the reader does not quite feel his own vitals free from it. Very likely, it does not grasp the whole situation; after all, it is a picture, not a map, that Mr. White has been making, and the photograph itself, though it may include, does not represent everything. Some years ago there was a silly attempt to reproach the true painters of manners by calling them photographic, but I doubt if even then Mr. White would have minded any such censure of his conscientious work, and I am sure that now he would count it honor. He cannot be the admirable artist he is without knowing that it is the inwardness as well as the outwardness of men that he photographs, and if the reader does not know it, the worse for the reader. He is not the sort of reader who will rise from this book humiliated and fortified, as any reader worthy of it will.

The author has put his best foot forward in the opening story, "The Man on Horseback," which, when I read it a few years ago in the magazine where it first appeared, seemed to me so perfect in its way that I should not have known how to better it. Of course, this is a good deal for a critic to say; it is something like abdicating his office; but I repeat it. It takes rather more courage for a man to be honest in fiction than out of it, for people do not much expect it of him, or altogether like it in him; but in "The Man on Horseback" Mr. White is at every moment honest. He is honest, if not so impressively honest, in the other stories, "A Victory for the People," "A Triumph's Evidence," "The Mercy of Death," and "A Most Lamentable Comedy;" and where he fails of perfect justice to his material, I think it is because of his unconscious political bias, rather than anything wilfuller. In the story last named this betrays itself in his treatment of a type of man who could not be faithful to any sort of movement, and whose unfaithfulness does not necessarily censure the movement Mr. White dislikes. Wonderfully good as the portrait of Dan Gregg is, it wants the final touch which could have come only from a little kindness. His story might have been called "The Man on Foot," by the sort of antithesis which I should not blame Mr. White for scorning, and I should not say anything of it worse than that it is pitilessly hard, which the story of "The Man on Horseback" is not, or any of the other stories. Sentimentality of any kind is alien to the author's nature, but not tenderness, especially that sparing sort which gives his life to the man who is down.

Most of the men whom Mr. White deals with are down, as most men in the struggle of life are. Few of us can be on top morally, almost as few as can be on top materially; and probably nothing will more surprise the saints at the judgment day than to find themselves in such a small minority. But probably not the saints alone will be saved, and it is some such hope that Mr. White has constantly in mind when making his constant appeal to conscience. It is, of course, a dramatic, not a didactic appeal. He preaches so little and is so effectively reticent that I could almost with he had left out the preface of his book, good as it is. Yes, just because it is so good I could wish he had left it out. It is a perfect justification of his purpose and methods, but they are their own justification with all who can think about them, and the others are themselves not worth thinking about. The stories are so bravely faithful to human nature in that political aspect which is but one phase of our whole average life that they are magnificently above all need of excusing or defending. They form a substantial body of political fiction, such as we have so long sighed for, and such as some of us will still go on sighing for quite as if it had not been supplied. Some others will be aware that it has been supplied in a form as artistically fine as the material itself is coarse and common, if indeed any sort of humanity is coarse and common except to those who themselves are so.

The meaning that animates the stories is that our political opportunity is trammelled only so far as we have trammelled it by our greed and falsehood; and in this aspect the psychology of Mr. White offers the strongest contrast to that of the latest Russian master in fiction. Maxim Gorky's wholly hopeless study of degeneracy in the life of "Foma Gordyeeff" accuses conditions which we can only imagine with difficulty. As one advances through the moral waste of that strange book one slowly perceives that he is in a land of No Use, in an ambient of such iron fixity and inexorable bounds that perhaps Foma's willingness to rot through vice into imbecility is as wise as anything else there. It is a book that saturates the soul with despair, and blights it with the negation which seems the only possible truth in the circumstances; so that one questions whether the Russian in which Turgenieff and

Tolstoy, and even Dostoyevsky, could animate the volition and the expectation of better things has not sunk to depths beyond any counsel of amelioration. To come up out of that Bottomless Pit into the measureless air of Mr. White's Kansas plains is like waking from death to life. We are still among dreadfully fallible human beings, but we are no longer among the damned; with the worst there is a purgatorial possibility of Paradise. Even the perdition of Dan Gregg then seems not the worst that could befall him; he might again have been governor.

IV.

If the human beings in Dr. Weir Mitchell's very interesting novel of "Circumstance" do not seem so human as those Russians of Gorky and those Kansans of Mr. White, it is because people in society are always human with difficulty, and his Philadelphians are mostly in society. They are almost reproachfully exemplary, in some instances; and it is when they give way to the natural man, and especially the natural woman, that they are consoling and edifying. When Mary Fairthorne begins to scold her cousin, Kitty Morrow, at the party where she finds Kitty wearing her dead mother's pearls, and even takes hold of her in a way that makes the reader hope she is going to shake her, she is delightful; and when Kitty complains that Mary has "pinched" her, she is adorable. One is really in love with her for the moment; and in that moment of nature the thick air of good society seems to blow away and let one breathe freely. The bad people in the book are better than the good people, and the good people are best in their worst tempers. They are so exclusively well born and well bred that the fitness of the medical student, Blount, for their society can be ascertained only by his reference to a New England ancestry of the high antiquity that can excuse even dubious cuffs and finger−nails in a descendant of good principles and generous instincts.

The psychological problem studied in the book with such artistic fineness and scientific thoroughness is personally a certain Mrs. Hunter, who manages through the weak−minded and selfish Kitty Morrow to work her way to authority in the household of Kitty's uncle, where she displaces Mary Fairthorne, and makes the place odious to all the kith and kin of Kitty. Intellectually, she is a clever woman, or rather, she is a woman of great cunning that rises at times to sagacity; but she is limited by a bad heart and an absence of conscience. She is bold up to a point, and then she is timid; she will go to lengths, but not to all lengths; and when it comes to poisoning Fairthorne to keep him from changing his mind about the bequest he has made her, she has not quite the courage of her convictions. She hesitates and does not do it, and it is in this point she becomes so aesthetically successful. The guilt of the uncommitted crimes is more important than the guilt of those which have been committed; and the author does a good thing morally as well as artistically in leaving Mrs. Hunter still something of a problem to his reader. In most things she is almost too plain a case; she is sly, and vulgar, and depraved and cruel; she is all that a murderess should be; but, in hesitating at murder, she becomes and remains a mystery, and the reader does not get rid of her as he would if she had really done the deed. In the inferior exigencies she strikes fearlessly; and when the man who has divorced her looms up in her horizon with doom in his presence, she goes and makes love to him. She is not the less successful because she disgusts him; he agrees to let her alone so long as she does no mischief; she has, at least, made him unwilling to feel himself her persecutor, and that is enough for her.

Mrs. Hunter is a study of extreme interest in degeneracy, but I am not sure that Kitty Morrow is not a rarer contribution to knowledge. Of course, that sort of selfish girl has always been known, but she has not met the open recognition which constitutes knowledge, and so she has the preciousness of a find. She is at once tiresome and vivacious; she is cold−hearted but not cold−blooded, and when she lets herself go in an outburst of passion for the celibate young ritualist, Knellwood, she becomes fascinating. She does not let herself go without having assured herself that he loves her, and somehow one is not shocked at her making love to him; one even wishes that she had won him. I am not sure but the case would have been a little truer if she had won him, but as it is I am richly content with it. Perhaps I am the more content because in the case of Kitty Morrow I find a concession to reality more entire than the case of Mrs. Hunter. She is of the heredity from which you would expect her depravity; but Kitty Morrow, who lets herself go so recklessly, is, for all one knows, as well born and as well bred as those other Philadelphians. In my admiration of her, as a work of art, however, I must not fail of justice to the higher beauty of Mary Fairthorne's character. She is really a good girl, and saved from the unreality which always threatens goodness in fiction by those limitations of temper which I have already hinted.

V.

It is far from the ambient of any of these imaginary lives to that of the half−caste heroine of "A Japanese Nightingale" and the young American whom she marries in one of those marriages which neither the Oriental nor the Occidental expects to last till death parts them. It is far, and all is very strange under that remote sky; but what is true to humanity anywhere is true everywhere; and the story of Yuki and Bigelow, as the Japanese author tells it in very choice English, is of as palpitant actuality as any which should treat of lovers next door. If I have ever read any record of young married love that was so frank, so sweet, so pure, I do not remember it. Yet, Yuki, though she loves Bigelow, does not marry him because she loves him, but because she wishes with the money he gives her to help her brother through college in America. When this brother comes back to Japan—he is the touch of melodrama in the pretty idyl—he is maddened by an acquired Occidental sense of his sister's disgrace in her marriage, and falls into a fever and dies out of the story, which closes with the lasting happiness of the young wife and husband. There is enough incident, but of the kind that is characterized and does not characterize. The charm, the delight, the supreme interest is in the personality of Yuki. Her father was an Englishman who had married her mother in the same sort of marriage she makes herself; but he is true to his wife till he dies, and possibly something of the English constancy which is not always so evident as in his case qualifies the daughter's nature. Her mother was, of course, constant, and Yuki, though an outcast from her own people—the conventions seen to be as imperative in Tokyo as in Philadelphia—because of her half−caste origin, is justly Japanese in what makes her loveliest. There is a quite indescribable freshness in the art of this pretty novelette—it is hardly of the dimensions of a novel—which is like no other art except in the simplicity which is native to the best art everywhere. Yuki herself is of a surpassing lovableness. Nothing but the irresistible charm of the American girl could, I should think keep the young men who read Mrs. Watana's book from going out and marrying Japanese girls. They are safe from this, however, for the reason suggested, and therefore it can be safely commended at least to young men intending fiction, as such a lesson in the art of imitating nature as has not come under my hand for a long while. It has its little defects, but its directness, and sincerity, and its felicity through the sparing touch make me unwilling to note them. In fact, I have forgotten them.

VI.

I wish that I could at all times praise as much the literature of an author who speaks for another colored race, not so far from us as the Japanese, but of as much claim upon our conscience, if not our interest. Mr. Chesnutt, it seems to me, has lost literary quality in acquiring literary quantity, and though his book, "The Marrow of Tradition," is of the same strong material as his earlier books, it is less simple throughout, and therefore less excellent in manner. At his worst, he is no worse than the higher average of the ordinary novelist, but he ought always to be very much better, for he began better, and he is of that race which has, first of all, to get rid of the cakewalk, if it will not suffer from a smile far more blighting than any frown. He is fighting a battle, and it is not for him to pick up the cheap graces and poses of the jouster. He does, indeed, cast them all from him when he gets down to his work, and in the dramatic climaxes and closes of his story he shortens his weapons and deals his blows so absolutely without flourish that I have nothing but admiration for him. "The Marrow of Tradition," like everything else he has written, has to do with the relations of the blacks and whites, and in that republic of letters where all men are free and equal he stands up for his own people with a courage which has more justice than mercy in it. The book is, in fact, bitter, bitter. There is no reason in history why it should not be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it was not so bitter. I am not saying that he is so inartistic as to play the advocate; whatever his minor foibles may be, he is an artist whom his stepbrother Americans may well be proud of; but while he recognizes pretty well all the facts in the case, he is too clearly of a judgment that is made up. One cannot blame him for that; what would one be one's self? If the tables could once be turned, and it could be that it was the black race which violently and lastingly triumphed in the bloody revolution at Wilmington, North Carolina, a few years ago, what would not we excuse to the white man who made the atrocity the argument of his fiction?

Mr. Chesnutt goes far back of the historic event in his novel, and shows us the sources of the cataclysm which swept away a legal government and perpetuated an insurrection, but he does not paint the blacks all good, or the whites all bad. He paints them as slavery made them on both sides, and if in the very end he gives the moral victory to the blacks—if he suffers the daughter of the black wife to have pity on her father's daughter by his white wife, and while her own child lies dead from a shot fired in the revolt, gives her husband's skill to save the life of her sister's child—it cannot be said that either his aesthetics or ethics are false. Those who would question either must allow, at least, that the negroes have had the greater practice in forgiveness, and that there are many probabilities to favor his interpretation of the fact. No one who reads the book can deny that the case is presented with great power, or fail to recognize in the writer a portent of the sort of negro equality against which no series of hangings and burnings will finally avail.

VII.

In Mr. Chesnutt's novel the psychologism is of that universal implication which will distinguish itself to the observer from the psychologism of that more personal sort—the words are not as apt as I should like—evident in some of the interesting books under notice here. I have tried to say that it is none the less a work of art for that reason, and I can praise the art of another novel, in which the same sort of psychologism prevails, though I must confess it a fiction of the rankest tendenciousness. "Lay Down Your Arms" is the name of the English version of the Baroness von Suttner's story, "Die Waffen Nieder," which has become a watchword with the peacemakers on the continent of Europe. Its success there has been very great, and I wish its success on the continent of America could be so great that it might replace in the hands of our millions the baleful books which have lately been glorifying bloodshed in the private and public wars of the past, if not present. The wars which "Lay Down Your Arms" deals with are not quite immediate, and yet they are not so far off historically, either. They are the Franco−Austrian war of 1859, the Austro−Prussian war of 1866, and the Franco−German war of 1870; and the heroine whose personal relation makes them live so cruelly again is a young Austrian lady of high birth. She is the daughter and the sister of soldiers, and when the handsome young officer, of equal rank with her own, whom she first marries, makes love to her just before the outbreak of the war first named, she is as much in love with his soldiership as with himself. But when the call to arms comes, it strikes to her heart such a sense of war as she has never known before. He is killed in one of the battles of Italy, and after a time she marries another soldier, not such a beau sabreur as the first, but a mature and thoughtful man, who fights through that second war from a sense of duty rather than from love of fighting, and comes out of it with such abhorrence that he quits the army and goes with his family to live in Paris. There the third war overtakes him, and in the siege, this Austrian, who has fought the Prussians to the death, is arrested by the communards as a Prussian spy and shot.

The bare outline of the story gives, of course, no just notion of the intense passion of grief which fills it. Neither does it convey a due impression of the character in the different persons which, amidst the heartbreak, is ascertained with some such truth and impartiality as pervade the effects of "War and Peace." I do not rank it with that work, but in its sincerity and veracity it easily ranks above any other novel treating of war which I know, and it ought to do for the German peoples what the novels of Erckmann−Chatrian did for the French, in at least one generation. Will it do anything for the Anglo−Saxon peoples? Probably not till we have pacified the Philippines and South Africa. We Americans are still apparently in love with fighting, though the English are apparently not so much so; and as it is always well to face the facts, I will transfer to my page some facts of fighting from this graphic book, which the read may apply to the actualities in the Philippines, with a little imagination. They are taken from a letter written to the heroine by her second husband after one of the Austrian defeats. "The people poured boiling water and oil on the Prussians from the windows of the houses at ——.... The village is ours—no, it is the enemy's, now ours again—and yet once more the enemy's; but it is no longer a village, but a smoking mass of ruins of houses....One family has remained behind...an old married couple and their daughter, the latter in childbed. The husband is serving in our regiment.... Poor devil! he got there just in time to see the mother and child die; a shell had exploded under their bed.... I saw a breastwork there which was formed of corpses. The defenders had heaped all the slain who were lying near, in order, from that rampart, to fire over at their assailants. I shall surely never forget that wall in my life. A man who formed one of its bricks was still alive, and was waving his arm.... What is happening there? The execution party is drawn out. Has a spy been caught? Seventeen this time. There they come, in four ranks, each one of four men, surrounded by a square of soldiers. The condemned men step out, with their heads down. Behind comes a cart with a corpse in it, and bound to the corpse the dead man's son, a boy of twelve, also condemned.... Steep, rocky heights; Jaegers, nimble as cats, climbing up them.... Some of them, who are hit by the enemy's shot, suddenly stretch out both their arms, let their muskets fall, and, with their heads falling backwards, drop off the height, step by step, from one rocky point to another, smashing their limbs to pieces. I saw a horseman at some distance, obliquely behind me, at whose side a shell burst. His horse swerved aside and came against the tail of mind, then shot past me. The man sat still in the saddle, but a fragment of the shell had ripped his belly open and torn out all the intestines. The upper part of his body was held to the lower only by the spine. From the ribs to the thighs nothing but one great, bleeding cavity. A short distance

farther he fell to the ground, one foot still clinging in the stirrup, and the galloping horse dragging him on over the stony soil.... Another street fight in the little town of Saar.... In the middle of the square stands a high pillar of the Virgin. The mother of God holds her child in one arm, and stretches the other out in blessing.... Here the fight was prolonged, man to man. They were hacking at me, I laying about me on all sides.... A Prussian dragoon, strong as Goliath, tore one of our officers (a pretty, dandified lieutenant—how many girls are, perhaps, mad after him?) out of his saddle and split his skull at the feet of the Virgin's pillar. The gentle saint looked on unmoved. Another of the enemy's dragoons—a Goliath, too—seized, just before me almost, my right−hand man, and bent him backwards in his saddle so powerfully that he broke his back—I myself heard it crack. To this the Madonna gave her blessing also."

VIII.

It can be said that these incidents of battle are imagined, like the facts of Vereschagin's pictures, but like these they are imagined rather below than above the real horror of war, and represent them inadequately. The incidents of another book, the last on my list, are of the warfare which goes on in times of peace, and which will go on as long as there are human passions, and mankind are divided into men and women, and saints and sinners. Of all the books on my list, "Let Not Man Put Asunder" is, narrowing the word to the recognition of the author's intellectual alertness and vividness, the cleverest. The story is of people who constantly talk so wonderfully well beyond the wont even of society people that the utmost skill of the author, who cannot subdue their brilliancy, is needed to make us feel their reality. But he does make us feel this in most cases, the important cases, and in the other cases his power of interesting us is so great that we do not stop to examine the grounds of our sensation, or to question the validity of our emotions. The action, which is positively of to−day, or yesterday at the furthest, passes in Boston and England, among people of such great fortune and high rank and transcendent fashion that the proudest reader cannot complain of their social quality. As to their moral quality, one might have thought the less said the better, if the author had not said so much that is pertinent and impressive. It is from first to last a book with a conscience in it, and its highest appeal is to the conscience. It is so very nearly a great book, so very nearly a true book, that it is with a kind of grief one recognizes its limitations, a kind of surprise at its shortcomings, which, nevertheless, are not shortcomings that impair its supreme effect. This, I take it, is the intimation of a mystical authority in marriage against which divorce sins in vain, which no recreancy can subvert, and by virtue of which it claims eternally its own the lovers united in it; though they seem to become haters, it cannot release them to happiness in a new union through any human law.

If the author had done dramatically (and his doing is mainly dramatic) no more than this, he would have established his right to be taken seriously, but he has done very much more, and has made us acquainted with types and characters which we do not readily forget, and with characters much more real than their ambient. For instance, the Old Cambridge in which the Vassalls live is not the Old Cambridge of fact, but the Vassalls are the Vassalls of fact, though the ancestral halls in which they dwell are of a baroniality difficult of verification. Their honor, their righteousness, their purity are veracious, though their social state is magnified beyond any post−revolutionary experience. The social Boston of the novel is more like; its difference from an older Boston is sensitively felt, and finely suggested, especially on the side of that greater lawlessness in which it is not the greater Boston. Petrina Faneuil, the heroine, is derivatively of the older Boston which has passed away, and actually of the newer Boston which will not be so much regretted when it passes, the fast Boston, the almost rowdy Boston, the decadent Boston. It is, of course, a Boston much worse in the report than in the fact, but it is not unimaginably bad to the student who notes that the lapse from any high ideals is to a level lower than that of people who have never had them. As for Petrina herself, who was in Boston more than of it, she is so admirably analyzed in the chapter devoted to the task that I am tempted to instance it as the best piece of work in the book, though it does not make one hold one's breath like some of the dramatic episodes: "Whatever religious instinct had been in the family had spent itself at least two generations before her time. She was a pagan—a tolerant, indifferent, slightly scornful pagan.... But she was none the less a Puritan. Certain of her ways of thought and habits of life, had survived the beliefs which had given them birth, as an effect will often outlive its cause. If she was a pagan, she was a serious one, a pagan with a New England conscience."

This is mighty well said, and the like things that are said of Petrina's sister−in−law, who has married an English title, are mighty well, too. "She had inherited a countenance whose expression was like the light which lingers in the sky long after sunset—the light of some ancestral fire gone out. If in her face there were prayers, they had been said by Pepperells and Vassalls now sleeping in Massachusetts churchyards. If in her voice there were tears, they had been shed by those who would weep no more. She mirrored the emotions she had never felt; and all that was left of joys and sorrows and spiritual aspirations which had once thrilled human hearts was in that plaintive echo they had given to this woman's tone, and the light of petition they had left burning in her eyes."

No one who reads such passages can deny that the author of "Let Not Man Put Asunder" can think subtly as well as say clearly, and the book abounds in proofs of his ability to portray human nature in its lighter aspects.

Lady de Bohun, with her pathetic face, is a most amusing creature, with all her tragedy, and she is on the whole the most perfectly characterized personality in the story. The author gives you a real sense of her beauty, her grace, her being always charmingly in a hurry and always late. The greatest scene is hers: the scene in which she meets her divorced husband with his second wife. One may suspect some of the other scenes, but one must accept that scene as one of genuine dramatic worth. Too much of the drama in the book is theatre rather than drama, and yet the author's gift is essentially dramatic. He knows how to tell a story on his stage that holds you to the fall of the curtain, and makes you almost patient of the muted violins and the limelight of the closing scene. Such things, you say, do not happen in Brookline, Mass., whatever happens in London or in English country houses; and yet the people have at one time or other convinced you of their verity. Of the things that are not natural, you feel like saying that they are supernatural rather than unnatural, and you own that at its worst the book is worth while in a time when most novels are not worth while.

Footnotes

"The Right of Way." A Novel. By Gilbert Parker. Harper Brothers.

"The Ruling Passion. Tales of nature and human nature." By Henry Van Dyke. Charles Scribner's Sons.

"Spoils and Stratagems Stories of love and politics." By Wm. Allen White. Charles Scribner's Sons.

"Foma Gordyeeff." By Maxim Gorky. Translated from the Russian by Isabel F. Hapgood. Charles Scribner's Sons.

"Circumstances." By S. Weir Mitchell, M.D. The Century Company.

"A Japanese Nightingale." By Onoto Watana. Harper Brothers.

"The Marrow of Tradition." By Charles W. Chesnutt. Houghton, Mifflin Co.

"Lay Down Your Arms. The autobiography of Martha von Tilling." By Bertha von Suttner. Authorized Translation. By T. Holmes. Longmans, Green Co.

"Let Not Man Put Asunder." By Basil King. Harper Brothers.