"St. Elmo" and its Author

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In the rush to keep any sort of pace with the lighter and noisier literature of the day it is pleasant and worth while occasionally to spend a few minutes looking over the publishers' lists at the ends of the popular novels of thirty odd years ago, and from them to contrast the tastes of the past and the present generations — a contrast which is very far from being entirely flattering to the readers of to−day. At the head of such lists we may be sure to find the names of those writers who corresponded with the authors of what are now known as "the best sellers" — we realise the claims that Mary J. Holmes and Ann S. Stevens and Augusta J. Evans and May Agnes Fleming then had to popular attention. We recognise many laudable ambitions in the advertisements of books dealing with "the habits of good society," with "the nice points of taste and good manners, and the art of making oneself agreeable," with "the art of polite conversation," and the forms in which letters of business, of friendship, of society, of respectful endearment should be couched. At first sight all this is likely to provoke rather contemptuous amusement. And how unjustly! The forms may be quaint and obsolete, but the sentiments are homely and praiseworthy, and in similar literature of to−day there are just as many platitudes, just as much that is silly and not nearly so much that is sincere. The average highly successful novel of that time was no more literature than is the average highly successful novel of to−day, and the old was generally marked, it must be acknowledged, by an airiness and pedantry that to−day would not reach the public without pretty severe editing. On the other hand, however, the old novels almost always had stories to tell, and they told them in a manner to make them from end to end vitally interesting to that class of readers to which they were designed to appeal.

With the exception of Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, and the possible exception of General Wallace's Ben Hur , there has probably never been a novel written by an American author that is to be found, well thumbed and yet carefully preserved, in so many humble libraries as Mrs. Augusta Evans Wilson's St. Elmo. Even to−day, obsolete as it is in form and style, it may be called an early chapter in the code of life. In a certain way, it has a significance very much broader than its significance as a mere novel. In the literary development of many young Americans it has marked a stage, a period. If one cannot look back and remember the time when one thought of St. Elmo as one of the finest and grandest of all novels, something has surely been missed. Most of us can recall quite readily days when we thrilled at the awful story of the hero's lost youth, and were stirred to amazement and admiration over Edna Earl's knowledge of the Unknowable. Perhaps St. Elmo's sardonic bitterness no longer impresses us; perhaps we have come to realise that all the tragic gloom of his demeanour was only a ridiculous pose; and as for Edna Earl, there is no doubt that she is entitled to a very high place as a public nuisance among the heroines of fiction. There never was a book written more open to ridicule. And yet, when that inclination to ridicule comes we pause, half ashamed. For under all the pompous phraseology we feel that there was a story to be told; that not a line of it was penned that was not inspired by sincerity and a belief in lofty ideals; and that it has done much to brighten the lives of many hundreds of thousands of readers. St. Elmo is a paradox. It is utterly and flatly absurd; and yet it is a noble work, the work of a noble woman.

One cannot spend much time at the task of reviewing the current books of the day without occasionally feeling a twinge of envy when thinking of the opportunities of the reviewers of other days. Who would not like to have had a fling at Vanity Fair when it was coming out in installments; to have had the chance to have hailed enthusiastically the rising genius of Dickens, or to have sat down gravely to the composition of a critical screed anent a new tale by the Wizard of the North? It is very interesting and worth while occasionally to spend time poring over rusty libraries in the search for contemporary criticism of the great books of the early half of the century. How many of the puny verdicts have been overthrown by the great judgment of posterity? Of course, we are quite sure that we should never have blundered so egregiously; that we should never have dismissed a great masterpiece with a few curt lines of faint praise or a half column of cocky abuse. We should have liked to have tried our fist at them all. We should have acclaimed highly the genius of Irving, Hawthorne and Poe, and

predicted the many startling events which were to result from the publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin. When we came to Mrs. Wilson's St. Elmo, we should, of course, have been the first to point out its resemblance to Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre; to show that Edna Earl was simply an impossible Jane Eyre in another environment, and that St. Elmo Murray was simply a very stilted and noisy Edward Rochester. All this and more we should have done; at least, we can think so now in pleasant day−dreams.

More than sixteen years have elapsed since the publication of Mrs. Wilson's At the Mercy of Tiberius , which she herself, as well as the public at large, long regarded as her last book. But two years ago she went to work again and wrote the story, A Speckled Bird, which her publishers are now bringing out. This is the only one of her novels which was not written at Ashland, the Wilson estate near Mobile. Her first book, Inez, appeared in 1855, and was far from being immediately successful. Mr. Derby, in his Fifty Years Among Books, Authors and Publishers, has told the story of her first visit to his office in the later fifties, when she came to submit the manuscript of Beulah . She was accompanied by a cousin, a nervous and fiery young Southerner, who spent his time during the interview between author and publisher apparently examining the backs of the books lining the room. He afterward confessed to Mr. Derby that he had been listening very attentively, and that he had made up his mind, in case of a rejection, to hurl the volumes at the publisher's head. Beulah appeared in 1859. Mrs. Wilson's third novel, Macaria , had an adventurous career. It was published at Richmond in 1862, under a Confederate States copyright: a United States copyright was not obtained for it until 1868. Vashti appeared in 1869, Infelice in 1875, and At the Mercy of Tiberius not until twelve years later.