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THE PLAIN MAN AND THE
NOVEL

No. 44

THE 'PLAIN MAN AND THE NOVEL

by
ROGER DATALLER



THOMAS NELSON AND SONS LTD
LONDON EDINBURGH PARIS MELBOURNE
TORONTO AND NEW YORK

First published, September 1940
Reprinted, September 1940

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INTRODUCTION

THE novel, it would seem, is in a bad way. It has, it appears, lost point, drive, vitality. While more novels than ever are being published year by year, and while the general standing of writing has become demonstrably higher in comparison with that of past generations, such a condition (we are informed) cannot be accepted as a standard of well-being.

The decay is due to a complex of causes, of which one or two elements are outstanding. There is, to begin with, the business of printing and distribution, or what may be termed the problem of the publisher. Gone are the dignified days of Victorian integrity (and here for a moment the critic will suspend his dancing upon the tombstone of Victorian "hypocrisy" to hurry forward the reproachful shades of Murray and Constable !); gone the days of honest notice and reticent reputation. A bookselling racket has descended upon the world; the artful manipulation of advertisement, and the ardent spotting of book-club winners. Publishing, now an adjunct of big business, has delivered up the soul of literature to the market-place and the money-changers.

But the problem of the publisher is as dust in the balance compared with what may be termed the problem of the author, who apparently is not so much a difficulty as a public danger. Apparently he has lost capacity to see, to think, and to feel in terms of modern necessity.

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The twentieth century is tumbling about his ears, and in practice he doesn't appear to have noticed it. He is concerned with ephemeral evidence, the future of the cocktail party, and the hectic excitement of back-stage intrigue. Theorizing in terms of social change and historical perspective, he will recapture with an air of reverend wisdom half-forgotten references to "Classical" and "Romantic" literature, as though such academic posturing had ever very much to do with the living of life. He has lost nerve, grasp, potentiality. With his dog-eared credentials he will be among the first to be swept into limbo by the full tide of revolution. He is dead, and he doesn't know it!—another Rip Van Winkle, but, unlike that denizen of the Kaatskill Mountains, without hope of resurrection.¹

As between publisher, novelist, and critic, the Plain Man stands in a very unenviable situation. Much of what he hears in criticism he is compelled to take upon trust. Publisher and novelist may be all that the critics have denoted; but the Plain Man is able to work only with the evidence to hand. He is unacquainted equally with critical coteries and the by-ways of publication. No inner information guides his choice. He is throughout the layman reader, the shrine's pedestrian, the humble (though not necessarily inarticulate) devout.

Comparatively simple, the Plain Man's interest is centred, not on the fashionable form of the moment, but in the content of the novel itself. His prime interest is in a *story*, and just as he is willing to listen to an interesting *oral* narrative at any moment, so, through the

¹ See Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People*, and Philip Henderson, *Literature*, as typical of this attitude.

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medium of printer's ink and paper, it is a story for which he is looking. Ideas are relatively unimportant. The story may deal with an issue as thoroughly out-dated as the rebellion of Bonnie Prince Charlie, and the ultimate defeat of the Jacobite forces—it doesn't matter much. For while the Stuart allegiance is as near extinction as any allegiance can be, there is still sufficient material in the '45 to kindle the imagination of the contemporary Britisher. Perhaps it is a lingering admiration for a young man who was not afraid to take a sporting chance, perhaps an evidence of recurring interest in royalty, perhaps a complex of both. But nothing is more certain than that while the political significance of the adventure has shrivelled away, the core of human value has been retained.

A well-told story does imply, however, one of adequate *shape*. The Plain Man still looks for a beginning, a middle, and an end. The fashion of chopping a story into component parts and of reshuffling the pieces—sometimes working from one end backwards, or from the middle, either way, and laying the responsibility for the method upon the whimsical and wayward recollection of the author—evokes little enthusiasm from a man who likes a story to be a story. Such a method is, of course, the mere by-play of creation, successful according to the amount of creative genius informing it, and likely to be accepted by those who will acknowledge the convention. The Plain Man, however, remains unattracted by such literary handsprings. Long story and short story alike demanding an essential balance, he realizes intuitively when such a balance is in operation and when it is not.

That is why it may be confidently asserted that the

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Plain Man will ever remain unenthusiastic about the work of Mrs. Virginia Woolf. Assured of her delicate sensibility, he will suggest that in his eyes such sensibility has been unable to prevent her from becoming the story-teller's bugbear. Indicate the thousand matchless cameos of which her work consists, and he will answer that the cameo in bulk doesn't mean a thing. He will probably refer you to those matchless pages in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs. Ramsay, measuring a half-knitted stocking against her son for size, contrives to summon into her mind while doing so the possibility of buying new chairs for old, the figure of the old woman who dusted them, the rest of the house in which she was living, the affection of her husband for the house in question, the books that he had given her (naming some of them by name, with attendant inscriptions), the children wiping their feet upon the mat, the adequacy of lockmakers in Scotland, the uses of cashmere shawls in picture frames, the annoyance of open doors, the Swiss maid who doesn't like bathing, the Swiss maid's dying father, and the Swiss maid's nostalgia for her native scenery, until at last the poor boy, no doubt under the impression that he is condemned to stand in perpetuity, contrives a reminding shuffle, only to be reproved in the severest manner, and informed that he mustn't "be tiresome!" And the Plain Man recalling that, after all, unlike poor Mrs. Ramsay's son James, and all the other Ramsays, he is not compelled to continue acquaintance with this perennial drooling, closes the book thankfully and makes his escape. First, then, the Plain Man is occupied with the story, and *implicitly* with the balance of the story. Then with the validity of the characters in the story.

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Here, again¹, he will find himself confronted with a number of technical explanations intended primarily to enlighten his ignorance. He will discover (on the authority of Mr. E. M. Forster) that characters may be created in the "flat" or in the "round"; Mrs. Micawber being in the "flat" (i.e. static, instantly recognizable), Madame Bovary in the "round" (capable of development and further rotundity).¹ There will be characters possessing "volition," and characters lacking "volition" (although the definition of the term "volition" will vary greatly as between one critic and another). There will be characters essentially "bourgeois," and others distinctly "proletarian"; characters that are "dark and instinctive," others that are "rational and cerebral."

Throughout this variety of definition the Plain Man picks a careful course, guided as far as possible by his own sense of fitness. He is not entirely convinced by Mr. Forster's allocation of characters into "flat" and "round," with the suggestion that the "round" characters are considerably more important than the "flat." Does this mean that the only vital persons in literature are those who, like Madame Bovary, are continually shifting their position, altering appropriately when they alteration find?

If so, then probably the great majority of people with whom the Plain Man has been acquainted in the course of his lifetime would be precluded from consideration altogether. By these terms of comparison they would decidedly fall into the "flat."

It is such a disparity (impossible to over-emphasize)—between experience as depicted in the novel, and life as he meets it by hourly encounter—that is at the root of the

¹ *Aspects of the Novel.*

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Plain Man's perplexity. One innovation he has never been able to accept, namely, the elimination of that boyhood's idol, the "hero."

He is assured, by those who presume to know, that "heroes" and "villains" are no longer in existence, that during the course of the last twenty-five years the "bad" men have been levelled up and the "good" levelled down; that the individual has given way to the mass; that men and women no longer possess immortal souls, but are best manipulated as "units"—industrial, social, and political; that there is no such thing as "sin," but merely economical or biological misfortune. The hero (he will be further informed) failed to survive the stringent test of modern realism. Pious heroes were discovered to be secret drinkers; financial heroes to be commercial crooks; domestic heroes to have second wives in Peckham Rye. There was a catch in high nobility; a common norm that brought the great man low. And yet, in spite of all emphatic assurances, the Plain Man hankers after a hero, no legendary, no exaggerated figure, but one significant in terms of modern leadership. He remembers the roar of acclamation that greeted Charles Lindbergh on his first crossing of the Atlantic; the shining figure of T. E. Lawrence; and (with certain reservations) the elevation of Hitler by the youth of Germany. Even the Communists rejoiced in Dimitrov.¹ Why, then, the elimination of corresponding figures from the fiction of the age? Are the novelists (like the prophet) merely sleeping, or on a journey?

At home and in the workshop the Plain Man feels himself upon more certain ground. His chief resentment

¹ See Ralph Fox's emphatic Chapter X., *The Novel and the People*.

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is that for years, now he has been bombarded in literature with advice upon marriage and family life apparently from those most ill-fitted to present it. He has little patience with the playboys of marriage; persons who, having proved themselves incapable of selecting an adequate partner for their own domestic hearth, have set themselves up as authorities upon the subject. For the reality that the Plain Man knows is something very different from the cocktail hurricanes of the Cap d'Antibes. His major worry probably is economic. Then the harassing period of childbirth, or illness in the family. There is social intercourse in Church, Trade Union, or in Club, and intermingled with such activity the joyful endeavour of building up a home, rearing children, or organizing holidays. Throughout it all he remembers marriage as a partnership, strengthened and cemented by this diversity of experience.

While the Plain Man is not unmindful of the hazard of misalliance, what he does complain of is that by a certain type of writer misalliance is regarded as the accepted thing. It is here again that fiction and his own line of experience do not square. He feels that deception is being practised, and that the novelist has a good deal to do with it. Why not let up for a while (he thinks) on glamour girls and playboys of Mayfair, and give the more "ordinary" people a chance? Is it too great a concession to ask?

The same air of unreality falls upon the industrial scene as the young evangels of ideology flutter down. The Plain Man watches with amazement his colleagues as they are hustled into opposing groups, on the one hand the go-getters and capitalists with cable watch-chains, on the other the proletarian agitator and the

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humble oppressed. He is told that great issue is joined, and battle proceeding ; that a life-and-death struggle is in progress, and that he must prepare himself for the conflict.

All this the Plain Man finds very difficult to conceive. He knows that there are hundreds and thousands of workmen who are not forever snarling at the boss, and who certainly do not regard themselves as being the victims of oppression. He knows that there are men to whom a job long and worthily held has meant a deep enrichment of experience. He knows that there is a certain fellowship of industry into which ideological issues do not enter at all. He knows that there is a justifiable pride in beholding work accomplished, and he wonders why the ideological evangels always fail to mention this. Nothing impresses the Plain Man less than the announcement that some revolutionary author has been, in turn, able seaman, housepainter, actor, porter, janitor, stonemason, butler, journalist, and lorry driver. Knowing that it is quite impossible to have performed the greater part of these occupations competently within the course of a single lifetime, his estimate of the author's capacity to do anything at all well falls by proportion. It is difficult to become a housepainter overnight, or (shades of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art !) an actor either. And yet such infinite variety of labour is often presented as the author's credential.

Everywhere the Plain Man discovers evidence to confuse and distort. There are literary conventions accepted unwinkingly by those who are in a position to know better. If a clergyman enters into a certain type of novel, you may assume without further inquiry that

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he will be up to no good.¹ There is the convention of the married man as a dupe, and the working man as a sucker ; the convention that a lazy young aristocrat has only to turn his hand to politics, to industry, or to detection, to be an instantaneous and amazing success ; the convention that actresses are to be divided into two classes—(a) the impecunious struggling, and (b) those who leap into immediate fame ; the convention that Chinese are sinister and Dutchmen simple ; the convention that somehow the airman has a cleaner view of life than that of the man whose feet are actually touching the ground—"up there it is so pure and clean !" etc.

This is the position with which the Plain Man finds himself confronted. All that he is trying to do in the welter of modern fiction is to find the experience that squares with his own reality. It is a difficult but not impossible task. There are voices that speak with clarity and precision if only one could find them. There are fingers that indicate a substantial pathway. It will be the purpose of these pages to outline something of that potentiality.

¹ "The clergy have suffered in novels from the fact that fiction is not usually written nowadays by men and women who know much about clerical life. . . . The clergymen of modern novelists are nearly all caricatures. They seem either to be a perverted company of sadists and sex maniacs, or else they are revoltingly smug. The author never seems able to imagine them as ordinary people, with normal thoughts and affections, leading for the most part prosaically normal lives."—SHEILA KAYE-SMITH, *Three Ways Home*.

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CHAPTER I

THE DETECTIVE NOVEL

ONE aspect in particular continued to trouble the present writer when, as a boy, he first became engaged with the lurid adventures of the American detective, Nick Carter. Why was it that this paladin of the hook-jab and the derringer could never be persuaded to investigate further than the stockyards of Chicago, or the questionable French Quarter of New Orleans? Were there no mid-Western problems? No Indian thuggery? No pony express malfeasance? No mining murders? Apparently not, for Nick Carter continued to leave untracked the considerable reaches of country between the Mississippi and the Rockies. He remained exclusively the Bowery Boy of the 'nineties, a child of the tenement and the water-front. Again, why?

The truth is that even in those days the detective novel was the product of a highly intricate society, calling for the use of laboratories, steam engines, telegraphy, and fingerprints; the detective proper, the tracker less of the virgin forest and uncharted wilder-

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ness than of the mathematical intricacies of skyscraper and warehouse. The area west of the Mississippi called for another order of detection—the lore of displaced leaf and hoof on stone. The Nick Carsons and Buffalo Bills were the natural guardians of that territory.

In a direct literary sense, it may be asserted that while the modern detective novel began with Poe, its origins drive much deeper than the Murders in the Rue Morgue.

Human beings have always been stirred by mystery, particularly that kind of mystery associated with the spilling of blood. Hence the popularity of the famous *Newgate Chronicles*, and in the romantic field the astonishing eighteenth-century success of the *Castle of Otranto*. “Hark, my lord ! what sound was that ?” Ah, what indeed ! When “fleshless jaws and empty sockets” encircled the hapless adventurer ; when midnight bells, and muttering owls, and moonlight falling on the broken walls afforded an invariable background ! “Holy St. Peter ! The lamp—how blue it burns !” In a moment it will be overturned and extinguished altogether ! And then ?

The history of the Detective Novel is bound up not only with the foregoing “Gothic” bedevilment, but also with the development of a thoroughly competent system of police detection in this country. It was in 1827 that Sir Robert Peel’s new officers of the law succeeded the Bow Street Runners of the earlier generation, and in 1839 came the establishment of the Criminal Investigation Department, a body of plain-clothes detectives, starting oddly enough with a report upon the activities of the Chartist National Political Union. The efficient behaviour of the newly established police, however, in cases of common theft and homicide

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soon relieved the public apprehension, and before very long it was recognized that the C.I.D. had come to stay.

The harsher provisions of the ancient penal code had also been eliminated, so that by the middle of the nineteenth century and the advent of Wilkie Collins it was possible to introduce the figure of the investigating sergeant without in the least antagonizing the reader. The detective as literary hero appeared. Another gallery had opened; and the Dupins, the Lecoqs, the Cuffs, and the Holmeses had come to stay.

At this stage we are compelled to return to Poe (1809-49), for it was with the influence of that remarkable writer that the detective novel assumed a form and a character that has never been entirely superseded. Almost all the succeeding writers drew upon Poe. "His brain was a seed pod full of seeds which flew carelessly around," says Conan Doyle, the creator of the greatest detective figure of them all. "If I had to name the few books which have really influenced my own life I should have to put this one second only to Macaulay's Essays."¹ It is only fair to add, however, that subsequent authors also brought each his little contribution to the perfection of the Detective Novel—it was Gaboriau (for example) who introduced the sketch-map, and Doyle and other writers the possibilities of the laboratory.

What was Poe's formula? First of all, he it was who introduced the admiring (and highly loquacious) satellite, a person possessing a mind very inferior to that of the master, and at times inferior also to that of the reader. The satellite served the purpose not only of rendering physical aid to his colleague (for, in the majority of

¹ *Through the Magic Door.*

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cases, it is difficult indeed for a detective to play a completely lone hand), but also to afford some means of communication with the mind of the reader. It is through the satellite that relevant information is conveyed to the spectator—just as much as the author feels necessary to an unfolding of the solution. It is through the apparent ignorance of the satellite that the reader is manoeuvred into a comfortable frame of mind. “Poor mutt !” he exclaims, as he considers the witless fumbling of Dr. Watson with some transparent piece of evidence, “anybody can see through an item like that !” Equally skilful is the selection of the “amateur” detective as hero in the contest of layman against professional. We are all amateurs, and in our vanity we associate ourselves unquestionably with the superior mind and ultimate triumph of the “amateur” detective.

Secondly, Poe laid down two great aphorisms of expert detection. One was, that when you have eliminated all the *impossibilities* in connection with a case, whatever remains, *however improbable*, is the truth. The other, the more *outré* a case the easier it will be to solve. It must be remembered too that many great writers based their problems upon cases that had actually passed through criminal inquiry : Poe and Mary Rogers, Collins and the French crime chronicles, Conan Doyle and Oscar Slater. Doyle discusses his own method quite frankly. “People have often asked me if I know the end of a Holmes story before I start. Of course I do. . . . The first thing is to get your idea. Having got that key idea, one’s next task is to conceal it and lay emphasis upon everything which can make for a different explanation.”¹ He found himself influenced

¹ *Memories and Adventures.*

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not only by the literary genius of Poe, but also by a remarkable Edinburgh surgeon named Bell, a man whose strong point was diagnosis. Doyle had been his outpatient clerk, with opportunity of studying Bell's method. "There he sat," says Doyle, "impassive as a Red Indian." It was exceedingly dramatic. "In one of his best cases he said to a civilian patient :

" ' Well, my man, you've served in the army ? ' "

" ' Ay, sir. ' "

" ' Not long discharged ? ' "

" ' No, sir. ' "

" ' A Highland regiment ? ' "

" ' Ay, sir. ' "

" ' A non-com. officer ? ' "

" ' Ay, sir. ' "

" ' Stationed at Barbados ? ' "

" ' Ay, sir. ' "

" " You see, gentlemen, ' he would explain, ' the man was a respectful man, but did not remove his hat. They do not in the army, but he would have learned civilian ways had he been long discharged. He has an air of authority and he is obviously Scottish. As to Barbados, his complaint is elephantiasis, which is West Indian and not British. ' To his audience of Watsons it all seemed very miraculous until it was explained, and then it became simple enough. It is no wonder that after the study of such a character I used and amplified his methods, when in later life I tried to build up a scientific detective who solved cases on his own merits and not through the folly of the criminal. " ¹

¹ *Memories and Adventures.*

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Poe's analytical method is best displayed in *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, first published in the *Lady's Companion*, November 1842, and rendered all the more significant because it was based upon a problem that he himself had not invented.

The story relates the disappearance and murder (by strangulation) of a Parisian grisette. The actual crime, however, was committed not in France but America; and the river from which her body had been taken was not the Seine but the Hudson. Her real name was Mary Cecilia Rogers, the place New York, and the whole of Poe's information drawn from a number of newspaper cuttings. With this available evidence, by skilful deduction he solved the mystery, although it was not until years later that the confessions of two persons involved "confirmed in full not only the general conclusion but absolutely all the chief hypothetical details by which the conclusion was attained."¹ Here, for our purpose, it will be useful to follow the assembled evidence with which Poe was able to work.

Marie, a beautiful girl in her early twenties, living with her mother, and employed in a perfumery, leaves her home one Sunday morning with the intention of spending the day with her aunt who lives some two miles distant. Before setting out she has concluded an arrangement for St. Eustache, her lover, to escort her home at dusk. Owing to heavy rain, and assuming that on account of the terrible weather she will be remaining overnight with her aunt, as she had done upon previous occasions, he does not keep the appointment. Neither he nor her mother see the unfortunate girl again. Three days later a body is recovered from

¹ Poe's footnote to *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

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the river, with suspicious marks of violence upon it. It is recognized as the body of Marie Roget.

The detailed evidence was definite enough in its limited fashion. There were bruises upon the girl's throat—an impression of fingers. In addition, a strip of lace had been tied very tightly around the throat. This alone would have had the effect of producing death. Part of the right wrist was much chafed, and the shoulder blades too. The dress was torn, but not without purpose. From her outer garment a strip of about a foot wide had been ripped upwards from the hem to the waist, but not detached. It was wound three times around the waist, and secured by a hitch loop at the back. The strip around the neck had been taken with great care from an under-dress. Marie's bonnet strings were still around her neck, fastened by a slip or sailor's knot.

So much for the dead girl's person. Of other evidence, it appeared that certain boys had found in the adjacent woods a petticoat, scarf, parasol, and a handkerchief bearing the name of Marie Roget. Near by were fragments of dress, evidences of struggle on the trampled earth, and through a broken fence the marks of a heavy burden having been dragged along the ground.

Evidence was also given by an innkeeper to the effect that a girl answering Marie's description had crossed the river, accompanied by a dark young man, and that on their departure they took to the road by the thick woods. A gang of ruffians had followed soon after the young man and the girl had disappeared, and the innkeeper also swore to hearing the sudden scream of a woman just after dusk. That was all. It may be added that St. Eustache, Marie's lover, in his distress at the

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death of his sweetheart, poisoned himself soon after. St. Eustache's innocence was not in question.

Newspapers commenting upon the tragedy added certain other information. Some time previously Mademoiselle Roget had disappeared for about a week from the perfumery at which she had been employed, in the company of a young naval officer much noted for his debaucheries. A quarrel had led to her return home. Secondly, one or two communications had been received endeavouring to fasten the crime upon a gang of blackguards infesting the outskirts of the city at the week-ends. There seemed to be no connection at all between these two further pieces of evidence.

How did Poe approach the solution of the problem of Marie Roget? In the first place he eliminated the assumption of suicide. Had the crime then been committed by one man or a number of men? The theory of a gang assault he ruled out, on the deduction that if a gang had been responsible for the murder there would have been practically no signs of struggle, while in the wood there were many signs. One individual had undoubtedly committed the crime. Having killed the girl, he had decided that he must dispose of the body. Accordingly he had torn the strip of skirt from the hem upwards, and winding this around the waist had used it as a handle in dragging the body along. This action, too, accounted for the broken fence. A gang could have lifted the girl clean over such an obstacle. A single individual could not.

What might be the character of the suspected individual? Obviously a secret lover, and, because of the hitch in the bandage at the waist and the sailor's knot by which the bonnet strings were fastened, of a seafaring

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occupation. A common sailor? Not in the least. In all probability a naval officer, for a girl of Marie's occupation would hardly be found in the company of an able seaman. In this connection, suggested Dupin (Poe's detective), it would be well to check up on the anonymous communications to the newspapers endeavouring to fasten the crime upon a roving gang. The writer was probably the murderer himself.

As concerned the other evidence—Marie had evidently been cast into the river from a boat. Where was that boat? The newspaper clippings revealed that an empty boat had been picked up by a bargeman the day after the murder, its tiller removed at the barge office, and that by some person unknown the boat had subsequently been taken away—minus the rudder! Where was the rudderless boat? Find that, averred Dupin, and “it will guide us, with a rapidity which will surprise even ourselves, to him who employed it in the midnight of the fatal sabbath. Corroboration will rise upon corroboration, and the murderer will be traced.”

Thus M. Dupin—in the strongly perfumed, taper-glimmering, time-eaten mansion of the Faubourg St. Germain—to his admiring satellite, the narrator; and thus the Cuffs, the Lecoqs, the Holmeses, and the Father Browns of later generations to such as cared to accompany them in their varied adventures.

The Great Sherlock

Poe had indeed sown broadcast the seed of productive activity. Emile Gaboriau in France, and Wilkie Collins in England, carried the scope of detection still further.

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Of Collins's *Moonstone* it is stated that not a nose is blown, not a door-knob turned, within the action of the story that does not contribute to the general solution of the problem. But it was not until the year 1887 that a tall, lean, hatchet-faced practitioner, in a deerstalker cap, carried the detective novel to a popularity and importance hitherto unknown. The figure was, of course, Sherlock Holmes, and its creator Arthur Conan Doyle. A surgeon of high literary ambition, devoted mainly to the writing of historical novels, he turned to the thriller as a measure of lighter relief, and, it must be added, of urgent financial assistance. Thereafter, for the next quarter of a century, Doyle was so closely identified with Sherlock Holmes that he found it impossible to terminate connection with the object of his creation. Once, in a life and death grapple with Moriarty, master criminal of the Western hemisphere, the detective was hurled to destruction in the boiling waters of a precipitous Swiss gorge ; but so emphatic was the chorus of disappointment arising from the enormous host of Sherlock's admirers, that Doyle, much against his own inclination, was compelled to bring the unfortunate detective back to life again—although (as one very fervent admirer of the great detective suggested) poor Holmes never seemed quite the same man after the experience !

Not less celebrated were the military-mustachioed features of Watson, Holmes's faithful coadjutor and confidant : Doctor J. H. Watson, late of the Indian Army Medical Corps, the ever-faithful, the ever-inquisitive. " You know my methods, Watson," was an observation that passed into the vocabulary of a generation. Alas ! it may be more than roundly

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suspected that Watson never did, for Sherlock remained an arbitrary companion throughout. The two cronies lived in Baker Street, where Watson it was who played a faithful Boswell to a somewhat elusive and erratic Johnson. Perhaps in the first place it was Doyle's deceptively limpid style that assisted in the success of the series, and, of course, his never-failing sense of the dramatic :

“ All day the wind had screamed and the rain had beaten against the windows, so that even here in the heart of great, hand-made London we were forced to raise our minds for an instant from the routine of life, and to recognize the presence of those great elemental forces which shriek at mankind through the bars of his civilization, like untamed beasts in a cage. As evening drew in, the storm grew higher and higher, and the wind cried and sobbed like a child in the chimney, Sherlock Holmes sat moodily on one side of the fireplace cross-indexing his records of crime, whilst I at the other was deep in one of Clark Russell's fine sea stories, until the howl of the gale from without seemed to blend with the text, and the splash of the rain to lengthen out into the long swash of the sea waves. . . . ‘ Why,’ said I, glancing at my companion, ‘ that was surely the bell. Who could come to-night ? ’ ”

Ah, who indeed ! The style was irresistible, the question poised in just the right dramatic moment. And through the doorway of that Baker Street apartment entered a bewildering variety of royalty and aristocracy ; the plutocrat, the democrat, the politician, and the man

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of letters. Humble cabbies clambered up for cross-examination, and master criminals of unprecedented cunning.

Holmes perpetuated the tradition (established by Poe) of the eccentric detective. Tobacco he retained in a slipper. In his lighter moments he created patterns by firing a service revolver at the opposite wallpaper. On moodier occasion he was a lover of music, and at times addicted to the hypodermic needle and cocaine. "Of contemporary literature, philosophy, and politics," said Watson, "he appeared to know next to nothing." But he was boxer, swordsman, and lawyer; an expert in mud-stains and tobacco ash, and having a "unique" knowledge of sensational literature and crime records.

The Holmes method was apparently to pass to the scene of the crime, to make measurement and general observation, and to return to Baker Street in order to make an imaginative reconstruction of the affair. Here we discover the detective with the finger-tips peaked and elbows resting upon the arms of his easy chair :

"The ideal reasoner would, when he has once been shown a single fact in all its bearings, deduce from it not only all the chain of events which led up to it, but also all the results which would follow from it. As Cuvier could correctly describe a whole animal by the contemplation of a single bone, so the observer who has thoroughly understood one link in a series of incidents should be able to accurately state all the other ones, both before and after."

Reduced to a simple explanation, the reconstructional magic was merely that which the youthful Doyle had

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observed in cross-examination methods of the impassive Dr. Joseph Bell. So that when the detective confronts Dr. Watson in the first of the shorter adventures, there is a similar experiment in deduction. After having announced that he has observed Watson in practice again, and also that his friend has been getting very wet lately and is being served by a most clumsy and careless servant girl, he justifies the assumption by the following conclusion: "My eyes tell me that on the inside of your left shoe, just where the firelight strikes it, the leather is scored by six almost parallel cuts. Obviously they have been caused by some one who has very carelessly scraped round the edges of the sole in order to remove the crusted mud from it. Hence, you see, my double deduction that you had been out in vile weather, and that you had a particularly malignant specimen of the London slavey. As to your practice, if a gentleman walks into my rooms smelling of iodoform, with a black mark of nitrate of silver upon his forefinger, and a bulge on the side of his top-hat to show where he has secreted his stethoscope, I must be dull indeed if I do not pronounce him to be a member of the medical profession."

Doyle, then, could tell a story, and by the introduction of significant detail sufficiently enshroud the mystery. All the other factors were present—an admiring satellite, a genial contempt for the official investigator, an aura of magic thrown out by eccentric habit, and an air of infallibility by the prolific sprinkling of scientific data. One feature, however, of the Holmes adventures continued to exasperate the intelligent reader; and this was, of course, the great detective's habit of withholding information secured during the course of the inquiry

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until the final solution of the problem—information that could just as well have been divulged in the action of the story. There is an representative example of this method in *The Adventure of the Priory School*. The plot very simply concerns the abduction of young Lord Saltire, son of the Duke of Holderness, from his school at Mackleton, by James Wilder (the illegitimate son of the Duke) in collaboration with a ruffian innkeeper, named Reuben Hayes. The boy is secreted in Hayes's inn. One evening Holmes and Watson arrive to watch the inn. They see James Wilder enter, and afterwards another man whose face is not for the moment recognizable—obviously the occasion for a stroke of further inquiry. Accordingly, poised upon the obliging shoulders of Watson, his assistant, the detective manages to peep through a window at the occupants of the room. Immediately he leaps to earth again. "Come, my friend," he observes curtly, "our day's work has been quite long enough. I think we have gathered all that we can. It's a long walk to the school, and the sooner we get started the better." Not a word to Watson of the identity of the strange man in the room !

For the strange man was the Duke of Holderness himself, drawn hither by the suddenly remorseful Wilder. Hayes had murdered a German master, and the terrified illegitimate son had been driven to confess everything. But why did not the detective divulge this piece of information to the faithful Watson ? There could have been no harm in doing so. The reason is, of course, that Doyle wished in the closing stages of the story to spring a dramatic surprise upon the reader by accusing the Duke himself of being concerned in the kidnapping of his own son. It was necessary that

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Watson should not know, in order that the reader might occupy the same position.

Enough, however, of Doyle and Holmes. There is magic still—if somewhat a little faded—in that remarkable creation. The Holmes stories are (as might be expected from their very bulk) unequal; but of the longer stories, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* ought not to go unnoticed. Containing as it does the characteristic weaknesses, it is still Holmes and Watson on a large-scale canvas, and Doyle's peculiar genius is set out nowhere better than in its pages.

The Later Sleuth

Towards the end of his career it was Conan Doyle himself who made a curious prediction concerning the fortunes of the detective story. "We shall," he announced, "have a clairvoyant in attendance at every police station, and every offence will be hunted down so that every crime will become very difficult if not impossible." Such a statement reflected ardently something of his own overwhelming interest in the occult; but it was a kind of pointer to the later form that was to succeed his own.

The turn of the century introduced a spate of detective stories so broad and indeed so vigorous in its flow that it is impossible within the scope of this very limited work to indicate more than names and tendencies. Certain conditions were established. Detection for murder was still of paramount interest; murder, as S. S. Van Dine has pointed out, being still the strongest word in the English language. It was understood, too, that the

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criminal should be a man of outstanding ability, in every way worthy of his opponent's steel. The murdered man must not on any account be criminal himself, for that would antagonize the reader's sympathy at the very outset. And for obvious technical reasons the corpse, once dead, must be allowed to remain dead ! Primary motives for murder were five : (1) murder for profit ; (2) murder for jealousy ; (3) murder for revenge ; (4) murder for ambition ; (5) abnormal sex murder.

Increasingly, too, a new method of treatment came to supersede the old.

The habit (maintained so consistently throughout the Sherlock Holmes series) of withholding vital information from the reader until the final stage of the story gave way to what is termed the "fair play" method, by which the reader receives each vital clue with the detective himself. The work of E. C. Bentley in *Trent's Last Case* marked a further stage in the development of the detective story. Increasingly, too, the scientific element emerged, until the research laboratory became a necessary adjunct to the equipment of every self-respecting detective. The importance of the laboratory will be recognized when recent murder mysteries, as set out in detective fiction, have included poisoned tooth-stoppings, licking poisoned stamps, inoculated shaving brushes, poisoned boiled eggs, poison gas, cat with poisoned claws, poisoned mattresses, electrocution by telephone, biting to death by plague rats, freezing by liquid air, guns in cameras, thermometers exploding bombs, etc., etc. The more skilful the criminal, however, the more artful the detective ; until with Philo Vance we arrive at the latter type of investigator, one who contrives a thorough knowledge of classical litera-

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ture with the art of playing polo, an expert knowledge of horse-racing with an aptitude for scientific research ; a practical medical knowledge with the art of the *flâneur* and the diner-out. Holmes, on occasion, showed no hesitation in admitting his deficiencies. "What is it to me whether the sun goes round the earth, or the earth around the sun !" Philo Vance would have found such admission quite impossible. He was astronomer also !

The truth is that the highly involved problem produces its own Nemesis. The detective can become too clever by half. For there is a necessary rider to Poe's famous condition of solution—that when you have eliminated all the impossibilities, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. One ought also to mention that "whatever remains, however improbable" must also be *credible*.

A final question poses the order of creation that the Detective Story represents. Is it, in its most effective form, comparable with the greatest literature of mankind ?

The answer is in the negative. Books like *The Moonstone*, the work of Dorothy Sayers, G. K. Chesterton, E. C. Bentley, Ronald Knox, and other writers, do certainly represent a very high standard of literary accomplishment ; but, at the same time, the subject itself precludes that deeper appeal to the emotions by which great literature is to be recognized. We find ourselves jesting over death, and the body of death. A shattering experience is reduced to the standard of the cross-word puzzle. There is little horror, and less pity, in the contemplation of crime. To and fro the wise-cracks flicker, until at last, when the final page has been

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assimilated, we set aside the detective novel with the companionate litter of playing cards.

The detective novel lives, then, greatly at the mercy of fashion. It is perhaps a melancholy reflection that the Holmeses, the Whimseys, and the Vances may in the course of a generation or two assemble only in the mouldy precincts of Udolpho. Be comforted, however, Father Brown would find diversion here, and Watson never-ending fare. The Plain Man's epitaph need occupy no more than a single sentence, and that in little more than half a dozen words : " It was grand fun while it lasted ! "

CHAPTER II

THE NOVEL AS PROPAGANDA

THE propaganda novel is quite simply a story with a purpose. Not that every novel may not be interpreted as a story with a purpose ; but there are some authors whose educative mission burns so ardently within them that it becomes impossible to consider any kind of writing save that of direct entreaty. There is little masking of the challenge. The banners flutter, the trumpets blare. The slogan flies to its appointed target. "And now, men and women of America," cries Mrs. Beecher Stowe, at the conclusion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "is this [slavery] a thing to be trifled with, apologized for, and passed over in silence ? Farmers of Massachusetts, of New Hampshire, of Vermont, of Connecticut, who read this book by the blaze of your winter-evening fire ; strong-hearted, generous sailors and shipowners of Maine—is this a thing for you to countenance and encourage ?" Such is the voice of the authentic propagandist. The pointed moral, and a tale adorned thereby.

It would be erroneous to suppose, however, that every type of propagandist found a field so favourable for opportunity as Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe. All too often in history the reformer has been compelled to clothe his meaning in parable and allegory. This was Rabelais's method in dealing with the corruption of the

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mediaeval Church, and that of Swift and Voltaire with the vileness of eighteenth-century government. The heavy-witted saw only the facile story: the man of critical intelligence the rapier point beneath.

The propaganda story, then, from sheer pressure of events, may shape itself to the half-concealed, the oblique approach. Perhaps the most famous example of this method is to be found in Nicolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Primarily, *Dead Souls* is as much concerned with the problem of chattel slavery as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; but Gogol's treatment is as far removed from that of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe as the timber profusion of eighteenth-century Moscow from the primly ordered architecture of Hartford, Connecticut. Gogol, of course, worked under the influence of a grim official censorship, a condition unknown in the United States of America; and in an order of society hardened to inequality, the exact opposite of the youthful and virile democracy of the West. Mrs. Stowe laboured to the rising tide of Abolitionist enthusiasm; Gogol wrote beneath the shadow of a Liberal eclipse. These are factors which (in addition to a startling disparity of temperament) ought always to be kept in mind in making comparison between the work of these novelists. But both *Dead Souls* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are great anti-slavery novels, both engaged with the moral analysis of slave-owning.

Turning to Gogol, we are astonished, in looking back upon the action of the novel, at the lack of deliberate constructive ability in his pages. Tchitchikoff meanders as loosely as Mr. Pickwick. It is only the amazing speculation in which he is engaged—namely, the buying of serfs, dead actually, but alive according to the census

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list, by the mortgaging of which he hopes to establish his own fortune—that lends vitality to the book. Around this rickety framework Gogol piles up a damning indictment of Czarist corruption and indifference. Page by page the weakness and cruelty of serfdom is exposed. All that the reader is required to do is to follow the adventurer as he pursues his journey from one likely landowner to another. And what a journey it is, diversified by every shade of acquisitiveness ! There is the profligate who would squander his serfs, and the misanthrope who would retain them. There is the haggler persistently splitting his copecks, and the gambler who cannot refrain from hazarding the whole. From such a variety of material it is difficult to select the wholly representative passage ; but here is one in which we find our Tchitchikoff haggling with a landowner who wishes to secure the same rate of payment for dead souls as live ones :

“ For my part says [Tchitchikoff], I place my hand on my heart, and suggest that eighty copecks apiece would be a very handsome sum.”

“ The idea ! Eighty kopecks ! ”

“ Well, in my judgment it is impossible to offer more.”

“ But I am not selling shoes.”

“ Well, you must acknowledge that you are not selling men either.”

“ And so you think you have found a fool, who will sell you a duly registered soul for eighty kopecks ? ”

“ But permit me. Surely these serfs died long ago, and all that remains of them is merely a name, barely perceptible to the senses.”

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And so the colloquy proceeds, the landowner maintaining a possessive interest even in the reputation of the dead. "Buy my stallion," beseeches another landowner, "and I will give you the souls as a bonus."

The tragi-farce moves on, to the ultimate failure and disgrace of Tchitchikoff. Throughout this astonishing narrative of cupidity and knavery there is hardly an overt sentence indicating the iniquity that Gogol feels the Russian serf system to represent. His irony flickers restlessly throughout, uncertain of reception, but impelled by the consciousness of indefeasible truth. He laughs a bitter laugh, constrained no doubt by a knowledge of the immense oppression against which he is fighting, and of which there is little sign at the moment that it will ever be overcome. At the end of the novel he does venture a public declaration, suggesting the eminent need of change, and announcing that "for the general good all private interests should hold their peace, and that the happiness of a great people can only be the outcome of sacrifice in high places."

The difference in character between Gogol and Mrs. Stowe is between a mystic whose faith has never been adequately resolved, and one whose faith is expressed in terms of concrete theology. Both were deeply religious, but the comparison must not be carried too far. By contrast with the covert form of *Dead Souls*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appears a highly emotional *divertissement*, lushly sentimental, and horrifically melodramatic. But a good deal less than justice has been done in the past to this, the most conspicuous of all propaganda novels. Two factors carried her work to its astonishing success—her passionate sincerity, and her mastery of dramatic situation. Her defects were many. She had lived to a back-

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ground supercharged with pious exhortation. She was bound largely by the literary conventions of her time. Little Eva (as Mr. Lewisohn has pointed out) is own sister of Ellen Montgomery who wept her way through the pages of the *Wide, Wide World*; and St. Clair is first cousin to the Rochester-St. Elmo family. But Legree has become both man and myth :

“ Legree he sported a brass buttoned coat,
A snake-skin necktie, a blood red shirt.
Legree he had a beard like a goat,
And a thick hairy neck, and eyes like dirt ;
His puffed-out cheeks were fish-belly white,
He had great long teeth and an appetite,
He ate raw meat most every meal,
And rolled his eyes till the cat would squeal.” ¹

and there has been considerably less looking down of noses at Uncle Tom since Mr. Paul Robeson convinced the world that it was possible to sing a negro spiritual and still remain intelligent.

Mrs. Beecher Stowe's sense of the dramatic is never more adequately displayed than in the chapter headed, “The Stratagem.” Read once again (and in the quiet night) how Cassy, the quadroon, played upon the brutal slave-owner's fears, and you will understand the basic material of which true drama is made, the atmosphere perfect, the speeches adequately timed :

“ ‘ Them noises is nothing but rats and the wind,’ said Legree. ‘ Rats will make a devil of a noise. I used to hear ’em sometimes down in the hold of the ship ; and wind—Lord's sake ! ye can make anything out o' wind.’ ”

¹ Vachel Lindsay, *Collected Poems*.

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"Cassy knew Legree was uneasy under her eyes, and therefore she made no answer, but sat fixing them on him, with that strange unearthly expression as before.

"Come, speak out, woman; don't you think so?' said Legree.

"Can rats walk upstairs, and come walking through the entry, and open a door when you've locked it, and set a chair against it?' said Cassy; 'and come walk, walk, walking right up to your bed, and put out their hand, so?'"

There is little need to recall the structure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* here. In general we encounter the slave-owner, intolerant and otherwise; the tribulation of the negro peoples is noted, not in the bulk, but most effectively, through the distinct personalities with whom we became acquainted. We mark the deterioration of those to whom the negro lived in subjection, and the intolerable system wherein families were torn asunder in order to meet the exigencies of the slave market.

Let it be clearly understood by the reader that there is not a single incident in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that could not have been truthfully duplicated at some point or other in the plantations. Lurid as the printing seems to be, Mrs. Stowe was able to document her story in every particular from Southern newspapers and intimate records.¹ From first to last her information was authentic. What she did was to concentrate in undue proportion the burden under which the negro laboured. The really cruel master was an exception, condemned by public opinion throughout the South as well as in the North. Mr. James Truslow Adams points out that this

¹ See *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published by Mrs. Stowe in 1853.

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situation was confirmed by the actual conduct of slaves themselves during the Civil War. Throughout the course of that catastrophe almost every negro slave remained loyal to his owner. "That the white master could go into the army, leaving his often lonely and remote farm or plantation, his wife and children, frequently even money and jewels, in the care of the slave for whose liberty his opponent was fighting, not only speaks volumes for the qualities of the black race, but indicates at least that there could have been no widespread hatred of the masters or resentment against them."¹

And yet, even with this later knowledge before us, we are compelled to admit that the book still retains considerable power. In comparison with the other propaganda fiction of that era, it stands alone. Why?

Beyond all manner of doubt Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe had laid her finger upon a fundamental human inequality—the habit of one man, or any number of men, to restrain their fellows in bondage. We feel that, whatever its defects, the *fundamental values* of this novel are true. The debit side shows the indictment of an entire people for the sins of a small minority; the credit side, a fierce humanity, and a latent reproach to the society in which such things were possible.

Before the industrial expansion of the seventies, eighties, and nineties, poetic Nemesis halted and lingered. The North rip-roared along its railroads, and the South painfully readjusted itself to Liberation economy. The century drew to its close, but in the latter months of 1904 a new evangel might have been noticed in the person of a rather stringy young man

¹ James Truslow Adams, *America's Tragedy*.

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with a dinner pail in his fingers, unobtrusively threading the avenues of one of the great packing centres of Chicago. It was Upton Sinclair, newly descended from the East, his crusading nature aflame with resentment at the maladministration of the packing houses and stock-yards, and at the system of society which made such maladministration possible.

Some time previously Ida Tarbell had formulated her indictment of Rockefeller and the Standard Oil Trust, and in *McClure's Magazine* had exposed the method of the oil-developers in driving out all competitors by any means whatsoever, fair if possible, foul if necessary. The evils of the American economic and political régime had been attacked also by Norris in *The Octopus* and *The Pit*; and by Lincoln Steffens in *The Shame of the Cities*. Later, Jack London (*The Iron Heel*) and Theodore Dreiser (*The Financier* and *The Titan*) were to rally to the conflict; but it was Upton Sinclair who, with a single magnificent *tour de force* of literary creation, was to rivet the attention of the whole world upon the newer order of slavery to which the free-born American citizen had now become the victim.

Sinclair's literary experience hitherto had been one of incessant activity. From 1897 to 1900, while still at Columbia University, he had maintained himself and his mother by writing boys' stories for the publishing house of Street and Smith, turning out sometimes as much as 30,000 words a week. At twenty, he tells us, he threw up "pot-boiling," became imbued with a mission to redeem the world, and as a broadly Christian Socialist (the "Jesus Complex," says Michael Gold), turned his attention to the teeming iniquity of the great American cities. The ruthless scramble shocked him,

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and Chicago it was that afforded this young adventurer the ample material that he needed. Chicago represented the Beef Trust, an organization which, for unsavoury reputation and economic ruthlessness, had become a byword throughout America. To Chicago he went. Sinclair discovered that by the simple expedient of carrying a dinner pail, the length and breadth of these enormous stockyards became open territory.

For six weeks he gathered material; and then, assisted by the rapid technique that had proved so successful in stirring the juvenile constituency of Street and Smith, he rammed home the legitimate successor to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with a book bearing the significant title of *The Jungle*—an exposure of the conditions that he had personally witnessed. It appeared at length (after a number of rejections). A problematical success, Sinclair himself has supplied the rational explanation. "I aimed at the public's heart," he asserted, "and by accident I hit it in the stomach!"

The Uncle Tom of *The Jungle* is Jurgis Rudkus, an illiterate Lithuanian emigrant. The enemy is the system, personified by an enormous number of Corporation officials, thugs, and shyster lawyers. Uncle Tom is remembered as an individual fortified by a philosophy and a faith; but Jurgis, a hefty, well-meaning member of the working classes, is without intellectual bearing of any kind. Tossed aimlessly to and fro upon the surface of society, only after profound tribulation he discovers some foundation of belief—in this case Socialism. For the greater part of the narrative, however, he remains a hapless innocent struggling aimlessly within the tentacles of the octopus.

Divested of its interesting, though often revolting,

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descriptions of packing processes, *The Jungle* tends to sag alarmingly. The heady rhetoric of the political platform is as empty in these pages as elsewhere. One tends to feel that the unpleasant nature of the industry has very little to do with either Individualism or Collectivism. Entrails are still entrails under whatever industrial system, and men and women (one supposes) will still be called upon to handle them. To suggest, as Sinclair does, that somehow the industry can be radically transformed by the application of Socialism is to fly in the face of accepted evidence. That wage rates may be altered and general conditions of working improved ; that a stringent system of inspection may be instituted as a result of democratic control, no one can deny ; but the Collectivist animal will still emit its last despairing squeal, and the bloody floor afford only precarious foothold for the Collectivist activity of the killers.

The Jungle is perfectly true to propaganda type in that we rarely find a recognizable human being in the opposing forces. The enemy are uniformly degenerates, perverts, or morons. It is true to type in that there is no laughter in its pages, for laughter dissolves our anger and the bitterness of controversy is thereby eliminated. Like all propaganda novels it is fierce and urgent ; there is little of patience or tranquillity at its heart. The hot and eager reasoning tends to make suffering the groundwork of doctrine. Thesis and antithesis are perfectly poised. It is never a question (as it may be) of two rights, but always of right and wrong, of the blackest iniquity and of unblemished innocence. The opponent has but to make an appearance to be recognized as roguery incarnate. His smile is a leer, his proffered

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handshake the prelude only to a treacherous lunge. His animosity never relaxes, and the finer shades of intercourse contribute only to the tyranny that he seeks to impose.

Unquestionably *The Jungle* is invested with the same noble indignation that we have already observed in the action of *Dead Souls* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The hazards and distresses of the unfortunate Lithuanian family are related with profound feeling, and the sequence of calamity that drives Jurgis himself from the city to the farming belt is moving in the extreme.

We are able at this moment to look back upon *The Jungle* from the perspective of something like a quarter of a century, and to mark its effect upon American society. We know that with its issue the packers were profoundly disturbed, and that hurried improvements were effected in the general administration and equipment of the stockyards. Theodore Roosevelt set up an investigating committee. The demand for tinned products slackened appreciably, and for many subsequent years there were housewives who glanced askance at the Chicagoan label whenever it appeared in the shop windows. It is one thing, however, to turn down tinned tongue, and quite another to accept a revolutionary ideology. How many real Socialists did *The Jungle* make? It is difficult to say. Very few indeed, if municipal elections between 1906 and 1936 count for anything. But perhaps the sum total of literary influence cannot be assessed by the mathematical habit. That Charles Dickens assisted the reform of the Poor Law, and Charles Reade that of the Victorian prison system, is undeniable; but exact measurement is beyond the reach of even the most ardent of social investigators. Such

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novels *influence* ; but downright conversion is another matter. It is doubtful indeed if a novel of propaganda ever really converted any one. That it may emphasize an atmosphere in which conversion becomes possible is perhaps as far as the Plain Man would care to go.

CHAPTER III

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL

THE historical novel is an attempt to reconstruct the atmosphere, the habits of thought, the prevailing psychology of a generation with which the writer has had no intimate contact. A writer dealing with contemporary manners may hold within his fingers the touchstone of his own generation. He is able to verify experience effortlessly, as by second nature. For the historical novelist such an attitude is impossible. He must think himself into an almost unfamiliar universe, testing every step of the journey, surrounded by many a pitfall. Every gesture, every sentence even, should be submitted to the closest scrutiny. "It's a small world," announces one character in Mr. Kenneth Roberts's *Rabble in Arms*, commenting upon a prospective journey to North America, an observation that could not have been uttered in any part of the universe in 1776. The remark belongs so obviously to an age of airplanes and radio. In '76 the world still lay enormous, mysterious, and to a large extent unexplored. The historical novelist must in the course of his reconstruction cover dress, housing, food, habits of speech, travel, and the manner with which the generation earned its living. Atheist by conviction, he may be called to consider sympathetically

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a consuming religious experience. Democrat by conviction, he will look with understanding eyes upon an order of society that he could not possibly condone. His first act of discipline should be to cast aside contemporary impedimenta, and to fling himself into a thoroughly alien element ; his second, to see to it that he brings back again to the notice of his fellows some segment of experience recognizably their own.

A great variety of motives turn the novelist back into the past. Many have done so in an endeavour to illuminate the present ; others because some outstanding historical personality has captured their imagination. Certain novelists are interested in psychological revaluation. Then, again, historical fiction has been conceived along lines of ideological conflict, the "historic" bearing of Nationalism, Capitalism, or Communism. The field is as varied as the action of contemporary life itself.

What do we look for in the perfect historical novel ? In the first place, not a complete reproduction of the past—that were impossible from the very nature of things ; but rather a satisfying imaginative reconstruction, in which the values of this day may find a reasonable identity with the corresponding values of another. It goes without saying that there are certain fundamental evidences that are poignantly timeless : a child's toy recovered from an Egyptian pyramid ; a salutation bitten into some Roman altar ; an ancient *billet-doux*, the fragrance still remaining, all evoke the inevitable response :

•

“ So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

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Let us begin with Scott, for he, in all his strength and weakness, marks the beginning of the Historical Novel as we know it to-day.

The weaknesses are obvious. There are, of course, those interminable prefaces written to justify an excursion into the then unfamiliar medium. We may skip the prefaces. Next, the heroines, the mannequins of fiction, as Mr. Norman Collins puts it, uniformly handsome, virtuous, and somewhat mentally deficient. We cannot very well skip the heroines, but we can make the requisite allowance, and pass on. The hero, too, at times seems little better. And as for the hurdle of eighteenth-century prose—

“The title of this work has not been chosen without the grave and solid deliberation, which matters of importance demand from the prudent. Even its first, or general denomination, was the result of no common research or selection, although according to the example of my predecessors I had only to seize upon the most sounding and euphonic surname that English history or topography affords.”¹—

the less said the better !

More positively, our obligation is enormous. We recognize now that the influence of Sir Walter Scott upon the European fiction succeeding his death eclipsed that of every other writer. In him Dumas, Balzac, Hugo acknowledged their master. Later in the century R. L. Stevenson fell into direct line of succession ; and one has only to peep into the opening pages of *Micah Clarke* to understand the school where Arthur Conan Doyle received instruction.

¹ *Waverley*.

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What were Scott's credentials? There was, of course, his astonishing vitality (*Guy Mannering* was written in only six weeks). There was the capacity to unfold a story so engrossingly that the reader is kept continually guessing as to what will happen next. There was the skill with which he was able to perform the most difficult task of all, the selection of detail relevant to the story. As one remembers the limited research then obtaining, the magnitude of Scott's achievement looms all the more impressive.

His narrative gift was enormous—the only difficulty is in making selection. One passes from *Wandering Willie's Tale* to the tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouch; from the trial of Effie Deans in *The Heart of Midlothian* to the curse of Meg Merrilies upon the Laird of Ellangowan:

“ Ride your ways, Godfrey Bertram—this day have ye quenched seven smoking hearths—see if the fire in your ain parlour burn the blyther for that. Ye have riven the thack off seven cottar houses—look if your ain roof stand the faster—ye may stable your stirks in the shealings at Dorncleugh—see that the hare does not couch on the hearthstone at Ellangowan.”

The touch is swift, vivid, realistic—properly passionate and sure. He is at his very best in dealing with his own country. None can eclipse him there. He rises to the height of his form in *The Heart of Midlothian*.

The historical novel after Scott assumed a form expressing both the best and worst of all the qualities of the master. To swing a cloak and point a sword became the legitimate aspiration of the creative artist. Some

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staggered under an intolerable burden of research (see *Romola* and *Salammbô*), crammed to the hatches with historical *bric-à-brac* and *objets d'art*; to these succeeded the forcible-feeble intrigues of the Weymans and the Orczys. A certain level of competence obtained, but few eclipsed the ordinary literary standards of the day; and the greater number now are outmoded in terms not of the period that they were supposed to represent, but by the eminently Victorian outlook through which such novels were created.

The greatest novel of the post-Scott period is undoubtedly *War and Peace*. Here Tolstoy, fortified not only by an enormous body of factual evidence, but also by intimate contact with the survivors of Austerlitz and Borodino, achieved an epic treatment of the Napoleonic struggle unexampled in prose, and challenged only remotely by Thomas Hardy's poetic *Dynasts*. Tolstoy was fortunate in being able to draw upon his own years in the Russian army. It was the author of *Sevastopol* who turned to the imaginative reconstruction of the forces that had grappled from the Danube to the Vistula; and since in tactics and equipment there was little difference between the armies of the early and the middle portions of the century, Tolstoy's treatment of the subject is (we may take it) comparatively reliable. Arnold Bennett declared that *War and Peace* could be likened to a labyrinthine forest, in which the reader was apt to wander and to lose his way. That is something of an exaggeration, for the successive stages of the novel are clearly defined, with an epilogue thrown in to make clear Tolstoy's philosophic intention. It does, however, include a certain Russian verbosity, characters leaping from one extreme to another in the approved Russian

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fashion. Tolstoy himself admitted that he had at times tended to sacrifice the individual character in the story to the broad historical design.

But with what sweep, what cosmic urge, this magnificent drama hurries forward ! Peoples, races, are on the move. Sometimes a shaft of daylight falls upon one quarter of the arena, sometimes upon another—the Russian tide at Austerlitz, the shampoo on the eve of Borodino, the blackened and deserted streets of Moscow, a Cossack patrol in the snows of that grim November. Throughout the narrative we are ever reminded of the larger framework that the author had in mind, that the campaign of 1812 had become a warfare of peoples, that the will had become not individual but instinctive, racial, and collective. Before the battle of Austerlitz, “from the general to the private, every man felt that he was no more than a grain of sand in this great, living sea. . . .” Falling back on Vienna, the soldiers pass in “living waves . . . waves of shakoes with their covers on, of knapsacks, of guns with their spiky bayonets, of faces with high cheek bones. . . .”

Great and small alike are ciphers in the wider movement. “On the day of Borodino, Napoleon neither aimed a gun nor killed a man. Everything was done by his soldiers, who killed their enemies, in obedience, not to his orders, but to their own impulse.” From this point Tolstoy advances to his final conclusion : “Fatalism is the only clue to history when we endeavour to understand its illogical phenomena. . . . The life of man is twofold—one side of it is his own personal experience, which is free and independent in proportion as his interests are lofty and transcendental ; the other is his social life as an atom in the human swarm which

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binds him down with its laws and forces him to submit to them."

Such is the prevailing motif of *War and Peace*, when Sevastopol was still a recent memory. In later years Tolstoy was to emphasize that transcendental condition in which freedom could be made absolute, but the moment was not yet. In *War and Peace* there is still the brooding of a terrible destiny. Spring blossoms and the lazy clouds are drifting over the fetid corruption of the battlefield. "We have only one thing to do," announces Rostoff, "to fight and never to think."

The principal character in *War and Peace* is Russia itself, with the aged general Kutusov as its symbol. "This old man," says Tolstoy, "who has no passions left, but only experience, the result of the passions, and in whom intelligence, which is intended to group together facts and to draw from them conclusions, is replaced by a philosophical contemplation of events, devises nothing and undertakes nothing; but he listens to and remembers everything; he knows how to profit by it at the right moment; he will hinder nothing that is of use, he will permit nothing harmful."

Racial problems have grown to occupy a position of increasing importance in contemporary fiction, due no doubt to the international repercussions of the last quarter of a century. In the welter of conflicting forces, however, it would be unprofitable not to notice the unique contribution made by the Jewish writer to this subject.

Here we pass at a bound from Tolstoy's conception of the instinctive will and of blind national purpose, to the highly conscious interpretation of destiny to be

found in the work of writers like Leon Feuchtwanger, whose *Jew Süß*, *Josephus*, and *The Jew of Rome* are among the most impressive novels made available for this generation. Unlike Tolstoy, Feuchtwanger is unable to draw upon that reservoir of personal recollection so valuable for the Russian writer. It is to the fecund resources of the Jewish tradition that he turns. What the Jew was, he is—and (we may take it) will be. His present tribulation is but an epitome of his age-long suffering. Sustained, however, by a solidarity of interest, and by the spiritual consciousness of Divine purpose, he will emerge triumphant over Satan, and take his place in the ultimate leadership of the peoples. When *Jew Süß* appeared in 1926 there were critics who hailed this picture of the eighteenth-century Jew as an unforgettable reconstruction of a vanished servitude. With the passage of intervening years the book assumes a terrible immediacy.

Jew Süß is perhaps the most representative of Feuchtwanger's historical writing. The background is the small German principality of Württemberg—an extraordinarily composite and animated picture of the Empire and the Papacy, of court life and that of the common people throughout Germany.

The Jews are in the midst. Wearing caftan and curls, they are admitted on sufferance into the private cabinets of the great and powerful ; but one of their number, Jew Süß Oppenheimer, eschews the trappings of an ancient people and rides in proud magnificence, with his buckled shoes and ruffles, his tie-wig and his coat of satin. He is of the younger generation, more calculating, less scrupulous than his elders. With the knowledge that there is only one reality in this world—

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money, he becomes indispensable to his master, Karl Alexander. His authority grows, and with it magnificence. Soon, before the Jews of Europe, he is uplifted as the most powerful of all his people. How the Duke destroys his daughter ; how he in turn destroys the Duke ; and how, finally, he is hurried to the gallows by an avenging society, cannot be told in detail here. All that need be indicated is the conscious destiny of the Jewish peoples. Here is no working of a blind, instinctive will. The goal is clearly marked ; the strategy complete.

Two realities are paramount in Feuchtwanger's study, the first, in a highly hostile society, being *money*. The Jew realized that there was nothing in this changing world that money would not buy. One shield and foothold for every member of Jewry—*money*. "On the door of the Jew with money no watch was set ; the Jew with money stank no more, and no magistracy clapped a ridiculous pointed cap upon his head." Money was the first reality. The second, much more intangible but none the less potent, was of a different order. It was the nature of their spiritual heritage, the profound and mysterious knowledge that sometimes brought upon their lips the enigmatic, soft, supercilious smile which doubly provoked their enemies ; the mysterious knowledge that united the Jews together—the meaning of the Book. "The Book ; yes, their book. . . . Manifold is the world, but it is as vain and fleeting as wind ; but one and only is the God of Israel, the everlasting, the infinite, Jehovah. Sometimes the Book was overgrown by the weeds of life, but it stuck fast in each of them, and in the hours when they were most themselves, at the highest point of their lives, it was

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there, and when they died it was there, and what flowed out from one to the other was this Word. . . . They had dragged the Book with them through two thousand years. It was to them race, state, home, inheritance and possessions. They had given it to all peoples, and all peoples had embraced it. But its only legitimate possessors, knowers, and judges were they alone. Six hundred and forty-seven thousand three hundred and nineteen written characters had the book. Each character was counted and weighed, tested and judged. Each character was paid for with blood ; thousands had let themselves be tortured and slain for each character. Now the book was altogether their own. And in their houses of prayer, on their highest holy-day, the proud who walked in power, as well as the humble, bowed and downtrodden, knew it and cried : ' We have nothing except the Book.' "

The keynote therefore of *Jew Süß* is that a people may maintain its unity by observance of certain spiritual principles alone. Its temples are not made with hands. Beneath oppression its nature will be patient and enduring. It will watch and wait ; consent even to the building up of Gentile magnificence, to the building up of an alien and even hostile society. But it will ever remember its spiritual purpose, and in its heart conserve as in a secret holy of holies the conscious knowledge of its destiny. " Vain and fleeting as the wind is the world. . . . "

The historical novel may (as its author inclines) change its focus very suddenly from the race to the individual. The author may be little interested in philosophy and the strait-jacketing of material into a

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relevant whole. He may look upon historical fiction in terms of family evolution, as in *Inheritance*, where Phyllis Bentley relates the story of the Oldroyds and their fortunes in the cloth trade of the West Riding of Yorkshire, or in the Herries series of Sir Hugh Walpole, the Lakeland picture of a family through several generations and several historical ages.

Miss Bentley's story is probably the best of the Industrial Revolution stories, in so far as within its pages we are able to trace in long perspective the action of master and machine, and of master and man, in the crowded years of the nineteenth century. Beginning in the year 1812 to the crash of Luddite hammers, it traces the uneasy relationship of both sides culminating in the post-war depression of the twenties, and the final ruin of the Oldroyd family. She reads in this disaster the Nemesis of a hard and wilful habit of control; the dehumanization of industry and the necessity of greater co-operation between the conflicting forces.

It is, however, perhaps much more in the historical novel than in any other form of fiction that we discover an individual note, the first person singular of innumerable narratives. How limpidly deceptive are the opening sentences of *Treasure Island*! "Squire Trelawny, Dr. Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is treasure still to be lifted. . . ." There is a looking down of noses at Stevenson to-day, but the Plain Man need not concern himself greatly with the fashionmongers in this matter, for Stevenson is a master in his own right and has no need of defenders. He

more than any other nineteenth-century writer had the power to pluck one by the buttonhole, as it were, and to lead the captivated reader into the byways of his own selection.

Take *Kidnapped*, that perennial masterpiece of pursuit, as fresh and invigorating to-day as in the year in which it was published. To all intents and purposes the novel has no plan, no pattern. Some readers are apt to be deluded by R. L. S.'s announcement that in this novel David Balfour took the bit between his teeth, and wandered around very much on his own responsibility, leaving his panting creator in the rear. But that, however, is mere whimsicality. David's wanderings are inevitable to the story. The dovetailed sequence of the *Master of Ballantrae* is another kind of creation.

What were the origins of *Kidnapped*? We may take it that Stevenson, like the majority of his fellow-countrymen, had been captivated by the advent of the Young Pretender, and the highly romantic adventure of which he had been the central figure. Scott (to whom Stevenson owed so much) had taken the more attractive episodes of the rebellion for his own novels, so that he had left over very little for a later comer. Perhaps this factor it was that decided Stevenson to exclude the Prince almost completely from his pages; perhaps in delineating character he preferred to work upon men and women of his own creation. At any rate, he turned to the aftermath of the conflict, when the Stuart forces had been scattered abroad and the fire of resentment still smouldered actively among the Highland clans. Into this welter of bloodshed and political intrigue David Balfour is thrust, caught up in the problem of the Appin Murder, and hunted for life across the heather

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in company with a proscribed Jacobite, one Alan Breck. It is a breathlessly conducted tour of the wild Highlands of '51, the "whole, long, strange, pathetic story of our savages," as Stevenson put it.

The main quality of *Kidnapped* is this individual apprehension of crisis, a buffeting and bruising by imponderable forces, of themselves only vaguely understood. The quality includes an almost perfect blending of the time sense of one generation with that of another. Thackeray tried his utmost to do something like it in *Henry Esmond*, but only succeeded in making the book unreadable for later generations. Stevenson succeeded, with a style formal yet limpid, by carrying his research with effortless ease and grace. Perhaps he was a little nearer boyhood than Thackeray, a thought more immature. In this case, however, the advantage lay all with Stevenson, for the art of story-telling implies a capacity to condescend. "Write as you would speak," said Katherine Mansfield on the art of story-telling, "to one much loved but having less than your intelligence."

To quote one page is to quote all. Here is David halting before the melancholy House of Shaws :

"The door, as well as I could see it in the dim light, was a great piece of wood all studded with nails ; and I lifted my hand with a faint heart under my jacket, and knocked once. Then I stood and waited. The house had fallen into a dead silence ; a whole minute passed away, and nothing stirred but the bats overhead. I knocked again, and hearkened again. By this time my ears had grown so accustomed to the quiet, that I could hear the ticking of the clock

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inside as it slowly counted out the seconds ; but whoever was in that house kept deadly still, and must have held his breath."

So David passes from the house of his father to that of his Uncle Ebenezer ; from the House of Shaws to Captain Hoseason's brig ; from the brig to the sequestered island ; from the island to the heather, Alan Breck, and the redcoats ; from the Highlands finally to the door of the British Linen Company's Bank in Edinburgh. There is not a false note in the whole setting. The story never loses pace (the drawback of so many historical novels). The characters are never less than human.

The Stevenson virtuosity died with Stevenson, but like every other distinguished writer he had his imitators. To enumerate these is not within our province. Since 1892 of historical novelists there have been aplenty, from Arthur Conan Doyle to Miss Helen Waddell. Of contemporary novelists Mr. C. S. Forester ought to have distinguished mention. He lacks the wealth of rich analogy that Stevenson displayed ; but in every other respect his work is deserving of the closest attention. He handles his material with the sure precision of the artist, and the pace and swing of his narrative is beyond all praise. Mr. Forester's Horatio Hornblower series is a wonderfully sustained picture of naval adventure in the Napoleonic Wars ; in books like *Death to the French* and *The Gun* he deals with the army too. *Death to the French* may be termed the Peninsular counterpart of *Kidnapped*. In it we observe how Rifleman Matthew Dodd of the Light Division, isolated from his comrades, in the retreat to Torres Vedras,

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manages to conduct a single-handed campaign against the French army among the hills and valleys of Portugal. He returns to his regiment at last, clothes torn to pieces, toes protruding through shoes, but with an eminently manageable rifle—the undefeatable Dodd !

There is a stark precision in Mr. Forester's narrative that bites into the mind ; no glossing over of inconvenient horror ; and a masterly assimilation of a variety of important and unremembered material. Take, for example, the account of the reliable Dodd on finding himself cut off from his fellows :

“ Rifleman Matthew Dodd went on up the hill. As soon as he was safe from immediate pursuit he sat down in the cover of a whin-bush to reload his rifle. . . . He took a cartridge from his pouch and bit the bullet—a half-inch sphere of lead—out of the paper container. He poured the powder into the barrel, all save a pinch which went into the priming pan, whose cover he carefully replaced. He folded the empty cartridge into a wad, which he pushed down the barrel on top of the charge with the ramrod which he took from its socket along the barrel. Then he spat the bullet into the muzzle ; it only fell down an inch or so, for it happened to be one of the more tightly-fitting bullets—extreme precision of manufacture was not demanded or considered necessary by those in authority. Since he could not coax the bullet down the rifling, he reached behind him to where a little mallet hung from his belt by a string through a hole in the handle. The fact that Dodd carried one of these tools proved that he was one of the careful ones of his regiment—it was not a service issue. Standing

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the rifle up on its butt he rested the ramrod on the bullet and tapped sharply with the mallet. . . .”

And so on until the rifle was fully loaded. There are many who would have described the loading of the rifle, and a certain number who might have done so with detail, but few who would have remembered the characteristic addition of the mallet !

The popularity of the historical novel shows little sign of abatement ; witness the record sales of *Anthony Adverse* and *Gone With the Wind*. But the condition of permanent success lies in a stable and not in a shifting quality. The successful novel must treat with the past ; but not exclusively. It must contain a certain admixture of the present ; but only in careful proportion. The precise nature of that compound is the secret of the man of genius alone, marking the difference between the impermanent and the permanent thing—the difference, may we add, between the *Last Days of Pompeii* and *War and Peace* ?

CHAPTER IV

INTIMATIONS OF INDUSTRY

IN surveying the Literature of the last two hundred and fifty years, nothing is more notable than the peculiar severance of Letters from Industry. I do not imply by this announcement that the roving eye of the novelist has not many a time and oft lingered upon the drama of the Industrial Revolution, and that he has not tried as far as possible to incorporate such material into the body of his work. Far from it. We do not need to be reminded of *Mary Barton*, of *Sybil*, of *Alton Locke*, of Phyllis Bentley's *Modern Tragedy*, or of A. J. Cronin's *The Stars Look Down* to establish such a contention. But let it be remembered also that there is one experience of the performer, and another of the spectator ; and while it is true that the spectator sees most of the game, it is equally true that there is a certain part of the game in which he does not share at all, namely, in the playing itself. The novels already mentioned are "spectator" novels created upon a basis of *facts collected*, and not (save vicariously) upon an experience undergone.

Imaginatively, of course, it is possible to share an enormous number of experiences ; but even so, imagination cannot fully comprehend an experience that has not been fully shared. Take for example the popular conception of mining, *i.e.* that it is a dark, unpleasant,

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ill-paid, and very dangerous occupation. Now mining is a dark, ill-paid, unpleasant, and very dangerous occupation; but there is much more to the business of mining than that. No account can be regarded as complete that does not include also a certain body of cheerfulness, of salty humour, and of a devotion to labour, greater than that to be found in any other British occupation, with the exception perhaps of the seafaring industry alone.

When the novelist begins to work upon this material, however, an extraordinary revolution takes place. The pony-boy discards his whistle, and the haulage man his quip. Faces in the half-light become "dark," "grim," "dour," "sullen." There are periodical tempests of rage or discontent, and strikes without number, while a practical joke becomes an almost unholy thing! Everything must be subdued by a grimly external treatment of the subject. Perhaps—in terms of literary technique—the fault was Zola's. One cannot be certain. But the habit remains.

A major difficulty is that of class distinction. It seems impossible at times for members of one class to bridge the gulf that separates it from another. Galsworthy, one of the most sensitive writers of the twentieth century, stumbled badly in approaching the British working man. In the whole of his extensive gallery there is not a single working-class character with the sturdy independence, the innate horse-sense, and the resolute industry, that characterize so many of our fellow-countrymen. His characters are all of a cap-touching type, whining on a London kerb, or snivelling in a London police court. In *Fraternity* he queers the pitch at the outset by introducing the impossible Hughs, a working man who knocks his

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wife about ; and later references to the working classes are in terms of the people who smell ! Galsworthy doesn't give his "fraternity" a chance, for washing is not unknown as a habit among the working classes, and a "chanst abroad" has yet to find its place in the vocabulary of Industrial England.

This theme is worth pursuing. In Conrad, for example, the pre-eminent novelist of the sea, it is impossible to find an able seaman worthy of detailed notice, save in terms of dispraisement. The only full-length portrait of which he was capable appears in the *Nigger of the Narcissus* : the cockney, Donkin. Donkin, Conrad tells us, was a shirker, "the pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubber's"¹ . . . the sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpressed faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company."

Now this dispraisement of Donkin is all very well in its way, falling as it does within the structure of the novel ; but one reads on with the uneasy feeling that had any seaman other than Donkin possessed the temerity to question the quality of the food, or the conditions of working upon the Conrad clipper, he would have been thrust quite arbitrarily into the Donkin class. At some time or another one of these sea-lawyers must have told Conrad where he could "step-off," and the master mariner had never forgotten it.

At times we do come across really common sense cameos of working life, notably in the writings of D. H. Lawrence ; but it is J. B. Priestley's Jesse Oakroyd

¹ What, by the way, could a self-seeking landlubber secure from a man like Donkin ?

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who represents a really sensible interpretation of a northern working man ; no servile cap-touching, no bitterness over vanished opportunities, no apology for his working-class status—rather indeed, a great pride, firstly in his own dearly cherished independence (a capacity “for bein’ a man and not a damned monkey”), and secondly in the craftsmanship of his own fingers.

It has become a commonplace by now to announce that the artist has never reconciled himself to the machine. He may, like all the other members of modern society, adjust the gears of his motor, or travel behind those who will do the adjusting for him ; but he cannot against inclination become fundamentally enthusiastic by the news of increasing mechanical achievement. His main reaction is one of indifference :

*“What is this life if full of care
We have no time to stand and stare ? . . .”*

From time to time certain poems have been written in praise of the machine—they are unremembered. Short stories have been written extolling the motor car and airplane. They are insignificant. The starry-eyed mechanic may wax enthusiastic over shining cranks and pistons ; the poet never. At bottom the artist realizes that he is the inveterate enemy of the mechanical, the irrefragably ordered thing. He is dedicated to the workings of the spirit ; and thus it is that for every one story you discover in praise of a mechanical theme, there will be a hundred written in criticism of it. The issue is symbolized effectively in *Erewhon*. But there are writings other than those of prophecy.

Early in the nineteenth century it was an urgent social

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necessity that produced a common witness in such diverse persons as Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell on the one hand and young Benjamin Disraeli on the other. The conscience of both had been deeply stirred by the condition of the industrial north, and two novels, *Mary Barton* and *Sybil*, were the result of their inquiry. Mrs. Gaskell's *Mary Barton* cuts closer to the bone, for the weavers of whom she wrote lived about her husband's chapel in Manchester, and she knew them in terms of intimate acquaintance. The spinner's philosophy was a simple one :

“ ‘ Bless thee, lad, do ask 'em to make th' masters break th' machines. There's never been good times sin' spinning-jennies came up.’ ”

“ ‘ Machines is the ruin of poor folk,’ chimed in several voices.

“ ‘ For my part,’ said a shivering, half-clad man, who crept near the fire as if ague-stricken, ‘ I would like thee to tell 'em to pass th' short hours bill. Flesh and blood gets wearied wi' so much work ; why should factory hands work so much longer than other trades ? ’ ”

Buhl tables, porcelain, and gilded dandies negligently lounging, encumber *Sybil*. When these impediments have been removed the effect is very much the same as that of Mrs. Gaskell :

“ There is more serfdom in England now than at any time since the Conquest. I speak of what passes under my daily eyes when I say, that those who labour can as little choose or change their masters now, as when they were born thralls. There are great

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bodies of the working classes of this country nearer the condition of brutes than they have been at any time since the Conquest. Indeed, I see nothing to distinguish them from brutes, except that their morals are inferior."

These quotations represent the beginnings of a literature that was to increase as the century proceeded. The predominating element was one of indignation and pity, and Tory Democrat and Philosophical Radical alike could urge no greater remedy than that of shorter hours and higher wages. When the Luddite generation had passed and the Chartist movement had expended itself, there was as little criticism of the machine in contemporary fiction as there was in the pages of Macaulay. Indeed, a note almost of religious awe pervaded mid-Victorian exultation. To substitute for fifteen miles an hour a greater speed of twenty-five was regarded in some esoteric manner as "progress," not only in the sense of locomotion, but vaguely in the sphere of morals also. With the advent of popular education, however, a new hope fluttered the human breast; and it was confidently predicted that the day would come when not only the working man would be able to take in and read a daily newspaper of his own, but also to express himself in some sort of literary form. A premonition of what is sometimes termed proletarian literature.

No author (it may be assumed) can be responsible for the truly proletarian novel but the proletarian himself—the man who, being a proletarian, has assimilated culture within the working class stratum and has elected to remain within the environment of his own people because he prefers to work and deepen there.

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Of such writers, two groups emerge : one, the permanently embittered, from which springs usually a vehement and forthright sort of propaganda (discussed already in these pages) ; and the other, those who have learned to look upon life more objectively, who are, broadly speaking, anti-humbug, and who will not hesitate to prick the bombastic pretensions either of the Right or of the Left. Such writers will recognize that the drama of working-class life may arise from a clash of personality with which Marx and Engels have nothing to do. The truth is that the most interesting novelists are those who have had the strength to pigeon-hole ideology, and to see just men and women occupied by the ordinary avocations. No one thinks any the less of Jane Austen (for example) because at a period when this country was fighting for its existence, she made no reference at all in her pages to the struggle. 1848 was the year of Revolution over the whole of Europe. We do not feel a reduction in the quality of *David Copperfield* because Charles Dickens omitted to make any mention of the matter.

So it must be too with the narrative of industry. A trade dispute may find legitimate notice, with broken windows, and a certain amount of official suppression. But that is all as may be. The drama of men in industry springs from a variety of causes, and we must look upon them all. "The essential characteristic of the really great novelist," says Arnold Bennett, "is a Christlike all-embracing compassion." It is the universal and all-embracing that we must look for. In *Broken Water* Mr. James Hanley tells us of his own urge towards creative writing : "Suddenly an idea came into my mind, and I said aloud, 'I'll write a story about a ship. The only

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character will be a ship. . . . The whole life, the Odyssey of a ship.' ” The city repelled him, but “ far down, across the sea of roofs, there was the sea, the placid or unruly water, the varied songs of the ships as their sirens sang, and all the poetry of the daily life of the river. That was the compensation for it all. *The poetry of the daily life of man.* Factory workers and sailors, dockers and engineers and navvies and shipbuilders. Workers spell poetry each day of their lives without knowing it. The hand that coils a rope, that hauls a weight from the hatch, writes his poem upon air and upon the minute life of his task. . . . The workers' life is full of colour and drama and poetry.”

The second type of novelist, then, is concerned with the colour and drama and poetry of industry. If it be possible to look in his way at a ship, why not at a mine, a mill, an iron foundry, or a railway station ?

The sparseness of the industrial yield may be accounted for by the fact that it is only with the greatest difficulty that the active worker can be induced to take a pen in his hand at all. In the absence of a literary gift, and of any sort of encouragement from the management, it is not surprising that the number of industrial studies should be few. It is only when working with a management of unusual magnanimity, or better still outside the scope of industry altogether, that the working-class author can hope for the complete freedom so necessary to the creative artist.

The yield is undoubtedly slender ; but there are one or two books of outstanding importance. Perhaps it is inevitable that the thickest crop should centre on the mines. Until the year 1920 nothing at all had been

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written about the mining industry in Great Britain (passionate reformers had always been contented with *Germinal*) ; but it was then that Mr. J. C. Welsh, a poet by temperament and a Trades Union official by occupation, published his novel, *The Underworld*, in a first edition of 20,000 copies. The book was an instantaneous success. For the first time in English literature a manual worker had dealt creatively and at length with the scene of his labour. The story is that of Robert Sinclair and Maysie Maitland, a couple of Scottish mine workers, and their ill-starred association, for the narrative concludes with the death of Maysie after child-bed, and the suffocation of Robert in the underground workings. The tone heavily sententious, the sunshine of the Lowlands plays only fitfully across the pages of *The Underworld*. The book is at the same time terribly sincere, and the poet's sensibility displays itself in every paragraph. Take, for example, the account of Maysie's first day on the screens :

“ ‘Six and sixpence a week’ was still ringing in her head. Indeed, the monotonous swing of the tables ground out the refrain in their harsh clamour, as they swung backwards and forwards. ‘Six and sixpence a week,’ with every leap forward ; ‘six and sixpence a week’ as they receded. ‘Six and sixpence’ with every shake and roar, and with each pulsing throb of the engine ; and ‘six and sixpence a week’ her little hands, already cut and bleeding, kept time with regular beat, as she lifted the stones and flung them aside. She was part of the refrain—a note in the fortissimo of industry. The engines roared and crashed and hissed to it. They beat the air regularly

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as the pistons rose and fell back and forth, thump, thud, hiss, groan, up and down, out and in : ' Six and sixpence a week.' "

Equally, the underground scenes are depicted with a grim and lyrical vigour. There are Union meetings. There is an unforgettable account of a disastrous "fall." On the other hand the rivalry of the hero with the mineowner's son for the affection of Maysie tends to reduce a certain portion of the story to the standard of "From Mill Girl to Mansion." It is conceivable that it was Mr. Welsh who initiated the practice of introducing illegitimate children into proletarian novels. If so, then he bears a heavy responsibility. One or two illegitimate children may be swallowed without difficulty, but an unvarying and persistent diet of illegitimate children is apt to become a bit of a bore.

After Welsh, Boden. When *Miner* was written in 1932, Mr. F. C. Boden was thirty. He had already distinguished himself with a volume of verse, *Pit-Head Poems*, and *Miner* was his first full-length novel. Unlike Mr. Welsh, whose trade union and political sympathies are displayed very fully in *The Underworld* and who later became a member of Parliament for a mining constituency, Mr. Boden seems not to be interested in Labour politics at all. In *Miner* there are no chapters to parallel "The Coming of the Prophet" and the account of the strike conference in *The Underworld*. Mr. Boden, it would seem, is interested mainly in depicting the slow unfolding and the sensitive reaction of a pit-boy to the physical background of a colliery workings. His vision is conveyed in a series of vivid, rapid, kaleidoscopic shots, the method being one of dynamic impressionism.

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Take, for example, this impression of a Chesterfield street :

“ Then up from the east end of the town, with the rain beating in his face, scurried a shabby mackintoshed youth with a bulging canvas slung at his back and a bundle under his arm. His cap, turned back to front, clung sopping to his forehead, and the rain ran down his nose and cheeks on to his mackintosh, while at every few yards he piped in a thin, treble voice, ‘ *Bird . . . early Bird . . . Bird.*’ Up around the church he came with his ‘ *Bird . . . early Bird . . . Bird,*’ along the High Street, through the market-place, darting from public-house to public-house, in and out of the rain, the bundle under his arm growing smaller and smaller. Young men came to the doors of billiard saloons and whistled him as he went by. Others appeared at alley-openings and street-ends, received their paper, handed over a coin, and disappeared again. Along West Bars he went, his ‘ *Bird . . . early Bird*’ growing fainter and fainter, till at last it was lost in the rain.”

Danny, the principal figure in *Miner*, goes to work underground. Before long, he is brought face to face with calamity. It comes first of all with a twinkling point of light dancing from the distance, and an agitated driver with a deathly white face crying out that he must find somebody, and quickly Danny races forward to the point of catastrophe. At the top of the gate a tremendous piece of stone has fallen, pinning the wretched man beneath. Around the stone, seven or eight men are “smashing with sledge-hammers” at the obstruction. The men are working like demons, and time passes

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painfully, for the rock can be broken only section by section. The men are silent except for the hissing of the breath between their teeth. This is no time for speech. At last, after about three-quarters of an hour, the obstruction is cleared, and the rescuers lift up the injured miner :

“ ‘Easy, men,’ warns the under-manager, ‘easy now.’ They lift him over gently and he moans. He is dying. He has fallen on to the edge of his shovel, and it has cut sideways through his ragged waistcoat into his stomach. It has gone in as far as the broken shaft, and the blood pours out as the under-manager releases it. The man moans. He has been laid on the waiting stretcher, and one of the men kneels at his side and holds up his head.

“ ‘Where hurts thee, Ernie lad ? ’ he asks huskily.

“The man is beyond speech. The blood wheezes in his throat and his head sags. He is dead. The white-faced youth who had broken the news to Danny is cowering against the side of the tunnel sobbing like a child. The men put on their shirts and trousers, Danny and the white-faced youth carrying the men’s coats and bottles, and the weary, subdued little band set out for the pit bottom.”¹

These conditions move the author to an indignant outburst against the mining conditions that make such happenings possible ; but he lays down no programme of amelioration as does Mr. Welsh, being content to leave such matters to those who may be moved thereby.

¹ *Miner.*

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Much different in treatment and in general scope of observation is Mr. Jack Jones's *Rhondda Roundabout*. Like both Welsh and Boden, he has served an apprenticeship in the mining industry, and like Mr. Welsh, he has taken a hand in Union politics. But while his literary graces are inferior to those of Mr. Boden, his outlook is much more vigorous, informed, and universal. He has moved about in the earth and walked up and down in it. Not that the coal-bearing Rhondda is an unusually extensive area ; but his book presents an *interchange* of experience notably absent from that of his fellow writers. In a literary sense this may be partly ascribed to the form that *Rhondda Roundabout* assumes, for it becomes rather evident that if Mr. Jones has not at some time been familiar with the work of Mr. John dos Passos, then he has certainly been thinking upon parallel lines. The story emphasizes the spiritual development of the Reverend Dan Price, B.A., the young minister of the Beulah Congregational Chapel ; but Price is perhaps the least successful figure of the book. He is important only as the symbol of the Rhondda's religious fervour. The real "hero" is the "revolutionary and riotous, religious and musical, sporting and artistic, coal-bearing Rhondda." It is not a book of one man, it is a book of a multitude, of (Hippo) Daniels the Communist, of Bandy Bowen the local prize-fighter (whose weakness is the "scoffing" of bananas), of Llew Rhondda, the egoistic lion, the fierce old musical conductor, of "Big Mog" the bookie, and a number of lesser, but no less interesting individuals. The groups meet and merge, the unifying influence that of love of music. Actually the pit is thrust into the background, and it is only in one chapter that an explosion draws a tense little company to a pit-head vigil.

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It is as though the author would fain inform us that miners too are always human, and that their social intercourse is not less (perhaps even more) engaging than the world has been led to acknowledge.

Mr. Jones's position is that of anti-humbug. Whether in the sermon-tasting of the chapels or the lecture-tasting of the Communist conferences, the culture-tasting in the drama week or the emotional holiday of the musical festival, he brings to the spectacle an irony that is one of the most refreshing features of his work. Thus, the more artistic rebels have decided that for the Communists there is, in preference to wordy warfare, a much more fruitful dialectic to be found in strings and syncopation. No more dancing to boss-class music in the Rhondda ! The pianist explains how :

“ . . . These are only a few of the class-conscious numbers I've knocked up. The words are by a pal of mine, our trumpet-player—and banjo as well, of course—who's not a party member, but he's a sympathizer all the same. Yes, his words, my music. There's this one : *With Olga on the Volga*, a waltz that Rhondda'd be humming in less than a week from the time I let it go. And this one-step, *My Leningrad Lou*, knock 'em stiff it would. And this novelty number—and what a number, *Oh My Five Year Plan Man*. This is the number in which I introduce the machines and the hum of dynamos and bits of a factory workers' conference. . . . ”

Whether it is in marking the dizzy rocketing to fame of Bandy Bowen, Rhondda's darling pugilist ; or in the final passing of Llew himself, the guardian of Rhondda's

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traditional music, Mr. Jones shows himself fully acquainted with his people.

There are other novelists of the mine. Among these the name of Harold Heslop ought to be remembered. His *Gate of a Strange Field* and *Last Cage Down* are powerful studies of industry—spare, and grim, and compelling.

In other quarters the range of proletarian literature is also limited ; but with welcome signs of increase. The sea stories of James Hanley (see earlier reference) have a place of their own in this kind of fiction. The Lancashire studies of T. Thompson are unique in their native shrewdness and humour. Mr. Leslie Halward, although not yet responsible for a story of length, is already notable in this connection. The literature of unemployment, too, with its emphasis upon the calamitous side of industry, would fall into this category. It was the work of Walter Greenwood, and in particular his spectacular success of *Love on the Dole*, that served to rivet a good deal of attention upon the misery and human wastage of unemployment. *Love on the Dole* is an unforgettable book, highly coloured though it may be in order to secure the requisite dramatic effect ; but, in its character drawing and its mastery of situation, it remains in the first flight of such literature. It is an epic of love, courtship, and marriage upon a pittance, in surroundings that serve to sap the moral fibre of the protagonists, evoking a philosophy at once hopeless and cynical. "It isn't this marriage business that matters. . . . It's the damned poverty . . . doing without the things that make life worth while." Such poverty forces Sally Hardcastle into a loveless union with Sam Grundy the comfortable bookie. It is the same sort of poverty that elevates into

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importance the loathsome Mrs. Nettle, the moneylender, and the industrious Mr. Price, the pawnbroker. Everywhere, the cash nexus predominates, and down before it go the values that serve to make existence satisfying and wholesome.

Mr. Walter Brierley, too, with his *Means Test Man* and *Sandwichman*, provokes a similar attention to unemployment. Mr. Brierley's style would be accounted much less "powerful" than that of Walter Greenwood; but in its sober, ordered impact it is none the less effective. There are some indeed (and the present writer is among the number) who would prefer the much more restrained exposition of the Derbyshire author, with its unforgettable "documentary" effect, and its natural development of situation. The psychological effect of such writing is of immense importance, serving to emphasize, more than with the reading of a hundred blue-books, the cancer that is wasting the social and economic body of society.

What is the order of the proletarian novel, that the Plain Man may look upon it and recognize it as a work of literature? The easy answer would be, any narrative of conflict wherein the proletarian is set out to the disadvantage of his employer, involving as it does acceptance of the Marxist thesis. The more satisfying interpretation would imply an objective contemplation of the whole. Certain features would distinguish this form. The Plain Man would discover human contact to be on a simpler and more elemental basis. Formality would be at a discount. There would be a good deal less understatement than is to be found in the higher strata, and consequently a franker note of criticism, and with it perhaps a certain vulgarity. Lighter relief would be

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along lines of humour rather than of wit. There would be less of an appeal to tradition, and more to the exigency of the moment. A lively spontaneity would characterize the dialogue. While it would be difficult to eliminate a certain proportion of that snobbery from which in England all classes seem to suffer, there would be in this type of novel a greater elasticity of contact, for the working classes at any rate seem to suffer least of all from the process of social crystallization.

On the other hand, economic insecurity would constantly display itself, with contingent anxiety on the part of every one. A lack of poise (if any) would be largely due to that. (In passing, it is remarkable what amount of poise may be assimilated on £5,000 a year!) Conversation would display a limited range, with disputation at once passionate and eager. Certain things would be revered above all others. Education certainly would be one of these.

As for an ultimate assessment, the proletarian novel will become subject to the same criterion of values by which other forms of fiction are criticized. There is no particular virtue in being poor (any more than there is in being rich), or oppressed, or subordinate. A man has no superior quality because he happens to work solely with his hands. The Plain Man will advance his own conception of the good life, acutely sensible of inequality and wrong, but conceding respect only to those who may be termed to be in the possession of virtue.

CHAPTER V

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL

THE autobiographical novel is a problem at once elementary and elusive—elementary, since we feel that the material has been drawn from positively first-hand sources (for what closer association could one desire than that of an author with his own experience ?) ; elusive, since we cannot be altogether certain of the exact proportion of fiction intermingled with fact.

Perhaps the autobiographical novel is not so fashionable as it once was. Biography has been coming up hand over fist. With pure biography the reader feels that he is getting much nearer to the bone, the stark essential of experience. Alas, seldom does he realize that there are biographies little better than fiction ; and that an autobiography may become so highly coloured as to have only a slender relation to the truth. We would not imply by the foregoing that autobiographers as a class are the *de Rougemonts* of literature. We do suggest, however, that of all forms of artistic expression autobiography should be regarded with the keenest scrutiny. "It is," says Cowley, "a hard and a nice subject for a man to write about himself ; it grates his own heart to say anything of disparagement, and the reader's ears to hear anything of praise from him."

It is an axiom that there are few first novels devoid of

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autobiography. Directly, *David Copperfield*, *Peter Simple*, *The Way of All Flesh*, *Sons and Lovers*, and *Martin Eden* contain autobiography. In a more symbolical sense, *Wuthering Heights* is an autobiographical novel. In a secondary sense, *Vivian Grey* is autobiographical. And *Huckleberry Finn*. We are concerned in these pages, however, not with the delightfully elusive but with the passably recognizable, a revelation so closely identified with reality that there need be no involved dispute concerning origins.

One turns almost instinctively to *David Copperfield*, for the boyhood and youth of David is substantially that of Dickens himself. "I have in my heart of hearts," he confessed in his latter years, "a favourite child." It was, of course, Copperfield.

Forster indicates how many passages in the novel were literally true. There is a list of the small collection of books possessed by Dickens senior. The visit of David to his father in prison was written two or three years before the novel itself, and represented a poignant episode in young Dickens's own life :

"My father [he says] was waiting for me in the lodge, and we went up to his room (on the top storey but one), and cried very much. And he told me, I remember, to take warning by the Marshalsea, and to observe that if a man had twenty pounds, and spent nineteen pounds, nineteen shillings and sixpence, he would be happy ; but that a shilling spent the other way would make him wretched. . . ."

Dickens's own autobiography had been caught up in the larger work. Thus we arrive at the melancholy

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episode of the blacking factory, when, utterly neglected and helpless, he felt his early aspiration of growing up a learned and distinguished man stifled at the outset. As the novel proceeds, *David Copperfield* slips more and more into fiction, until at last the reader realizes that the autobiographical phase is at an end. In recent years the literary detective, on a mission of linking up the threads of Dickens's marital relationship with the drama of David and his child wife, has been at large in the second half of *David Copperfield*; but with results so dubious that they need not be mentioned here. It is quite natural that an autobiographical novel so important should become the field for research. The real difficulty is in striving to pin down the imagination of the novelist to the routine even of his own intimate life. For a little time the stream runs clear and then it disappears in earth, perhaps irrecoverably. The large humanity of Dickens, however, is always perceptible in *David Copperfield*, and considering the limitation of his own boyhood, little of resentment or bitterness.

This method of revealing to the public eye the secret or semi-secret life of a character has certain advantages, the material being easily accessible, the apprehension of the author sharp and intimate; but on the other hand there are times when it may be calculated to produce its own Nemesis. During the latter stages of his career, Disraeli probably considered *Vivian Grey*, his youthful *joie de feu* of the twenties, of relative unimportance. T. P. O'Connor thought differently. In launching his terrific attack upon Lord Beaconsfield, sixty years after the production of that juvenile novel, O'Connor began: "Now, at the very outset of this work, I frankly tell the reader the thesis I attempt to prove.

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My view of Lord Beaconsfield's character is that it is essentially a counterpart of that of Vivian Grey ; and my view of Lord Beaconsfield's political career is that it has been conducted upon the same arts as are practised by the hero of his earliest story." ¹ " *A smile for a friend, and a sneer for the world, is the way to govern mankind, and such was the motto of Vivian Grey.*" ²

The chickens have an inconvenient habit of coming home to roost ; for the novelist (although he may sometimes think so) does not live in an entire world of his own creation. There are other, and far from silent, witnesses who may put in an appearance against him.

Consider two of the greatest autobiographical novels of the last half-century, *The Way of All Flesh* and *Sons and Lovers*, taking the author of the second book first.

D. H. Lawrence was a writer of remarkable sensibility. In characterization, in the art of creating atmosphere, he possessed no equal in contemporary literature. He was at home equally with children and Indians, with cattlemen and colliers, and before a sex-obsession gripped him to destruction, with women also. When he cared greatly, he could tell a story. (His primitivism, by the way, is not now in question.) The point is that he could write, and write so forcibly, with such power and charm, that he remains an acknowledged master.

Kissing goes by favour, and we like those whom we like. But even a master (it would seem) cannot be relied upon to tell a plain unvarnished story. In the light of later evidence he may be proved to be capable of incriminating omissions, of reading the past entirely

¹ *Life of Beaconsfield.*

² *Vivian Grey.*

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in terms of the present, of furtive bursts of wishful thinking—in fine, of telling the truth when he feels it convenient to do so, and lapsing into imaginative omission when he does not.

There are four main characters in *Sons and Lovers*—Paul Morel (Lawrence himself), Paul's mother and father, and Miriam Leivers (Paul's girl friend). As the story proceeds, the father is frozen out, and the other three remain. A triangle. The man, the man's mother, and his girl.

What follows is not an unusual story, although it is unusually told by Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers*. It is a drama that has been enacted time and again in the history of human relationships—simply that the girl isn't good enough for the favourite son. Lawrence points out that in the case of Paul the relationship is accentuated by the gradual estrangement, one from the other, of his parents. He becomes an abiding necessity to his mother. She has no husband now. Only Paul.

When the girl steps in between there is instant trouble.

“Always when he went with Miriam, and it grew rather late, he knew his mother was fretting and getting angry about him—why he could not understand. As he went into the house, flinging down his cap, his mother looked up at the clock. She had been sitting thinking, because a chill to her eyes prevented her reading. She could feel Paul being drawn away by this girl. And she did not care for Miriam. ‘She is one of those who will want to suck a man's soul out till he has none of his own left,’ she said to herself; ‘and he is just such a gaby as to let himself be absorbed. She will never let him become a man; she never

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will.' So while he was away with Miriam, Mrs. Morel grew more and more worked up.

"She glanced at the clock and said coldly and rather tired, 'You have been far enough to-night!'"

So the battle opens, and the struggle for Paul continues with intense feeling—pull mother, pull Miriam. Miriam too is conscious of her enemy. One day Paul makes a confession :

" 'You see,' he said, 'with me—I don't think one person would ever monopolize me—be everything to me—I think never.'

"This she did not consider.

" 'No,' she murmured. Then, after a pause, she looked at him and her dark eyes flashed. 'This is your mother,' she said. 'I know she never liked me.'

" 'No, no, it isn't,' he said hastily. . . ."

But it was his mother. And a little later, in the chapter headed "The Defeat of Miriam," we find him assuring his mother, "I'll never marry while I've got you."

And then the following conversation takes place :

" 'But I shouldn't like to leave you with nobody, my boy,' she cried.

" 'You're not going to leave me. What are you ? Fifty-three ! I'll give you till seventy-five. There you are, I'm fat and forty-four. Then I'll marry a staid body. See !'

"His mother sat and laughed.

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“ ‘Go to bed,’ she said—‘go to bed.’

“ ‘And we’ll have a pretty house, you and me, and a servant, and it’ll be just all right. I s’ll perhaps be rich with my painting.’

“ ‘Will you go to bed !’

“ ‘And then you s’ll have a pony-carriage. See yourself—a little Queen Victoria trotting around.’ ”

Yes, he is still to keep in touch with Miriam ; but Mrs. Morel has carried the day, she becomes the active source of his fighting away from Miriam, until at last the connection between the two lovers is broken. His explanation is not very illuminating :

“ ‘I want us to separate. We have lived on each other all these years ; now let us stop. I will go my own way without you, and you will go your own way without me. You will have an independent life of your own then.’ ”

It is the final triumph of Mrs. Morel.

Lawrence’s own version is one of the most unsatisfying things in Literature. He is conscious of the truth in his heart, but he cannot bring his lips to say it. He wriggles. He squirms. He points the finger. Readers of *Sons and Lovers* will not fail to note the chapter headings of crisis. “Lad-and-Girl Love,” “Strife in Love,” “Defeat of Miriam,” “The Test on Miriam.” The real test was not upon Miriam but upon Paul, and the real defeat his also. He tries to assure the reader that the real obstacle lay in physical bondage. “He shrank from the physical contact.” (This is rather diverting as coming from the essential Lawrence !) What he shrank from was the

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cold voice of his mother and her minatory eye upon the clock. It may have been (as Mr. Middleton Murry has pointed out) that Lawrence was "almost a sexual weakling," but nothing should obscure the position that the only satisfactory love that he had ever known is dismissed in *Sons and Lovers* with a piece of special pleading.

In a slight autobiographical sketch, written not many years before his death, he does make a glancing sort of recognition. "It was while I was at Croydon, when I was twenty-three, that the girl who had been the chief friend of my youth, and who was herself a school teacher in a mining village at home, copied out some of my poems, and, without telling me, sent them to the *English Review*, which had just had a glorious rebirth under Ford Madox Hueffer. Hueffer was most kind. He printed the poems and asked me to come and see him. The girl had launched me, so easily, on my literary career, like a princess cutting a thread, launching a ship."

The analogy is quite inadequate. It was no princess merely cutting a thread, for if the resemblance is in any way to be effective, it was Miriam who had actively assisted in the building of the ship itself. For years he had shaped his work responsive to her sympathy. In writing the *White Peacock* he had run to her with it bit by bit. What hurt Miriam most (her own record is available) was that he had left out these years of devotion to the development of his genius, "a devotion that had been a pure joy. . . . What else but the devotion to a common end had held us together against his mother's repeated assaults? . . . The one gleam of light was that Lawrence had overstated his case; that some day his

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epic of maternal love and filial devotion would be viewed from another angle, that of his own final despair.”¹

In *Sons and Lovers* we have another example of how the stream of recollection, so limpid and sparkling, loses itself in the sandy places of self-deception and dissimulation. This epic of maternal love was never reviewed, at any rate from the literary angle; and, while the story as a story may stand, for those who would read into the early inner development of Lawrence there is this additional commentary—without which the more comprehensive picture cannot be secured.

Appraisement Samuel Butler has had in plenty. “All this book is good,” announced Arnold Bennett, after a re-reading of *The Way of All Flesh*. “There is a vast amount of naked truth in the book.”² “Samuel Butler,” says H. E. Bates concerning *The Way of All Flesh*, “had delivered his two-handed solar-plexus punch . . . a punch that knocked more out of the moralists and more wind into the literature of its time than any other book had done for ages. After Butler, things had to be different.”³ But why continue? The naked truth had been presented at last! That was what the reader felt as he turned the packed, astringent pages of *The Way of All Flesh*. Here was an author with the supreme courage to lay bare the intimate relationship between himself and his parents, and who at last had spilled the beans upon Victorian hypocrisy. Within the pages of this book patriarchal tyranny, female subservience, Mammon-worship, and the colossal dead-weight of bigotry and ignorance were finally exposed.

¹ D. H. Lawrence : a personal record by E. T.

² Journals.

³ *The English Novelists*, ed. Verschoyle.

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Theobald Pontifex (the model being Butler's own father) was a figure of fun ; and Christina, his wife, an object of amused contempt. That hideous Victorian household, with its stuffy morning prayers, its class distinction, its overbearing tyranny, its cheque-book morality, its stupendous self-esteem—how ridiculous it all became ! In conflict with it, Ernest Pontifex finds at last independence and an inner peace ; but only after much tribulation and the repudiation of those values that his parents have held dear.

Between Samuel Butler, then, and Ernest Pontifex, we are conscious of little difference. What are the main particulars concerning Butler ?

He had an elevated beginning. His grandfather was Dr. Samuel Butler of Shrewsbury School, later Bishop of Lichfield ; his father Canon Butler ; and since (in 1835) the infant Samuel was baptized with Jordan water, the property of his grandfather, it will be seen that his earliest associations were of a distinctly pious character. Before he could well crawl (he tells us) he was taught to kneel. From the outset he regarded his father with fear and shrinking, and when, after school at Shrewsbury, he passed on to St. John's College, Cambridge, it was an accepted conclusion in the family that, like his parent and grandparent, he should turn to the Church as his future calling. With family and other influence his prospects were deemed quite favourable.

Meanwhile, in Cambridge, Samuel had begun an independent inquiry of his own concerning the basis of the Christian faith. Troubled in spirit, he prepared for ordination by working in a poor London parish, when, coming across an unbaptized boy, he confessed that until he had been informed of the circumstance he had been

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unable to mark any difference between the unbaptized urchin and the others. This, in addition to further doubts arising from disparity of evidence in the Four Gospels, decided his future activity. Greatly to his father's displeasure, he refused ordination.

Issue was now fully joined between father and son. He returned to Cambridge, where he received tart letters from his father threatening disinheritance. (Waving the will ! as Butler put it.) The Church or the Law ! announced Canon Butler decisively. Samuel, who had decided against either, cut the painter in his own fashion. Luckily he was not without means, having a reversion on certain properties worth £7,000. He suggested that he use a portion of this to set up sheep-farming in New Zealand, and at last his father consented. He sailed in 1859, and remained abroad for about five years.

It is no part of our purpose to relate in detail the rest of Butler's career. He wrote *Erewhon*, which was published in 1872. All that need be said is that from the New Zealand years onward Butler saw as little as possible of his father. Then, after the publication of *Erewhon*, the severance became complete.

Butler's side of the story is to be found in *The Way of All Flesh*. It is told by Overton, Ernest's godfather, who represents the mature Samuel looking back. Here is a passage in which he pillories the cash-nexus :

" Yet when a man is very fond of his money it is not easy for him at all times to be very fond of his children also. . . . His money was never naughty ; his money never made noise or litter, and did not spill things on the tablecloth at meal times, or leave the door open when it went out. His dividends did not

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quarrel among themselves, nor was he under any uneasiness lest his mortgages should become extravagant on reaching manhood and run him up debts which sooner or later he would have to pay. There were tendencies in John which made him very uneasy, and Theobald, his second son, was idle and at times far from truthful. His children might, perhaps, have answered, had they known what was in their father's mind, that he did not knock his money about as he not infrequently knocked his children. He never dealt harshly or pettishly with his money, and that was perhaps why he and it got on so well together."

The early stages of the story follow closely the lines of Butler's early training. "Before he could well speak he was taught to lisp the Lord's Prayer, and the General Confession." If his attention flagged he was whipped or shut up in a cupboard, or docked of some of the small pleasures of childhood. Lessons and whippings, fear and shrinking at every appearance of his father! His mother (already subordinate) remained merely the faithful echo of her husband. Ernest—at school and at Cambridge, in the East End curacy, and at last, after a stupid misunderstanding, in prison—we observe mainly as these happenings affect his relation with the Pontifex family. Finally he repudiates all connection with his father and, after a misalliance with a former servant girl of the rectory, settles down to a bachelor's life and to such artistic interests as may be cultivated with an economic security of an unsuspected legacy of £70,000.

The final word is spoken by Overton :

"Mr. Pontifex is the exact likeness of Othello, but with a difference—he hates not wisely but too well.

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He would dislike the literary and scientific swells if he were to come to know them and they him ; there is no natural solidarity between him and them, and if he were brought into contact with them his last state would be worse than his first. His instinct tells him this, so he keeps clear of them and attacks them whenever he thinks they deserve it—in the hope, perhaps, that a younger generation will listen to him more willingly than the present.”

The younger generation did listen. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, Butler was recognized as one of the main formative influences of the time, an influence fortified by the publication of his *Notebooks* in 1912. He represented the voice of reason in revolt. He was *the* personal witness against Victorian stuffiness and domesticity. For every one who showed acquaintance with Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*, a hundred were familiar with *The Way of All Flesh*. The family diminished, and with it the bonds of family discipline. Butler was the justification. Diffident fathers were harried into submission with the terrible warning of Theobald Pontifex. The children had eaten sour grapes, and set their parents' teeth on edge. Every episode in Butler's novel became a cudgel with which to belabour upstart parental authority. The naked truth had triumphed at last, and Butler's lengthy patience had been justified.

We would not attempt to minimize here the effect of Canon Butler's severity upon a mind so stubborn and sensitive as that of his much more famous son. The revolt had been justified, and the freedom dearly won. (It was a revolt, by the way, that continued throughout

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the whole course of Butler's life, the generation being substituted for the figure of his father.) But before this conception can be accepted as the inevitable conclusion of the Butler relationship, another and no less important word must be spoken. It is not merely that Samuel Butler was a naturally cantankerous individual, and that he would have created a stir in almost any order of society; but that also there may be some word of justification from the other side in this controversy. The pale ghost of the Canon is walking, and even the foulest of criminals may be permitted a word in his own defence ! What is that word ?

The Canon's advocate proved to be Mrs. R. S. Garnett, and the story she had to tell, in *Samuel Butler and His Family Relations*, stood in disconcerting relation to Samuel's own narrative in *The Way of All Flesh*. "The sadness of the whole thing," she declared, "is that the real Theobald, Canon Butler, was not detestable at all." Nor were the novelist's sisters odious. It seemed that they were pleasant, kindly, witty, humorous people ! In a general sense Canon Butler was beloved by all who had anything to do with him. His grandchildren announced that on the early death of their own father he became a "second father" to them, and they all loved (adds Mrs. Garnett) staying with him at Langham Rectory. The Canon held his wife in deep affection, and from the evidence that Mrs. Garnett advances in her book, there is little of the sluggish Theobald in his character.

What, then, was the root cause of the hostile attitude displayed by Butler towards his relations ? As I have already mentioned, Butler was a man of extreme sensibility, embittered greatly by the blundering of his

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father over the question of a career. In addition he lacked moral robustness. His attack was always side-long. He shrank from an open quarrel with his family. (He was writing to them in friendly terms during the creation of *The Way of All Flesh*.) In addition he was fundamentally incapable of realizing any point of view other than his own.

He was a veritable imp, a kind of Mephistopheles in the house. Those who imagine a milk-and-water innocent in the Butler Rectory are gravely in error. There is the well-known incident when, kneeling beside his sister at prayers, he repeats the responses in a studiously flippant fashion. Later, on visiting his sisters, they worked themselves up into such a nervous exhaustion before his arrival, for fear of what he would say or do, that afterwards May would retire to bed, worn out in trying to shield Harriet from his shafts. One wonders if at a later stage the Canon was not, on the balance, more bewildered and frightened than angry by the flow of his son's sarcasms. The tragedy was an equal rigidity of attitude both in the father and in the son. And the readers of *The Way of All Flesh* should take warning that if the overbearing authority of the father would seem to have disrupted all normal relationship, that the way of Samuel also may very well indicate a corresponding pitfall—the pitfall of a sterile mockery and an unadaptable reason.

More than ever it would appear of paramount importance that the Plain Man should become acquainted with the personality behind the book; the tendency being to associate *the whole* of what one reads in the autobiographical novel with the personal life of the author. If it be contended that "the story is the

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thing," then there is no need to question further ; but we are not here discussing a story as a story, but a story as a piece of autobiography. If the novel in question be termed " autobiographical," then it becomes of student interest to discover how much of it is really so.

CHAPTER VI

THE SEX MOTIF

SOONER or later we arrive at the individual relationship of men and women in fiction—"love" of the Victorian novelist, "romance" in terms of Hollywood jargon, "sex" as the psychologists see it, the "personal equation" of the highbrow critic. However (as the Yorkshireman remarked) it is all polony whichever way you may happen to cut it! Sometimes there is an attempt to rationalize its insidious and explosive courses, to talk it into reason, so to speak; but up to the present moment the attempt has not been very successful. One need only turn for evidence to the activities of the post-war generation, which, after having been thoroughly primed by Freud and his disciples, proclaimed to all the world and sundry that sex had been allocated to its proper place, and that, secure from its diversion, the work of the world could continue. The net result of this attitude was that young people proceeded to pay about twice as much attention to the subject as those of any other generation. In a whirlwind of theorizing, experimentation, chattering, and bickering, they collapsed at length in a state of nervous prostration across the immolated altar. Now that the clatter has somewhat receded, it may be remarked in general that from Arden to Cosmopolis men and women are pretty much what they always

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were. Hey-ding-a-ding-ding still quivers in the consciousness of the happy lover, and mourning s^hows are spread before the dolorous eyes of the rejected one. Starlight or neon light, sweet lovers love the spring. In fiction our main interest is to disentangle the prevailing fashion from the fundamental human experience.

In a sense (as Mr. Norman Collins has so aptly pointed out) the first psychological novelist was Richardson. We find in *Pamela* the prototype of virtuous maiden and aggressive male, and the last-minute-rescue situation that brought down the ire of Jacob Tompion upon this order of novel. For the maiden in question must contrive to preserve her virtue from dangerous (though not excessively dangerous) assault. The gentleman, raffish enough in all question, will be one of those who will contrive to recognize his errors while still in the "bloom of youth." Before this happens, however, Pamela, the handsome housemaid, must be pressed to the point of desperation :

"Good sirs ! good sirs ! What is to become of me ? Here is my master come in his fine chariot : Indeed he is ! What shall I do ? Where shall I hide myself ? O ! what shall I do ? Pray for me ! But O ! you will not see this ! Now, good God of Heaven, preserve me ! if it is thy blessed will !"

The poor girl can hardly write. She cannot hold her pen. The lines upon the paper are crooked and trembling. Her knees are as water ; but she is as safe as houses. She will contrive to keep the young libertine at arm's length for a matter of over four hundred pages, and succumb only as he consents to marriage.

Richardson's purpose presumably was a moral one,

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for he was interested mainly in emphasizing the horror and degradation of loose conduct. As the century passed to its close the pursuit though no less arduous became a good deal more civilized. In tone and temper the pages of Jane Austen are generations removed from those of Richardson and Fielding. Mutual attraction seems to operate as usual ; but with what good humour and appropriate restraint, until the novelist's high point is to contrive the most ingenious of proposals. Gone is the "stand and deliver," the sheer manhandling, of the eighteenth century ; it is now all cypher, anagram, or expressive silence. After the proposal (if not before) mamma must first be consulted ; but it is father who has the final word.

The interest, then, of the Victorian novel lay, first in secret and highly sentimental affirmation of affection, and next in securing parental consent. Therein lay the greater part of the drama. (The high light of quite a number of well-known Victorian novels is a *deathbed* consent on the part of one of the parents.) There are other complications, of course—rivalry, jealousy, unwonted poverty ; but these are subsidiary to the principal theme of "I don't know what your father will say !"

Proposals were extraordinarily long-winded. It was felt, one supposes, that the business of linking up in marriage for a lifetime was much too serious a matter for a mere laconic question and answer. In Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe*, Guy Morville proposes marriage to Amy Edmondstone :

"You ought to be told why your words and looks have such an effect on me as to make me behave as I

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did last night. Shame on me for such conduct ! I know its evil, and how preposterous it must make what I have to tell you. I don't know how long it has been, but almost ever since I came here, a feeling has been growing up in me towards you, such as I can never have for any one else. . . . If ever there is to be happiness for me on earth it must be through you. . . .”

And so on.

“ Could you ever love me, you peerless, sweetest, loveliest . . . ? ” cries Cecil Brownlow to Esther in Mrs. Yonge's *magnum bonum* ; but that was a fairly straightforward supplication compared with Mr. Carleton's appeal to Fleda Ringgan, in Elizabeth Wetherell's *Queechy*. He combined his proposal with the acceptance of a Bible. Placing the copy in Fleda's hand, he began :

“ ‘ It has been for many years my best friend and companion,’ he said in a low tone. Fleda could make no answer, even by look.

“ ‘ At first,’ he went on softly, ‘ I had a strong association of you with it ; but the time came when I lost that entirely, and itself quite swallowed up the thought of the giver.’ A quick glance and smile told how well Fleda understood, how heartily she was pleased with that. But she instantly looked away again.

“ ‘ And now,’ said Mr. Carleton, after a pause, ‘ for some time past, I have got the association again ; and I do not choose to have it so. I have come to the resolution to put the book back into your hands, and

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not to receive it again, unless the giver go with the gift.'

"Fleda looked up, with a startled look of wonder into his face. . . ."

But this ingenious contrivance, again, was as nothing compared with the stark and terrible drama of a couple of parents confronted with the *fait accompli*. Father, oppressive and cold at the head of the table ; mamma, pale and weeping at the foot.

"'Papa!' [cries Laura Edmondstone to her mother, on revealing her liaison with her cousin Philip] 'Oh, you must not tell him ! Now, I have betrayed him indeed ! Oh, my weakness !' and another paroxysm of tears came on.

"'Laura, you seem to think you owe nothing to any one but Philip. You forget you are a daughter ! that you have been keeping up a system of disobedience and concealment, of which I could not have believed a child of mine capable. O Laura, how you have abused our confidence !' "

"'You forget you are a daughter !'" As though it were in the least possible, and as if the greater part of Victorian convention was not bent every hour of every day in reminding some hapless girl of a circumstance that she could never forget !

Parental authority, then, loomed largely in the sex-relationships of the Victorians, and in the main it was triumphantly vindicated. At times it was called upon to suffer an ill-merited defeat ; but only when directed in conflict with unacceptable persons—inveterate drunkards,

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or gamblers, or atheists, or members of the Unitarian movement. Large families, too, brought in an element of competition unknown in a world of reduced birth-rate. It was fully accepted that a girl's mission in life was to "get off" with a husband, and that her entire education should be directed with this end in mind.

As the century drew to a close new voices were calling men to judgment in terms of evolutionary theory and the development of the democratic idea. The novel, too, displayed its own element of change. Proposals of marriage were briefer and much less formal. The balance of criticism became heavily weighted against the parent. The gentle art of "Putting Father in His Place" became the mainstay of the rising novelist, and ancient standards were challenged in the light of self-expression—self-expression being the exclusive prerogative of all young persons between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, the others presumably having nothing to express. It was the hour of youth and freedom, of *The Woman Who Did* and *Anne Veronica*.

One turns inevitably to H. G. Wells, for in his work the ferment arose to popular height. From the *New Machiavelli* to the *Research Magnificent* his characters are tortured and bewildered creatures caught up (as he tells us in *The Passionate Friends*) "in the net of animal jealousies and thoughtless motives and ancient rigid institutions." By the end of the first decade of the new century, we note, the bugbear of father has completely disappeared. There is no parental restraint in *Tono-Bungay*. No frowning parent blocks the avenue through which Stephen Hatton and Lady Mary Justin seek to enter. The ogre this time has become the "servitude

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of sex " and the limitation that this imposes upon those who would work together for a more enlightened system of society. Sex is one of the "essential riddles" of adaptation to the greater civilized order.

The problem, as Wells poses it in *The Passionate Friends*, is of an unfortunate love affair between the relatively impoverished Stephen Hatton and the patrician Lady Mary Christian. They are fully in love with each other, but she refuses to marry him because he cannot offer her the surroundings to which she has been accustomed. With Stephen there will be poverty, back streets, and lack of sunshine. With Justin (the man she proposes to marry) there will be "space, air, dignity, endless servants." These also, she claims, will ensure the freedom that she seeks, for Justin has forsworn conjugal intimacy. No clutching and gripping and carrying off! An independent personality.

Naturally Stephen voices his resentment; but the marriage to Justin takes place, and the subsequent action of the story is one in which from time to time the uneasy relationship between Stephen and Mary bursts into open flame. At length Stephen marries too, his bond with Mary still finding intermittent renewal. Finally Lady Mary dies, torn to pieces in the struggle between husband and lover, and the two males (so to speak) make a contrite gesture over her body.

The implication of *The Passionate Friends* is a deep-seated one. Stephen reproaches himself with his own frenzy for possession. "I did not want her to be happy as I want you to be happy even at the price of my life; I wanted her. I wanted her as barbarians want a hunted enemy, alive or dead. It was a flaming jealousy to have her mine. That granted, then I was prepared for all

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devotions." Pondering the problem, he continues : " . . . the deepest question before humanity is just how far this jealous greed may be subdued to a more generous passion." Later, he amplifies the deeper social implication of the thesis. "There are no universal laws of affection and desire, but it is manifestly true that for most of us free talk, intimate association, and any real fellowship between men and women turns with an extreme readiness to love. And that being so, it follows that under existing conditions the unrestricted meeting and companionship of men and women in society is a monstrous sham, a merely dangerous pretence of encounters. The safe reality between these Liberal appearances is that a woman must be content with the easy friendship of other women and of one man only, letting a superficial friendship towards all other men veil impassable abysses of separation, and a man must in the same way have one sole woman intimate. To all other women he must be a little blind, a little deaf, politely inattentive. He must respect the transparent, intangible, tacit purdah about them, respect it but never allude to it. To me this is an intolerable state of affairs, but it is reality. If you live in the spirit of any other understanding you will court social disaster."

The question as Wells poses it, is indeed a question of some importance ; but whether his conclusions are to be accepted or not is a very different matter. Wells is always eager, inquiring, invigorating, but his weakness lies in what he would probably conceive the seat of his utmost strength, displayed most pathetically with such typical sentences as "Humanity has yet to find its method in sexual things."

Reverting to the theme of *The Passionate Friends*, the

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Plain Man may very well inquire why society in general should 'be indicted for Mary Christian's deliberate maladjustment of her position at the beginning of the story. He will feel that the heading of the essential chapter in question should be transposed from "The Marriage of the Lady Mary Christian" to simply one of "You Can't Have Your Cake and Eat It!" Nor will he accept too easily the suggestion that Lady Mary's irrevocable decision should be camouflaged by the convenient term of "blunder," for there can be little doubt that she had arrived at her decision only after the usual Wellsian meditation. "I want a great house, I want a great position, I want space and freedom," etc., etc. Well, it was pretty obvious that she could not have all these, and at the same time have Stephen Hatton. The result was that she ruined her own life and that of her lover also. Mr. Wells suggests that the "tyranny of sex" is the responsible element. The Plain Man will want to know where the moral responsibility of Lady Mary's judgment comes in.

It is pretty certain that the Plain Man will continue to scratch his head dubiously in considering the recurring phrase, "the tyranny of sex." What is Mr. Wells driving at when he suggests through his characters that a man's unrestricted meeting and companionship with the opposite sex should be increased by one, by two, by three? Is it a semi-intellectual harem that he is after? And does not such a suggestion demand a good deal more than human nature can sustain? The trouble with the Wellsians, the Plain Man may continue, is that in becoming socially minded they tend to lose individual proportion. They are "friends" of the proletariat, or of the Russian "masses," or of the Chinese millions.

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They are familiar with all the twists and turns of "social" philosophy, but they don't know how to keep a wife, and in any case haven't the gumption to realize that, in an intimate sense, a man cannot possess a large number of friends, female or otherwise. The reservoir of affection isn't deep enough for the measure of Mr. Wells's enterprise.

The Plain Man may further inquire why it is that such intellectually active people as one finds in the pages of Mr. Wells's novels should with such frequency land themselves into tragic misalliance?—George Ponderevo in *Tono-Bungay*; Remington in the *New Machiavelli*. Perhaps it is (he concludes) that they talk too much. Just that! Oh, how they talk and talk and talk! These chatterboxes of experiment! How the impressions multiply—always "fragmentary," be it noted. How the "gropings" and the "stumbings" continue, until at last the climax for which we are waiting arrives: "I must take you away with me. There is nothing for us but to go away together." But it only indicates that the chatterboxes are removing themselves from one point of the universe to another. After a time the Plain Man tends to become rather weary of it all, and arrives at the conclusion that it is not so much "method" and "world outlook" that the Wellsian character seems to need as a little common sense in the art of courtship.

The frills and flounces of romantic love having been discarded, "sex" conversation continued. Sex was a condition to be analysed, and subjected to the utmost scrutiny, "method" still the prevailing term. Sex should be treated objectively, scientifically (after all it was only part of a biological "process"), should be insulated for convenience, flicked on and shut off like

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gas or electricity. The paternal ogre had disappeared, and the ogre of society with it. What remained was only "to put sex in its place" and all would be well. Ah, the inestimable convenience of "putting sex in its place."

With such a development it might have been assumed that sex and its problems would give way to much more important matters. On the contrary, England entered into a further period of sex-obsession, but with a different twist. Mr. Ivor Brown has well put the situation in his *I Commit to the Flames*, a study of contemporary literature.

"The young readers of to-day are the children of the Wellsians and the Shavians, and it is the nature—and possibly the duty—of the young to loathe and despise the favourite author of their parents. After all, even if an author does call a tart a tart, even if he employs the adjective bloody in every paragraph, that does not make him readable for ever, and the young began to grow weary of realism about prostitutes, of adventures of erotic scientists who always took somebody's wife to Greenland in order to work it off and talk it over. . . . You cannot walk down Sinister Street for ever; the place becomes as boring as the Cromwell Road. So, after the War, there was a public ready for a break with realism, even for romanticism, provided it was not of the rosy Victorian type."

The time was propitious, then, for the entry of novelist David Herbert Lawrence, with the slogan of "You may turn out nature with a pitchfork, but she will always return." Hitherto, sex had been a thing

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that existed in the head, now, according to D. H. Lawrence, it must be set in its proper relation to the instincts, the "dark consciousness" seated in the blood. A truce to discussion! A new "mindlessness" was to take its place, a reversion to the primitives, and so forth.

For the purpose of this crusade it would seem that the new prophet's origins were of unusual significance. The son of a Nottinghamshire collier, Lawrence had grown to manhood in a mining village. Primitive labour and living! The grit of coal-dust, and the brutish manual strain of coal-getting! Life in the raw! Bathing on the hearth-rug, and boozing in the pub! (At any rate, so it seemed to the thousands of excited young readers in first turning to *Sons and Lovers*). Actually, the tone of the Lawrence household had been set, not by his blustering hairy father, but by the refined lower middle-class mother, a situation unremarked for the moment. What mattered was that a child of this primitive environment had emerged with a philosophy well-suited to the development of the age.

There is no space within these pages to deal in detail with the course of Lawrence's fiction from the *White Peacock* to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Naturally, he disowned civilization, spurning in turn Capitalist and Proletarian. He rejected the working class for being "narrow in outlook, in prejudice, and narrow in intelligence." The middle class, "broad, and shallow, and passionless," were equally unsatisfactory. Compromise of the Wells-Barrie order was impossible for him. Wells, he proclaimed, the hopeless "suburbanite," who ought to be shot down without mercy in the name of youth, courage, fresh air, and the gods of phallic consciousness. "Myself," he declares in one letter, "I am sick of the farce

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of cosmic unity, or world unison. It may exist in the abstract—but not elsewhere. And we may all find some abstract ground to agree on. But as soon as it comes to experience, to passion, to desire, to feeling, we are different. The spirit of place ultimately always triumphs.” As far as one may gather from his writings, sex was not being worshipped in contemporary England as it should be worshipped. Christ had foisted upon humanity an unnatural division of body and spirit, and such a division should be eliminated by the new sex-consciousness.

This idea fully occupied D. H. Lawrence’s mind, and drove him in restless pilgrimage from one quarter of the world to another. “The spirit of place,” he had said, “ultimately triumphs,” and so, failing to find in war-time England the spirit for which he had been looking, he ventured abroad until his books became a succession of sex-travelogues roughly united by the philosophy (if so it may be called) that he had embraced.

In England, Lawrence had concentrated upon miners, farmers, and a fringe of middle-class intellectuals. Now, he was prompted to a field much larger than that offered by Europe. He must needs pass on to Asia, from Asia to Australia, still in pursuit of a spirit that he could identify with the mindless urge of the bloodstream. In *Kangaroo* he relates how he tested the young democracy of Australia—only to find it wanting. From Australia he turned to New Mexico, and in a succession of stories and sketches, *The Plumed Serpent*, etc., announced affinity with the Indians of that region. There were narratives of blood sacrifice, Hopi snake dances and the like, and in the end such a surfeit of mumbo-jumbo that Lawrence himself grew thoroughly tired.

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When he had worked out his blood affinity with the Indian—"face lifted and sightless, eyes half closed and visionless, mouth open and speechless," and tum-tum and tom-tom began to be a bore—he decided that the place in which to live and work was not the scene of a decayed civilization, but decadent old Europe after all. "One must live in a place that is being lived in."

The belly (be it added) he still regarded as much mightier than the brain, and from this point onwards his voice arose more strident, more feverish. Opposition drove him to courses still more extreme. The stark relation of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* emerged, and a succession of smaller but no less representative stories. At last he died, consistent to his sex-tortured end.

Sex-obsession is the keynote of Lawrence's work. In the course of it he displayed a capacity to communicate physical sensations unequalled among his contemporaries.

Here is a late spring woodland from *The White Peacock* :

"The wood was high and warm. Along the ridings the forget-me-nots were knee-deep, stretching, glimmering into the distance like the Milky Way through the night. They left the tall, flower-tangled paths to go in among the bluebells, breaking through the close-packed flowers and ferns till they came to an oak which had fallen across the hazels, where they sat, half-screened. The hyacinths drooped magnificently with an overweight of purple, or they stood pale and erect, like unripe ears of purple corn. Heavy bees swung down in a blunder of extravagance among the purple flowers. They were intoxicated even with the sight of so much blue. The sound of their hearty, wanton

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humming came clear upon the solemn boom of the wind overhead. The sight of their clinging clambering riot gave satisfaction to the soul. A rosy campion flower caught the sun and shone out. An elm sent down a shower of flesh-tinted sheaths upon them."

Or Gerald Critch, in the presence of Ursula and Gudrun, compelling his red Arab mare to confront a railway train at a crossing :

" 'The fool ! ' cried Ursula loudly. ' Why doesn't he ride away till it's gone by ? ' "

" Gudrun was looking at him with black-dilated, spellbound eyes. But he sat glistening and obstinate, forcing the wheeling mare, which spun and swerved like a wind, and yet could not get out of the grasp of his will, nor escape from the mad clamour of terror that resounded through her, as the trucks thumped slowly, heavily, horrifying, one after the other, one pursuing the other over the rails of the crossing.

" The locomotive, as if wanting to see what could be done, put on the brakes, and back came the trucks rebounding on the iron buffers, striking like horrible cymbals, clashing nearer and nearer in frightful strident concussions. The mare opened her mouth and rose slowly, as if lifted up on a wind of terror. Then suddenly her fore-feet struck out, as she convulsed herself utterly away from the horror. Back she went, and the two girls clung to each other, feeling that she must fall backwards on top of him. But he leaned forward, his face shining with fixed amusement, and at last he brought her down, sank her down, and was bearing her back to the mark.

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But as strong as the pressure of his compulsion was the repulsion of her utter terror, throwing her back away from the railway, so that she spun round and round, on two legs, as if she were in the centre of some whirlwind. It made Gudrun faint with poignant dizziness, which seemed to penetrate her heart."

While capable of writing prose as sensitive and penetrating as the foregoing, Lawrence was at the same time responsible for a good deal of facile drivel, not only about his familiar belly-cult, but about the ordinary relationships of men and women. With the Victorian novelist we smile pityingly at the timorous approach to Father ; but that at least was a position capable of being generally understood. What can one make, however, of the cryptic conversation to be found in a very great number of Lawrence's pages ? The wordy squabbings, and the unutterable disgust with all human intercourse :

" ' I would die like a shot ' [says Birkin to Ursula, in *Women in Love*] ' to know that the earth would really be cleaned of all the people. It is the most beautiful and freeing thought. Then there would *never* be another foul humanity created, for a universal defilement.'

" ' No,' said Ursula, ' there would be nothing.'

" ' What ! Nothing ? Just because humanity was wiped out ? You flatter yourself. There'd be everything.'

" ' But how, if there were no people ? '

" ' Do you think that creation depends on *man* ! It merely doesn't. There are the trees and the grass and the birds. I much prefer to think of the lark

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rising up in the morning upon a humanless world. Man is a mistake, he must go. There is the grass, and hares and adders, and the unseen hosts, actual angels that go about freely when a dirty humanity doesn't interrupt them—and good pure-tissued demons : very nice.' ”

It is the kind of conversation that leads nowhere.

Throughout the writings, then, of D. H. Lawrence there runs the recurring sex conflict of men and women, accompanied by an amazing variety of symbol and circumstance. Intellectuals tussle with the wives of colliers, Italian peasants with simple Nottinghamshire maidens, gamekeepers with aristocratic mistresses, western ladies with Mexican caballeros ; and even (for Lawrence could not deny himself the ultimate fling) a resurrected Christ with a woman of Isis in the temple of her religion.

The symbols of sex were inescapable. With Lawrence everything fell into division, male and female, suns and moons, trees and flowers, birds and animals. Particularly animals. Lawrence has a story of a dog-fox that shadows a woman in an isolated homestead.

It seemed, as time went on, that his contempt for the world increased to such proportion that he lost an effective grip upon intelligence itself. Perhaps such a development was inevitable. One cannot continue to abjure the reason, deride it, belabour it, treat it with every possible contempt, and remain somehow an eminently reasonable being. Since he had dismissed the brain for the belly-worship of his creed, the vision of a peaceful and rational society could have no attraction for him.

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He was an enemy of the mind ; and though somehow he might have repudiated this as shrilly as he repudiated all accepted standards, he remained a mouthpiece of reaction in contemporary letters. The " mindless, eyeless, hysterical mass-consciousness " with which his work is identified has become the bane of Modern Europe.

CHAPTER VII

THE SEA AND FICTION

IT is a truism to announce that every significant writer responds largely to the spirit of place. Examples lie too thickly assembled to establish the contrary. *Wuthering Heights* would not be shaped in the way with which we are familiar had Emily Brontë spent her youthful years in the milder and more enervating atmosphere of southern England. The very spirit of the Mississippi is caught up in *Huckleberry Finn*, and the wild mountains of the Caucasus in *The Cossacks*. It would be interesting to follow this connection in terms of literary style. Has the form of Doughty, for example, nothing to do with the austere discipline of the Arabian Desert? Or that of Henry Thoreau with that of the fruitful wilderness in which he elected to live?

There is, we may take it, a singularly intimate relation of land and ocean with those who work upon and earn a living thereby. And by living with the land we would indicate not only the business capacity to organize a farm holding (displayed to a certain advantage by Mr. A. G. Street), but an ability to enter into nature's infinite variety of mood and circumstance—the possession of distinguished English writers like Thomas Hardy and Richard Jefferies, and of which their works alone are sufficient credential.

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As for the sea in literature, almost all the nautical writers of consequence have at some time or another been mariners in practice, although the greater part of such work has been written in retirement. Both Marryat and Conrad became creative on shipboard. *Frank Mildmay* was begun while Marryat was cruising in the Western Isles. Every one remembers the origin of *Almayer's Folly*.

The amazing feature of our seafaring literature is that it has remained so limited in quantity. Consider for a moment the maritime activity of modern England. Within the last three hundred years the seven seas have been charted, in great proportion, by British seamen in British bottoms. Bar Cook and Anson, what have we left on record? For generations the great East Indiamen put out from London Docks on the three-monthly voyage to Asia. There is no literature of East Indian activity. For twenty years we fought Napoleon by sea as well as by land, and in the end it was the British Navy that triumphed. Beyond a slender novel entitled *The Post Captain*, by J. Davis, Captain Marryat alone remains to tell the story. Men passed from midshipmen to admirals in the course of that tremendous struggle, but the literary yield has been negligible. Why? In a general sense it is difficult to decide, but one explanation may be directed partly to the arduous nature of the seaman's occupation—the successive watches, and the continual demand that a self-contained community always makes upon its members; and partly to the consciousness of official interference from above. All fiction is implicit criticism of something, and in the navy of Nelson's day (as indeed in that of a later generation) the innovator found little mercy and scant justice.

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One has merely to consider some of the slender diaries that have come down to us, and to couple with these a minute study of the life and career of Captain Thomas Cochrane, later tenth Earl of Dundonald, to understand the force of official displeasure against the slightest sign of originality.

Be that as it may, it is proper that we should turn not to the work of Joseph Conrad and Herman Melville, but first of all to the outstanding accomplishment of Captain Marryat. We do this, not because he was a greater writer than Conrad (he never approached anything like Conrad's flexibility of style), or a greater philosopher than Melville (Marryat had very little philosophy at all), but because, above everything else, he was a representative British seaman. It makes little difference in the long run that his life should have been passed in sail. Marryat's career alone, as one considers it in detail, would serve as an excellent substitute for fiction. A boy of strong passions (excess of which, by the way, never left him), he ran away from every school in which he had been placed, to sea—always to the sea. At last, since it seemed that there was nothing more to be done about it, on September 3, 1806, at the age of fourteen, he was appointed midshipman to the frigate *Imperieuse*.

Two factors predominated in this appointment to the navy. The first was that this boy of tender years was precipitated (launched would perhaps remain the more appropriate word) into immediate warfare; and the second, that his captain proved to be the redoubtable Captain Lord Cochrane, the hardiest adventurer of the whole navy, termed by Napoleon (who had a pretty taste in such matters) "the wolf" of the English fleet.

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Cochrane was the T. E. Lawrence of his generation, and his exploits resounded from one end of the country to the other. His great feat had been the capture in the sloop *Speedy* of the Spanish frigate *El Gamo*, carrying a crew of over three hundred men. He was a phenomenal prize-taker. In 1805 he sailed into Portsmouth harbour with three golden candlesticks fastened at the mast heads, and prize accounts to the value of £64,000. Later (on the strength of this, and a certain democratic conviction) Cochrane decided to stand as Radical candidate for Honiton.

Such was the commander under whom Marryat began to grow into manhood. In the course of the next few years this midshipman was to be the witness of no less than fifty engagements, and to take part in a great number of them. In 1808, when he was sixteen, part of his private log ran :

- July 24th.—Taking guns from batteries.
- „ 25th.—Burning bridges and dismantling batteries to impede the French.
- August 1st.—Taking brass guns from the batteries.
- „ 15th.—Took a French dispatch boat off Cette.
- „ 18th.—Took and destroyed a signal post.
- „ 19th.—Blew up a signal post.

In the course of 1808 he received three wounds, one from a bayonet in the stomach ; and in the course of that year and the subsequent one was recommended in dispatches by his captain.

There is, of course, much more to Marryat's life than this (he saw the dead Napoleon, for example) ; but sufficient has been indicated to prove that if any man

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ought to know anything about the navy of the early nineteenth century, then that man was Frederick Marryat.

He began writing at the age of thirty-six, and thereafter until his death poured out a steady stream of novels, the majority dealing with life in the navy as he had known it, the most famous being *Peter Simple*, *Midshipman Easy*, and *Masterman Ready*.

What does one find in Marryat? Perhaps it would be easier at the outset to state what one does not find. In conspicuous measure he lacked, for example, the art of creating atmosphere. His was the primitive storyteller's attitude, that of a shipmate yarning with hearty ease in the shadow of the capstan. He took it quite for granted in his readers that they understood a dirty night to represent a fury of wind and sea and rain. No need to indicate the nervous reaction to such an onset, how the breakers reared and toppled and crashed into the darkness, or how the spray slashed salt upon the tongue. A pattern of foam was much too minute for his imagining. The utmost that he conceded to this sort of description was a kind of strong and emphatic narrative, excellent of its kind and at its best in Chapter XV. of *Peter Simple*, where he describes the captain's superb handling of the *Diomedé* on a lee shore. The truth of the matter was that he had lived much too thoroughly in the school of action to remain objective in contemplation. There is something of this attitude in the description of an impending engagement in *Midshipman Easy* :

“The reverberation of the heavy cannon on both sides over the placid surface of the water—the white smoke ascending as the sun rose in brilliancy in a clear

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blue sky—the distant echoes repeated from the high hills—had a very beautiful effect for those who are partial for the picturesque. But Jack thought it advisable to prepare for action instead of watching for tints. . . .”

Then, again, his stories are comparatively shapeless, depending for rounding off and surprise upon coincidence and calamity. He is impelled throughout by a roving commission, his *only* destination apparently being the port from which he started. His characterization is distinguished by little subtlety, and his women (with the exception of the bumboat fraternity) are as lifeless as those of Scott. A significant body of negation.

But on the positive side, how formidable ! Shapeless though his books may seem, they are definitely *alive*, with all the happy-go-lucky adventuring of the sailor. He draws to the full upon his teeming experience, and while there is a certain duplication of incident in his stories, the narrative seldom palls even in subsidiary action.

There are no predominating characters that make one remember Marryat as one remembers Dickens or Shakespeare. We take the crew in rotation, and the characters are subordinate to the whole ; but there are a number that stand very sharply in the mind, the inimitable Chucks, for example, of the *Diomedé* :

“ He had a very handsome person, inclined to be stout, keen eyes, and hair curling in ringlets. He held his head up and strutted as he walked. He declared, ‘ That an officer should look like an officer, and *comport* himself accordingly.’ In his person he was very clean, wore rings on his great fingers, and a large

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frill to his bosom, which stuck out like the back fin of a perch, and the collar of his shirt was always pulled up to the level of his cheek-bones. . . . He attempted to be very polite even when addressing the common seamen, and, certainly, he always commenced his observations to them in a very gracious manner, but, as he continued, he became less choice in his phraseology. O'Brien said that his speeches were like the sin of the poet, very fair at the upper part of them, but shocking at the lower extremities. As a specimen of them, he would say to the man on the fore-castle, 'Allow me to observe, my dear man, in the most delicate way in the world, that you are spilling that tar upon the deck—a deck, sir, if I may venture to make the observation, I had the duty of seeing holystoned this morning. You understand me, sir, you have defiled his Majesty's fore-castle. I must do my duty, sir, if you neglect yours; so take that—and that—and that—(thrashing the man with his rattan)—you d——n hay-making son of a sea-cook. Do it again, d——n your eyes, and I'll cut your liver out.'"

The secret of Marryat's appeal to the general reader is, roughly, his generous and liberal outlook. He hated all cowardice and cruelty. Every element of deceit or chicanery he denounced with unabated fervour. At a time when the press gang was still the recognized medium of naval recruitment, he did not hesitate to denounce its injustice. Naval floggings received little condonation from his pen, and as an opponent of the French soldier and sailor in many a Napoleonic engagement he was chivalrous to a degree. In addition, his work is interfused with rollicking humour that flickers about

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the forecastle and quarter-deck impartially. Above everything else Captain Frederick Marryat, C.B., considered the early nineteenth-century seaman in terms of simple humanity. Composing his own epitaph, one feels the worthy captain would have claimed no higher meed of recognition than that.

It is interesting to turn from Marryat to Conrad, if only in terms of contrast. Both were in sail and both were sea-captains, but there is all the difference of the fighting *Téméraire* and the *Flying Dutchman*, between this sturdy English mariner and his Polish counterpart. Marryat was at home in every portion of the vessel. Conrad was of the quarter-deck, and knew the forecastle only as a matter of duty. Marryat was sensitive to the democratic tradition of the navy; Conrad knew nothing of such democratic feeling, and could not countenance the slightest interference with the captain's prerogative (some of his sharpest criticism is reserved for those "philanthropists and self-seeking land-lubbers" who would interfere with seafaring conditions). Marryat's style is bold, untrammelled, and breezy. Conrad's is feline, elusive, and cold. It would have been impossible for Marryat to have developed his narrative with the involved technique of *Lord Jim*. Marryat's humour bubbled over in every page of his writings. Conrad's humour, when it did appear, remained like winter sunshine on the face of the waters, infrequent and disappointing. The strangest condition of all is that the man who to outward appearance and mental character was the least representative of British seamen was hailed as the greatest maritime writer of them all. What is the explanation? ♣

In the first place, Conrad—in spite of his naturalization

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papers—remained first and foremost a foreigner ; and in the second place, a peculiar kind of foreigner.

He was of Polish origin, with a startling resemblance to the aggressive Owen T. Kettle, the “ tramp ” captain of Cutcliffe Hyne. His name had been Korseniowski, and his grandfather, a Polish insurrectionist of 1831, had lost an estate in the abortive revolution of that year. His father, too, had shared in the extensive underground movement that occupied Poland in its resistance to Russian oppression in the middle of the century. Let it be remembered that Conrad’s earliest recollections were of his mother wearing the habitual black of mourning for Poland’s degradation ; and of people with pale, grave faces slipping in and out of the Korseniowski residence upon their several and secret occasions. As a youth of sixteen, and with such a record of intransigence behind him, he realized that there could be no future in his native country. Denied freedom at home, he resolved to seek his fortunes abroad, and if possible upon the sea. Thus it was that he became an apprentice upon a French coasting vessel, saw a good deal of high adventure, including gun-running to the Carlists in Spain and to the republics of Central America. Impressions of these years will be found in his book of essays, *The Mirror of the Sea*, in the more elaborate fiction of *Nostromo*, and in a number of later novels. In 1878 he came to England, knowing hardly a word of English.

What followed was one of the most extraordinary essays in self-education that literature has to display. In two years he had taken a third mate’s certificate, and in 1885 passed his final examination as a Master Mariner in the mercantile marine. His first command was the barque *Otago*. And then, after a journey into Central

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Africa, he became the chief mate of the *Torrens*, a fast sailing vessel plying between England and Australia. On the *Torrens* he met young John Galsworthy ; but most notably, too, he carried with him the greater part of the manuscript of *Almayer's Folly*. He finished the remaining chapters in a London lodging-house in the early part of 1894, when it was published by Fisher Unwin, and from that time his seafaring life drew to a close and his literary career began.

Conrad turned largely to his own nautical experience. Indeed, one worry of his literary activity was whether this fount of memory would run completely dry. He rather fancied himself as a psychologist ; but while it has been suggested that it was from Victor Hugo that he received his melodrama, and from Henry James his subtlety, there can be little doubt that his own secretive and explosive nature accounts for the type of character that he delighted to portray. He loved to pass a story conspiratorially from mouth to mouth, so to speak ; and he is often most comfortable with an introspective, broody legion of adventurers, and the humours and endurances in which such people are involved. Some of his writings are distinctly autobiographical, as, for example, *Youth*, the account of an ill-fated voyage from London to Bangkok ; and in *Youth*, as in *Typhoon* and *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, we have some of his finest sea-pieces, master studies of the sea in its untrammelled activity. There is no one who can so depict the solitary isolation of a sailing vessel in the unbroken ring of the horizon around :

“ She held on straight for the Red Sea under a serene sky, under a sky scorching and unclouded,

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enveloped in a fulgor of sunshine that killed all thought, oppressed the heart, withered all impulses of strength and energy. And under the sinister splendour of that sky, the sea, blue and profound, remained still, without a stir, without a ripple, without a wrinkle—viscous, stagnant, dead. The *Patna*, with a slight hiss, passed over that plain luminous and smooth, unrolled a black ribbon of smoke across the sky, left behind her on the water a white ribbon of foam that vanished at once, like the phantom of a track drawn upon a lifeless sea by the phantom of a steamer.”¹

Or an aspect of a tramp steamer caught in an eastern hurricane :

“The sea, flattened down in the heavier gusts, would uprise and overwhelm both ends of the *Nan-Shan* in snowy rushes of foam, expanding white, beyond both rails, into the night. And on this dazzling sheet, spread under the blackness of the clouds and emitting a bluish glow, Captain Macwhirr could catch a desolate glimpse of a few tiny specks black as ebony, the tops of the hatches, the battened companions, the heads of the covered winches, the foot of a mast. This was all he could see of his ship. Her middle structure covered by the bridge which bore him, his mate, the closed wheelhouse where a man was steering shut up with the fear of being swept overboard together with the whole thing in one great crash—her middle structure was like a half-tide rock awash upon a coast. It was like outlying rock with the water boiling up, streaming over, pouring off, beating round—like a

¹ *Lord Jim*.

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rock in the surf to which shipwrecked people cling before they let go—only it rose, it sank, it rolled continuously, without respite and rest, like a rock that should have miraculously struck adrift from a coast and gone wallowing upon the sea.”¹

Conrad's finest work is to be discovered in the novels and stories belonging to this period. Here we find the unforgettable picture that he draws at the end of *Youth*, of how for the first time he looked upon the men of the East, and how in *The Heart of Darkness* he sensed the mysterious spirit of place as it struck into the soul of trader Kurtz of the Congo basin.

In *Lord Jim* we are presented with a figure quite impossible for Captain Marryat. A dilemma, the like of Jim's, would have been ruled out of practical consideration by a Napoleonic captain. But, as Conrad himself put it, “the sea itself seems to wear a different and diminished aspect from the sea of Lord Nelson's day,” and so the nervous strain of the mate of the s.s. *Patna*, his perpetual questing and his melancholy division of spirit, may seem a good deal more apposite in this day than that.

Lord Jim is the Midshipman Uneasy of nautical literature. Doomed to wander fatefully from the first page to the last, there is something ghostlike, wraithlike about his personality. We see him always through the eyes of others, through Marlow's eyes, or those who have been in communication with Marlow. He never utters a word that may be termed directly his own. He hovers around like a character from Pirandello, speaking substantially “off,” but with the fainter possibility of

¹ *Typhoon*.

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fantasy. This is beyond any doubt the effect of Conrad's treatment of the story. First it is told by Marlow from direct personal observation, then from the lips of Jim as he relates the story to Marlow. Sometimes it is an impression from a trader who has encountered Jim, again related in its turn to Marlow. Other vistas are gleaned and introduced into the general scheme of the narrative, such as Jim's brief encounter with the second lieutenant of the French flagship in Sydney. But it is always Marlow's voice that we are hearing—the steady unhurried accents of Marlow, to the steady unhurried uncorking of bottles, with its "he-told-me-that-so-and-so-had-told-him" technique. *Lord Jim* is an essay in second-hand yarnning.

But what a yarn ! The action of the story lies within the Orient, first in the inquiry into the abandonment of the ill-fated *Patna*, with a throw-back to the event itself ; and later to the various regions of Java, where Jim, the disgraced second mate of the steamship, is trying to reestablish his own tranquillity of mind in the face of his earlier cowardice.

Jim has a curiously introspective mind. He is perpetually conscious of the fatality with which his life is identified. He remembers early evidences. He remembers an episode in the dusk of a winter's day upon the training ship. A collision takes place. There is a cry of "man the cutter." Jim is late in arriving at his appointed station, so that the rescue is effected without him. Is this the first of many portents ? At last he secures his mate's certificate, and in the course of time signs on with the s.s. *Patna*, a "pilgrim" boat, engaged in conveying the Mohammedan devout to the shrine at Mecca.

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The *Patna*, it appears, is an ancient steamer, a relic of the ocean, with plates like brown paper, and obviously overdue for scrapping. At sea one evening she trembles violently along her whole length, due perhaps to some sort of contact with floating wreckage. Ordered by the captain to make inquiry forward, Jim stumbles into the forepeak half-full of water. The *Patna* has been holed, and suddenly the second mate realizes that only the old and rusty bulkhead stands between the human cargo above, and disaster. He reaches out a tentative hand, and the plating (that brown paper !) bulges inwards upon his fingers. Above, he can hear the steam valves shrieking as pressure is released. The ship is vibrating to the released steam, and in addition the pilgrims have been aroused, swarming about the decks in terror. Soon there will be a panic movement towards the boats.

Jim falters. "He was not afraid of death ; but he was afraid of the emergency," the prospect of disaster, the swarm of pilgrims precipitated into the sea.

He dashes up to the bridge. A squall is approaching, and the ship's nose dips sluggishly, ominously. A struggle goes on around the boats. One reaches the water and a frenzied voice cries "Jump !" In that moment of panic, Jim jumps, and the men push off, on the assumption that the ship is sinking. Ultimately, the boat's crew reaches land, and Jim is saved.

But the *Patna* does not sink. She is salvaged by a French gunboat and towed into Aden, where an inquiry is ordered, and Jim is confronted by a charge of cowardice. Why did he jump ? How far was he to blame ? He leaves the court of inquiry with a suspended certificate, and a profound consciousness of dishonour. The public disapproval is as nothing to the burden of self-accusa-

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tion that he carries around. The thing follows him—becomes inescapable. He realizes that he has entered into a conflict which will call upon his resources to the uttermost. "I am bound to fight this thing down," he announces. "I am fighting it down *now* !"

At this point Marlow makes him a loan, and secures for him a job in a rice mill. Begin anew, let the past be forgotten. But there is a serpent in the grass, for who should turn up in this of all the places in the world but the second engineer of the *Patna*, making the place intolerable with his observations upon the past !

The pilgrim moves on. He next gets a job in Bangkok with a teak merchant, but leaves again in six months' time after having tossed a Dane into the water because of certain aspersions upon his courage. He is now recognized everywhere ; and once again it is Marlow who comes to the rescue by persuading a trader and entomologist, Stein, to take on Jim as a Malayan agent.

And now Malaya swallows Jim. It is a barbaric country, full of danger. He allies himself with the parties in opposition to the local rajah, and becomes very friendly with Dain Waris, the son of the chief. The two, white man and brown, allied in danger, enter into a kind of David and Jonathan partnership. As for Jim, his reputation increases. Legend begins to invest him with supernatural powers. He becomes the virtual ruler of the land. Is it to be Malaya, indeed, where he casts off his fatal irresolution, to find a little peace again ?

He becomes tied up with the step-daughter of an unspeakable little Malacca Portuguese ; and Jim's life being in danger, she urges him to leave the country. There can be no marriage between them, however. He informs her that he isn't good enough for her. The

old iron is still eating into his heart. When Marlow arrives upon a visit, and invites him to return to civilization, he refuses. The time is not yet. So Jim remains.

From this point the narrative marches on to the final tragedy. A body of white adventurers ally themselves with the rajah to turn out Jim and his native "friendlies." Jim endeavours to secure their withdrawal, but by an act of grim treachery the new-comers kill Dain Waris, and the anger of the Malays is turned upon Lord Jim himself, for he is known to have been in communication with the white marauders. In the utmost peril of his life, Jim walks into the stricken chief's campong in order to offer his sympathy. The Malayan, overcome with grief and anger at the loss of his son, raises his pistol and shoots Jim dead. The long pilgrimage is over. Has Jim justified himself at last, and by this deliberate stalking of death retrieved dishonour? Do these few final moments produce a harmony hitherto unknown?

Lord Jim (if one would care to have it so) is a picturesque kind of novel, more formless than anything ever written by Captain Marryat, and in a sense peculiarly inverted in subject. It was high, physical courage alone that interested Marryat. Under Captain Lord Cochrane, a swift rebuke and contemptuous dismissal would have been the fortune of any officer of the Lord Jim type. Under Collingwood and Nelson there was no inclination to dwell upon the mental processes of cowards.

As for Conrad, however, there is little doubt where his sympathy lay, for his philosophy (in so far as he displays any philosophy at all) was usually concerned with the problem of loyalties. Conrad was always conscious of

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that little community afloat upon the waters, encompassed by danger, preserved only by an indivisible unity of interest. What Marryat accepted as the perfectly natural thing, Conrad pondered constantly. He brought to the English sphere of action a foreigner's propensity to logic. He was authoritarian at heart, and, living as he did upon a plane of high nervous tension, expressed this attitude in many curious forms. The story is told of how upon one occasion having arranged to meet his wife in a London hotel, he walked up to the inquiry office and said :

“ ‘ Tell my wife that I am here ! ’

“ ‘ What name ? ’ inquired the clerk.

“ ‘ What has that to do with you ? ’ asked Conrad sharply.”

When it was pointed out that without knowing the lady's name they were quite helpless in the matter, he responded, quarter-deck fashion, “ Call the manager.” And when this functionary appeared it was Conrad again who faced him squarely with the challenge, “ Produce my wife ! ”

Then Conrad discovered that he had come to the wrong hotel !

The sea, it would seem, in so far as it does make an impress upon the malleable mind of man, confirms the necessity of the fellowship and service of those who traffic upon its surface. The sea may be approached in an infinite variety of moods. Byron's “ image of eternity ” is the same element which, according to Mr. H. M. Tomlinson, possesses no more soul than a midden ! Melville displayed an apocalyptic zeal when

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he regarded the ocean ; to Kipling as to Masfield it is the avenue of a gloriously romantic endeavour :

“ *O, the blazing tropic night, when the wake’s a welt of
light
That holds the hot sky tame. . . .*”

But in glittering sunshine ; or in grey, wind-driven extremity—always the close immediacy of daily intercourse, and the dependence of one man upon another in that waste of water.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RURAL NOVEL

WITH the rural area we stand upon much more stable ground. There is (already indicated) a prevailing unrest and uncertainty concerning all things nautical—the sunlit waters of one moment may very well give way to the churning tempest of the next. The sea is a place of wanderings and excursions, of denizens perennially upon the move. The quay affords a resting-place, but it is only the transitory haven, the impermanent condition. Thus it is that in the literature of the sea we are confronted by the shifting tides, the currents and the cross-currents of its action. There is a vagrant quality in the sea story, and the form obtaining is a hawser pattern linking up one landfall with another. The climax, as in the mining industry, is often one of sudden death. “My poor bloody kids!” exclaims an ill-fated seaman at the conclusion of one of Jack Hanley’s stories. “Now small gulls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.” So the *Pequod* plunged beneath the waters, and Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* had run its course.

With the rural scene the tempo changes. The dissonance of death is muted. The slowly pacing seasons set their seal upon the lives and fortunes of those who work

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upon the land. Governments may vex and warfare dislocate a great deal of that activity, but fundamentally the countryman remains the same. His mind develops with the slow germination of the soil. He has learned to wait upon the unhurried year. The assumption that he is eminently business-like, surveying his acres for caterpillars, weevils, and weeds, does not presuppose that he is less insensitive to nature's influence than the majority of townsmen. He would in all probability find himself a little at a loss to provide an image for a scattering of petals on the grass, or the flecking of young green corn with poppies. His approach, severely practical, does not imply a lack of sensibility to nature's glory. A good deal less articulate than the townsman, he possesses a wordless contact, a communion all his own.

The difficulty of the rural novel is that the characters often tend to become supercharged with the æsthetic attributes of the author—nature worship in the case of Jefferies, or mystical ecstasy in that of Hudson, a position which brings to the foreground the crucial problem of character creation. Do rural characters speak seldom because their thoughts are long, long thoughts, and their wisdom unusually profound? Does the country mind remain simple and instinctive, and the town mind sophisticated and machine-conditioned? Are the differences between town dweller and country dweller such as make an insuperable barrier between them?

In turning to the rural novel it is dutiful to remember Hardy. Not that there are no other "nature" novelists. Mr. A. G. Street would seem to be one of the most popular, linking as he does the past with the present; but Hardy retains by far the most enduring of all "rural" reputations.

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There are times when one cannot help thinking that this priority of Hardy has not been altogether favourable to an objective assessment of rural life. For throughout the whole of his writing career Hardy was at feud with the Almighty. He lived in an Age of Adversaries, Science *v.* Religion being one of the most notable :

*“ Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
If God won't have you, the Devil must.”*

Hardy, however, reconditioned the struggle. Lumping God and the Devil together as the President of the Immortals, he nominated himself as the Adversary.

Thus it is that we discover in the most notable of his work the recurring pattern of fatality (of nasty things done to ordinary human beings by the President of the Immortals)—a pattern of fatality which many people have identified with the rural scene. Actually, of course, the element of fatality may be identified with any manner of scene, from the mansions of Mayfair to the back-to-backs of Birmingham. The dairy worker, Tess, was not alone in calamity. The uneven deal may well be served to the waitress at the table, or to the cutler at his bench.

One ought therefore to approach Hardy with appropriate caution, for undoubted artist though he is, he cannot be restrained from doing things to the cards. At times he does not hesitate to mismanipulate the deal, to find an ace in his sleeve, and, like another Victorian, to suggest that the President of the Immortals had put it there !

The note which Tess writes to Angel Clare, telling him of her past, *happens* to go under the carpet as well

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as the door, and thus never reaches him ; when Mrs. Yeobright goes to call on her son Clym in order to effect reconciliation, he *happens* to be asleep and fails to hear her knock, and so on. There are cynics who declare that the President of the Immortals *happened* to treat Thomas Hardy fairly well, considering ; bringing to him fame and a competence. But that for the moment is beside the point. Our real concern is not in the extreme position that Hardy delighted to assume, but how far his works may be associated with the setting of rural England. There was about his writings certainly an imminent apprehension of place. He lived very nearly to the life of the farm folk and the cottagers, sensitive to the range of nature's evidence. " He was a man who used to notice such things," he tells us in a poetic self-portrait. For example, there is the well-known approach of the great storm in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the milking shed in *Tess*, and the " worn whisper, dry and papery " of the mummied heath bells in *The Return of the Native*. With evolutionary prescience he refused to recognize the woodland as a haunt of immortal peace :

" But, having entered in,
Great growths and small
Show them to men akin—
Combatants all !
Sycamore shoulders oak,
Bends the slim sapling yoke,
Ivy-spun halters choke
Elms stout and tall."

It was no comfortable pantheism that Hardy adopted.

Perhaps the action of the representative Hardy novel, divested for a moment or two of Celestial double-cross,

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may be observed at its best in *The Woodlanders*, although even here he follows a favourite formula of allowing A to fall in love with B only to allow B to fall in love with C, and so on. Hardy himself terms it a novel of "matrimonial divergence," announcing, in the words of Gibbon, that he will not venture to interpose his private judgment upon the problem of marriage as he sees it; a rather odd pronouncement in view of what takes place in the subsequent four hundred and fifty pages.

However, it is the woodland country and the personal fortunes of those who live beneath the shadow of the trees with which Hardy is engaged. There seems to be little conflict between man and nature. Time and again the two are identified in passages of indubitable point. When Marty South and Giles Winterbourne are setting the young fir trees together, it is Marty who, as she notes the soft musical breathing of the wind through their branches, observes that they sigh "because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest—just as we be." Of the larger wood itself "the Unfulfilled Intention," says Hardy, "which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling."

Perhaps in this sense the most notable of the interwoven incidents is the relation of Marty's father with the great elm that grows outside his cottage, and with which he mystically identifies his own existence. "The shape of it seems to haunt him like an evil spirit," says Marty. "He says that it is exactly his own age, that it has got human sense, and sprouted up when he was

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born on purpose to rule him, and to keep him as its slave. Others have been like it before in Hintock." The tree falls, or is ordered to be felled by the doctor, on the assumption that once removed the obsession will pass. The obsession does pass, and with it the old woodlander, who does not survive the disappearance of the tree.

The drama of *The Woodlanders* is not between Man and the President of the Immortals, and certainly not between Man and Nature ; but it is rather a personification of the eternal struggle between Town and Country. The town represents the sophisticated, the artificial, the meretricious element of the story ; the country, the deeply seated, instinctive, and forthright habit of living. The townees rejoice in every attribute, but lack virtue. The countryfolk lack many things, the graces of intellect, the advantage of riches, but are sustained by their innate well-being.

There is no need here to recapitulate the varied action of the story, except to point out that the characters fall roughly into two groups : (1) Giles Winterbourne, the yeoman, Marty South, the cottage girl, and old Melbury, the timber merchant, representing the rural element ; and (2) the doctor, Fitzpiers, and Mrs. Charmond, a wealthy widow, representing the town ; Grace Melbury being a connecting link. Thus the calamity chain so dear to Hardy is carried out. Marty, the country girl, falls in love with Giles, the countryman. Giles does not repay her love, but is himself in love with Grace Melbury, a town-educated girl, the daughter of rural parents. Grace does not reciprocate, but is attracted by and marries Fitzpiers, a young doctor. Fitzpiers does not reciprocate, and in turn is attracted by

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Mrs. Charmond, the town lessee of the big house. Mrs. Charmond in her turn is haunted by a "South Carolina gentleman of a very passionate nature," so passionate, indeed, that in the end he manages to shoot her. Too late, Grace realizes that she is really in love with Giles, for he too dies, but of exposure; while, in conclusion, Grace rearranges an uneasy alliance with her husband.

It is doubtful if to-day the rural characters in the story would evoke from the ordinary reader quite the sort of sympathy that Hardy intended: Marty, the country girl, for example, in selling her hair so that it might adorn the head of Mrs. Charmond. Mountains of hair have been snipped off from around female ears during the course of the last twenty years, without remuneration whatsoever. The girl who has actually paid a fine fat fee to the barber for the shearing of locks will rather envy Marty South in her assumed misfortune. Nor would the girls of this day, schooled to the top-hat and white tie tuition of the dance-hall and the cinema, start in terror from a figure in evening dress suddenly walking in the glade. Tails and tuxedo nowadays have penetrated even the woodland.

But the real hero and heroine of *The Woodlanders* are Giles Winterbourne and Marty South. Their simplicity and fidelity are strangely identified with the rural nature of their setting. From the beginning of the story—where in the firelight the country girl pursues her country occupation, the making of spars for thatchers—to the very close, when she stands alone before the grave of Giles Winterbourne, we are conscious of this affiliation. Even Grace had considered Giles in memory as the "fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation"; but it

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is Marty who makes articulate the essence of the country spirit :

“ But I—whenever I get up I’ll think of ’ee, and whenever I lie down I’ll think of ’ee again. Whenever I plant the young larches I’ll think that none can plant as you planted ; and whenever I split a gad, and whenever I turn the cider wring, I’ll say none could do it like you. If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven ! . . . But no, no, my love, I never can forget ’ee ; for you was a good man and did good things ! ”

Hardy, to the last, was still the moralist and nature lover. What can we say of his successors ? One author, at least, ought to find some mention here. (I exclude Mr. T. F. Powys, whose Tripps, and Tupps, and Turveys, and Duffys can lick hollow the President of the Immortals at his own game, on the ground that he is primarily a short-story writer.) This is Mr. H. E. Bates, author of two notable novels of country life, *The Fallow Land* and *The Poacher*. Mr. Bates is no moralist. Flaubert is his master, with occasional touches of Tchekhov and D. H. Lawrence. In *The Fallow Land* and *The Poacher* we are dealing with a sober, reticent tribe of countrymen and women, who are bound by every tie of instinct and intelligence to the earth, only to be torn away from it by the dread hand of war, or the more familiar one of the police officer. There is a harsh fatality in their lives ; but unlike the type of character that we find in Hardy, there is no sign of conscious manipulation. No President of the Immortals sets the pace for Mr. Bates. He is much too objective for that. The drama is purely human, or in some senses

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sub-human. His characters have no religious or intellectual enthusiasms. They are the morons of the landscape. When Luke Bishop, in *The Poacher*, finds himself released from prison after serving sentence, he "looked as though lost in thought, but his mind was empty." And so we follow Mr. Bates's characters on their various occasions—wiping bottles, or cleaning out the pigs, or mowing in the hayfield, or taking the horses to the blacksmith's to be shod—thoroughly occupied physically, but with minds that are completely empty of any idea save the immediate prospect of light and food and warmth. The really disturbing circumstances are those of cold and hunger. In the course of the narrative, Mr. Bates will paint in swift economical strokes a background to the activity of his characters; but since these creatures display so little evidence of critical and æsthetic sensibility, we cannot be at all certain how the disparity may be reconciled. One day, after having been laid up by illness, the poacher views the February landscape :

"He stood looking out of the window until he was too weak to stand any longer. Beyond the henyard and the paddock with its cart-hovel he could see a copse of birch and oak bordering a piece of wheat-land. In the field the corn had come up thickly, in fine tangled threads of tender green, the rows curving with the land. He kept looking from the wheat to the birches. The trees were the colour of wine, a dark red, the buds and catkins shining more brightly here and there against the buds of oak, which were paler, a sand colour, showing up in turn against their darker branches."

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Now here we stumble upon a pretty problem for the realist. Whose eyes are really peering through that window? Those of Luke Bishop, or those of Mr. H. E. Bates? Were the trees in question really *wine-dark* for the poacher, and the young corn *tender green*? It is difficult to think so. What then becomes of Mr. Bates's objective austerity? With this type of realism the characters move of their own volition; but it is as though Mr. Bates were saying: "Be responsible completely for your own immediate actions and words, be faithful in that, and I will try my utmost to assist you in the matter of landscape!"

The effect of Mr. Bates's technique upon the reader, however, must not be underestimated. In comparison with Mr. Bates, Hardy's rustics are a legion of inconsequential chatterboxes. With Mr. Bates, too, the ponderous and wagon-like sentences of the elder writer, "the simple corporeal presentment," give place to a method a good deal more acceptable to the contemporary mind. Mr. Bates's characters, so to speak, are always taut and trim and cleared for immediate action.

This realism is displayed to very effective purpose in *The Fallow Land*, the story of Deborah Loveday, and the grim struggle she wages in contact with the earth. Jesse Mortimer marries Deborah, a maid-of-all-work, and carries her off to his father's farm, where she is caught up in the rural life around her. Very soon she realizes that life on the farm indicates perennial struggle:

"She became aware of the existence of the land. The land was something more than the earth; the land was something vague, primitive, poetic; the

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land was a composite force of actual, living, everyday things, fields and beasts, seed-time and harvest, ploughing and harrowing, wind and weather, bitterness and struggle ; the land was an opponent, a master. The earth was sweet in spring and autumn, natural, eternal, yielding flowers and loveliness. The land was eternal also, but a man worked on the land, sweating, breaking his back, his work was never done. Unlike the earth the land never rested or relented. The land ate into the body of a man, and the man and the land became at last part of each other, bonded together and lost without each other, like two old enemies drawn to each other at last by a kind of bitter love."

As her elders die away it is upon Deborah's shoulders that the burden of management falls. Jesse, increasingly idle and feckless, defeats her every suggestion to amplify their means. He is a philanderer too. At last, after an affair in the village, she quarrels violently with him, and he disappears, now leaving the whole responsibility of the farm upon her shoulders.

With one man and his son she faces up to the management of the farm, in addition to the rearing of her two children, David and Benjamin. She works night and day to keep things going. The years pass by. Her hair grows grey, and when the war comes she is again isolated, for both boys enter the army and pass over to France. Ultimately David, her favourite, is killed, and Benjamin it is who returns to the farm.

Benjamin, so like his father, intemperant and impulsive, marries, takes an adjoining farm, and once again Deborah is left alone with an increasing fear of isolation.

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Time passes, and at length a strangely familiar figure enters. It is her husband Jesse, returned at last. But how different from the old, aggressive, swashbuckling Jesse that she had known. Deaf, and nearly blind, he is allowed to stay on as a paid hand. Deborah, however, is nearing her end. The long struggle is almost over. Thin and frail, she drags herself to bed ; but even there her thoughts are cast upon the activity around her—the yield of eggs, the ploughing that must be set in motion. At last she dies, and the long struggle is over. •

Mr. Bates's writing is entitled to the highest respect. He is a sincere artist, and by *The Fallow Land* alone he is established in the forefront of country writers.

As an antidote to the "dark" and "instinctive" activity of the rural novel and the "country mind" displayed therein, the Plain Man should not fail to make an acquaintance with Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*. It is a riot of good-humoured, but often penetrating criticism of the rural novel as we have known it during the last forty years. Hardy, Kaye-Smith, D. H. Lawrence, and a number of other writers are set upon the target, and how the swift shafts rattle and ping upon the objective. Sometimes a genuine bull's-eye evokes a shout of admiration. The main theme of the story is the redemption to modern methods and habits of thought of the "dark" inhabitants of Starkadder Farm, by a bright young débutante named Flora Poste. Atmosphere is introduced by Miss Gibbons with a number of warning asterisks, thus (two for atmosphere, three for psychology)

"By the time the buggy had reached Beershorn, which was a good seven miles from Howling, Adam had forgotten what he was going there for. The reins

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lay between his knotted fingers, and his face, unseeing, was lifted to the dark sky.*** From the stubborn interwoven strata of his subconscious, thought seeped up into his dim conscious ; not as an integral part of that consciousness, but more as an impalpable emanation, a crepuscular addition, from the unsleeping life in the restless trees and fields surrounding him."

Flora in Starkadder Farm, an establishment ruled from an upper room in which resides the grim old Aunt Ada Doom, contrives to recondition every one from the dark, instinctive clodhoppers of rural fiction into beings more acceptable to the café-dansants and the aeroplanes of contemporary England. Even Aunt Ada Doom (who as a girl of six once saw something terrible in the woodshed !) is induced to take a trip to Paris by air. The triumph is one of modern sophistication over the "instinctive" and "impulsive" material, literally worked to death in the course of the last generation. *Cold Comfort Farm* is so eminently quotable, that it is difficult to know where to begin. Here is a picture of Seth, the "dark, instinctive" lady-killer at work upon Flora :

"He came over to her with the lounging grace of a panther, and leaned against the mantelpiece. Flora saw that he was not the kind that could be fobbed off with offers of tea. She was for it.

"'What's that you're making?' he asked. Flora knew that he hoped it was a pair of knickers. She composedly shook out the folds of the petticoat and replied that it was an afternoon tea-cloth.

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“ ‘ Ay . . . woman’s nonsense,’ said Seth softly. (Flora wondered why he had seen fit to drop his voice by half an octave.) ‘ Women are all alike—aye fussin’ over their fal-lals and bedazin’ a man’s eyes, when all they really want is a man’s blood and his heart out of his body and his soul and his pride. . . .’

“ ‘ Really ? ’ said Flora, looking in her work-box for her scissors.

“ ‘ Ay.’ His deep voice had jarring notes which were curiously blended into an animal harmony like the natural cries of stoat or weasel. ‘ That’s all women want—a man’s life. Then when they’ve got him bound up in their fal-lals and bedazin’ ways and their softness, and he can’t move because of the longin’ for them as cries in his man’s blood—do you know what they do then ? ’

“ ‘ I’m afraid not,’ said Flora. ‘ Would you mind passing me that reel of cotton on the mantelpiece, just by your ear ? Thank you so much.’” Seth passed it mechanically, and continued :

“ ‘ They eat him, same as a hen-spider eats a cock-spider. That’s what women do—if a man lets ’em.’

“ ‘ Indeed,’ commented Flora.

“ ‘ Ay—but I said “ if ” a man lets ’em. Now I—I don’t let no women eat me. I eats them instead.’ ”

Flora, having heard somewhat similar sentiments from young men at Bloomsbury parties, as well as in the drawing-rooms of Cheltenham, maintains an understanding silence.

“ ‘ That shocks you, eh ? ’ said Seth, misinterpreting her silence.

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“‘Yes, I think it’s dreadful,’ replied Flora, good naturedly meeting him half-way.

“He laughed. It was the cruel sound like the squitter of a stoat as it sinks its feet into the neck of a rabbit.

“‘Dreadful . . . ay ! you’re all alike. You’re just the same as the rest of all your London ways. Mealy-mouthed as a school kid. I’ll lay you don’t understand half of what I’ve been saying, do you ? . . . Liddle innercent.’

“‘I am afraid I wasn’t listening to all of it,’ she replied, ‘but I am sure it was very interesting. You must tell me all about your work some time. . . . What do you do, now, on the evenings when you aren’t—er—eating people ?’

“‘I goes over to Beershorn,’ replied Seth rather sulkily. The dark flame of his male pride was a little suspicious of having its leg pulled.

“‘To play darts ?’ Flora knew her A.P.H.

“‘Noa . . . me play that kid’s game with a lot of old men ? That’s a good ’un, that is. No. I goes to the talkies.’”

And so Seth the lady-killer is fully revealed as a movie-fan ! liking “talkies” better “nor anything in the whoal world,” and possessing signed photographs galore of the glamour girls of Hollywood. At length, making no progress with Flora, he takes the dark flame of his male pride off to see and hear “Sweet Sinners” at the Beershorn cinema.

It takes two, of course, to play the “dark, instinctive” game of the rural novel. If one character won’t, and uses instead a sophisticated needle to emphasize her criticism,

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then the result is apt to be (as in the pages of *Cold Comfort Farm*) a riot of counterbalancing laughter.

With the passage of time it is possible that the rural novel of the past may become much more antedated than its suburban counterpart. With the advent of the machine, and of scientific intensive farming, a good deal of the purely adventitious—subservience to rain, wind, and sun—may be eliminated. Synthetic fertilizers and other control factors will have to be taken into account. The chemical revolution in agriculture is one of the most astounding features of the century. The agricultural chemist is already in the foreground, and the idea that the farmer was the dutiful, if somewhat discontented caretaker of God's handiwork is rapidly disappearing. Water supplies are being controlled. The chemist has discovered what plants are made of, and that the soil itself contributes nothing to the growing processes except to act as a reservoir, retaining certain elements that contribute to plant growth. Thus it is that already the agricultural chemist can not only make two blades of grass grow where one grew before, but he has learnt to duplicate that grass synthetically. He is in a position to announce a new crop every few weeks. Two sheep (for example) were killed a few months ago (Cornell University) that had never at any time nibbled at a blade of grass or a kernel of grain. They had been fed on a synthetic mixture of casein, cellulose, starch, vitamin concentrates, and salts. They were beautiful sheep, the wool excellent.

What the repercussions of such experiment will be upon imaginative literature is conjectural. There are universal considerations that will always command attention—human difficulty, and human courage in

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facing it. But the local aspect will certainly suffer revolution, and the permanent landmarks will be changed. Spring-time perhaps may be permitted to enter, and the golden magnificence of autumn. But beyond that it would be difficult to say.

CHAPTER IX

THE SOCIAL NOVEL

It would be fundamentally useless to approach the Social Novel, *i.e.* the art of living and working together, without some consideration of the English character. Too often does the social critic fail to recognize that the norm of English social relationship is not equality, but liberty ; and that the distinguishing trait among Englishmen generally is that while Jack's master does what he likes, Jack says what he likes ! and that this tendency to freedom of speech is an important check upon overweening behaviour everywhere. Class relationship is still one of the main factors in English social and industrial life (hence the hoary old aphorism that every Englishman loves a lord). But the long catalogue of social memoirs attesting the free intercourse obtaining between tenant and landlord, between the owners of great houses and their servants, and in the daily encounter of master and man during the great industrial epoch, all point to the preservation of an exceptionally virile liberty.¹ It is only in recent years that the Joint Stock Corporation, the development of the Combine, and other ramifications of Big Business, have served to eclipse this intimate relationship. Nowadays, of course, a highly intricate organization often separates the ordinary workman from

¹ See the emphatic evidence of Sir Ian Hamilton in *When I was a Boy*.

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the high-ups. There are millions of employees who have never seen their employers at all, only departmental managers and foremen. But while the fullest allowance should be made for a circumstance of this kind, it is, one feels, only of a transitory nature. Sooner or later the national character will assert itself.

The English character, then, is distinguished by certain extraordinary features. It is the Plain Man's duty in turning to the novel of social significance to disentangle these from extraneous treatment, and to establish a proportionate standard of values.

Regarding fiction from this angle, we are reminded (as we must be constantly) of the individual quality of the man behind the work. In such a relation, we feel, Realism and Romanticism begin to look a little more like tags than ever. With all the Realism in the world at his command, Galsworthy could not have produced anything very different from the *Forsyte Saga*, with its limited middle-class outlook, and its gentle, so gentle, quality of satire. Galsworthy, middle class through and through, simply could not help pitching upon a certain type of individual to the exclusion of all others. Possessing as he did all the virtues of his class, it would be foolish at least (men and women being what they are) not to anticipate a few of its deficiencies. What happens indeed in *The Forsyte Saga*?

The saga is the story of Soames Forsyte, a lawyer, a "man of property," and Irene Forsyte his wife, the possession of whom he regards with a very acquisitive eye. She is his "property," in common with his pictures, his furniture, and his real estate.

But Irene doesn't belong to Soames, and never will belong. She represents, Galsworthy tells us, the in-

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tangible spirit of beauty that the Forsytes could never adequately grasp, since it lay altogether outside their own standard of values. Throughout six volumes—*The Forsyte Saga* and *The Modern Comedy*—we see Soames in active pursuit of this intangibility, but in vain. He seems at times to touch the very hem of its garment, but that is all. Irene eludes him in marriage. He divorces her, and remarries, having one daughter, Fleur. But the pervading spirit of the thing that is Irene continues to trouble him. He apprehends what beauty is, but he can never take it for his own. He cannot think its thoughts, nor speak its language. He dies in the end, somewhat mellowed by experience, in the act of saving his daughter Fleur from destruction.

Soames Forsyte (Galsworthy would have us realize) is not a villain at all ; but really a decent sort of fellow bound by the tradition of his class. There are other Forsytes too in the Saga, good, bad, and indifferent. Of these, the figure of old Jolyon strikes a sympathetic note. The interlude in the first volume, where the death of old Jolyon is related, a painless breathing out in the tranquil summer afternoon as he waits for the coming of Irene, is one of the most beautiful things in modern literature. Satire there is unquestionably in the *Forsyte Saga* ; but it is a tempered satire, affectionate rather than otherwise, all in the family, so to speak. The narrative ends (it would seem) with a sigh of regret for the glory that is past.

Opinions are sharply divided upon the relative character of Irene and Soames. D. H. Lawrence, for instance, tore Irene to pieces. He had no patience with the mannered, restricted type of love-making that Galsworthy affected. The Irenes of literature were the

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desiccated, passionless emanations of a bourgeois society. White lilies of beauty indeed ! Rotten lilies at best ! And the men in association with them ? A company of thin-blooded pedants and *poseurs*, fearful of taking to emotional life in the dark instinctive fashion that Lawrence so admired. Between the white lily of Irene and the tiger lily of D. H. Lawrence, it is somewhat difficult for the Plain Man to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. Perhaps, on the whole, he would plead to be protected against the vagaries of the Lawrentian type of spinster !

Actually, the Plain Man in general sympathizes with Irene against her overbearing figure of a husband ; and the Plain Woman usually contrives an extenuating word for Soames. What a woman to live with ! Never at any time an accommodating sentence from her lips. No wonder she drove poor Soames Forsyte crazy !

No one responded more readily than John Galsworthy to a universal plea for justice. Inhuman treatment of men and animals alike called for his most ardent condemnation. Much to the annoyance of certain of his readers, he refused to propound cut-and-dried solutions of the problems that he uncovered. It is not the novelist's business, he argued, to provide solutions ; it is sufficient that he should cast the light of his lantern into the questionable places. It is for others to provide the remedy. " Who am I that I should relieve you of your adult, citizen responsibility ? "

Within his own class of society he seemed to move liberally at ease. When he drew in contact with another, for all his genuine imagination and discernment, his focus switched awry. Time and again he drew a blank with the working classes.

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The best known example is in *Fraternity*. The story, broadly, is intended to emphasize the reality of class division, with the disturbing element of sex, however, to break down the barriers and to indicate a common human necessity. Hilary Dallison, a man of independent means, has an affair with a working-class model, a girl sitting to Bianca, his wife. Instinctively the girl has moved towards him, and while for a time he manages to keep her at arm's length, at last he decides to go away with her, only to discover at the last moment that he cannot hope for any happiness with a girl of her class. "Class has saved me," he writes to his brother after spurning the little model, "it has triumphed over my most primitive instincts." So that with the conclusion of the story the solution of class differences seems further off than ever. Galsworthy's thesis is presumably that East End is East End and West End is West End, and never the twain shall meet, a contention untenable in view of the continued infiltration of one class by another.

Galsworthy's weakness is in his choice of irreconcilable extremes. On the one hand there is the hypersensitive, Hamlet-like Hilary ; and on the other hand a girl who throughout the whole book is never conceded a name of her own, but is always referred to as "the little model." "The little model," indeed. Who is the "little model" ? The cat's grandmother presumably—an indefinite personality like the cook, the maid, or the butler. What would the reader have thought if Galsworthy had referred to Bianca throughout as "the little wife," or Mr. Stone, his father-in-law, as "the little old gentleman" ?

Equally, when the working classes are conceded identity, it is in terms of the usual Galsworthian violence

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or shiftlessness. Hughs, Hilary's working-class rival, is in the habit of thrashing his wife ; and she for her part submits, though the majority of English women would have given Hughs the go-by long before the opening of the story. In a word, Galsworthy could never regard the English working man as anything but an impersonal object to be pitied and assisted. He seems never to have encountered anything more representative of the workers than a cap-touching, "spare a copper, kindly sir !" or "lemme tek a charnst in the colonies, guvnor !" order. An excursion into the industrial areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire would have brought him into contact with a sturdy self-reliance and independence that would have made a world of difference to his broader conception of society.

In terms of contrast, it is salutary to remember the work of both Arnold Bennett and J. B. Priestley. The two greatest of Bennett's books are *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger*, the latter, of course, the first volume of a life expanded into trilogy.

The bulk of Bennett's work was enormous, and in the latter stages of his career he became preoccupied with the garish appurtenances of society rather than with the depth of human experience within. He had all Macaulay's indrawn breath of wonder at "progress," and there was always something of Denry Machin's "fancy me being here just as though I belonged to it in a place like this !" attitude as he found himself stalking through the Hotel Splendide, the yachts, the drawing-rooms, and the foyers of his pilgrimage. The note became complacent at the end ; but it was still there, and must be accepted as an integral part of his personality. He began with Flaubert and Maupassant as his

high gods ; but there was nothing alien in his treatment of the region in which his boyhood and youth had been spent, or of the characters that he there set in motion. *The Old Wives' Tale* displays the amplitude and precision of a master. Mrs. Woolf (in an entertaining pamphlet, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown*) derides the piled-up detail of the Bennett formula, the "property," the gas-works, the shop-windows and their contents, and so on ; but to recreate the vanished world of the seventies the method was inevitable. Bennett's detail, however, was always disciplined. There was nothing freakish in the assembly. He made no virtue of oddity. He had an orderly mind—a little too orderly on some occasions, but admirably adapted for the purpose he had in view.

The story of *The Old Wives' Tale* is that of the two sharply contrasted daughters of Mrs. Baines, a Bursley draper, Constance and Sophia—the one placid and unadventurous, the other wilful and impetuous. One is a stay-at-home, the other a fly-by-night. For Constance, step by step—marriage, children, widowhood—the drama is played out over the cobblestones of her native town ; for Sophia, it is the more extensive and swifter avenue (but arriving in the same place at the end) of elopement, and Paris of the Second Empire and the siege. Stage by imperceptible stage, the young and lively girls mature, grow grey, and still retain the indefeasible character with which they are endowed.

There is no room to set out in detail the action of the *Old Wives' Tale* ; but every page displays the masterly psychology of its author. Take the relative attitude adopted by both girls to poor Mr. Povey, the shop assistant. He loses a tooth (Sophia has snatched it out of his mouth with the pliers as he lies asleep upon the

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sofa, the point of the story being that it is not the aching one !), and in the struggle that takes place later it is Constance who secures and treasures it. Or the episode where Sophia, after a clandestine meeting with Gerald Scales, is cross-examined by her mother :

“ ‘ You are deceiving me, Sophia,’ said Mrs. Baines, with fierce solemnity. ‘ Where have you been this afternoon ? ’

“ Sophia’s foot was restless on the carpet behind the table. ‘ I haven’t been anywhere,’ she murmured glumly.

“ ‘ Have you seen young Scales ? ’

“ ‘ Yes,’ said Sophia with grimness, glancing audaciously for an instant at her mother. (‘ She can’t kill me. She can’t kill me,’ her heart muttered. And she had youth and beauty in her favour, while her mother was only a fat middle-aged woman. ‘ She can’t kill me,’ said her heart, with the trembling, cruel insolence of the mirror-flattered child.)

“ ‘ How came you to meet him ? ’

“ No answer.

“ ‘ Sophia, you heard what I said ! ’

“ Still no answer. Sophia looked down at the table. (‘ She can’t kill me.’) ”

The Plain Man responds to the truth of the episode as swiftly as he does to the upgrowing of *Clayhanger*, and indeed to his relations with his own father and family. In a broader sense, Bennett was a family writer. His problems were those of family management and family priorities, at a time when broader and more tolerant standards of behaviour were coming in. Actually he

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seems to have lived upon the fringe of the industrial world, observing closely without ever being of it. Perhaps something of the stark division that existed between business and domesticity at the end of the nineteenth century dictated this attitude, for his days in commerce were short and he was always more or less his own master.

The Plain Man responds more certainly to Bennett than to Galsworthy. The narrative, swift and rational but with just the right proportion of romance to lend it colour and zest, the range of character in which the humble are not unduly diminished, sets the best of Bennett a step ahead of the best of Galsworthy. Bennett walks in a much more comprehensive world ; but even that universe is not as full and as satisfying as it might be. Where is such comprehension to be found ?

To mention the name of J. B. Priestley here may be to promote a wrangle upon the possibilities of the good man gone wrong in modern Literature, for, after having written a number of novels of intriguing accomplishment, it was Mr. Priestley's misfortune to become responsible for a light-hearted picaresque best-seller in *The Good Companions*, an offence which has been jealously preserved against him by persons, many of whom should have been capable of knowing better. Actually, among the younger writers, there is no mind more virile to-day than that of the author of *The Good Companions*. He occupies the enviable, half-way position between realism and romanticism, being captured by neither one position nor the other. The reason is, of course, that he is possessed with an unusual amount of what southerners would call common sense, and northerners gumption. (Mr. Priestley being a York-

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shireman would probably prefer the latter definition.) He is not to be taken in by "movements" and "ideologies," those all-embracing systems by which everything is to be explained. He is anti-humbug all the time, being confirmed in this position by large and all-embracing humanity. His novels now are numerous; but there are few discerning readers who have not been impressed by his study of London commercialism in *Angel Pavement*.

Happily Mr. Priestley has related something of his attitude in writing the novel. "Up to the moment I had finished this book," he tells us, "the world of City offices, crowded buses, tubes, cheap tea-shops, little pubs in decaying old City streets, with the docks and the Seven Seas just round the corner, had haunted me for years, pestering me to write about it, and it was not until I had done my best to re-create it in this piece of fiction that I was free of it, relieved from the pressure of its weight of life. . . . I wanted to deal with characters who could not have found their way into the cheerful, picaresque adventures of *The Good Companions*. . . . For these people of *Angel Pavement* there is no easy fairy-tale escape. They are the victims of circumstance—and the cruel financial chaos of our time is part of that circumstance—and they have little to enjoy but the bitter though not unrefreshing brew that a sense of irony can offer."

Angel Pavement is the story, then, of a little group of people, brought together on the adventitious workings of modern commercialism, and tragically unified by an essay in deception by one of their number. In a sentence, the story relates how the mysterious Mr. Golspie, an agent for a new process of turning out veneers and

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inlays, brings ruin upon the eminently respectable firm of Twigg and Dorsingham.

In the older type of novel, this calamity in its ramifications would have thrown a single spotlight upon the employer and his family alone. A weary business titan would have been the central figure. A sympathetic shot of the old chief clerk might have been admitted, and that would have been about all. Mr. Priestley doesn't exactly reverse the process, for the employer and his wife receive quite ample notice ; but he completes full circle, for the Golspie deception signifies disaster for every one : for Stanley Poole, the office boy, for Turgis, the junior clerk, for Miss Matfield, the typist, for Mr. Smeeth, the cashier, for Mr. Goath, the traveller. Skilfully Mr. Priestley takes each of these in turn, for all have their place in the organization, and their lives are uncovered for a season as the influence of Mr. Golspie (and in the case of poor Turgis his daughter) upon the fortunes of the firm becomes apparent. If ever a novel was written with a sense of social responsibility, the range and balance of its reactions, then that novel is *Angel Pavement*. These individual fortunes are skilfully dovetailed together, until with a final shattering blow the design is broken up, and the component pieces become available for rearrangement. Throughout it all, however, we are conscious that we are dealing with human beings, not pawns manipulated by some theory-ridden fanatic. A sense of fun, that criterion of human values (at any rate in England) is never absent, even in the darkest possibility. And although Mr. Priestley has been dismissed as "Dickensian" because of his use of humour, he need lose little sleep on that account. If *Angel Pavement* is "Dickensian," so are the dockers of

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East London and the spinners of Lancashire, the colliers of Yorkshire, and the farm labourers of Somerset. We are all "Dickensian" if for the moment we could remember that there is laughter as well as melancholy at the heart of things.

This deeper and broader sense of social responsibility is to be marked in other quarters also. There is the kaleidoscopic expressionism of John Dos Passos in New York; the more disciplined but older-fashioned writing of Sinclair Lewis; in Russia, Gorki and Sholokhov; in Germany, Hans Fallada.

It is a curious circumstance that no great novel has ever been written about the English House of Commons, the finest club in Europe, and the mainspring of democratic example the world over. The House of Commons appears (if at all) episodically in "Sagas" like the *Modern Comedy*, and novels of social struggle like *The Stars Look Down*. But in a full-dress portrait—never. Perhaps it is that this hammering-out of legislation lends itself best to fiction of another type. Perhaps a rhetorical habit of expression tends to play old Harry with style. Perhaps the long exacting hours of Parliament leave no room for literary pursuits whatsoever. At any rate the yield is slender enough; and for a really satisfactory novel on the art of self-government we are compelled to turn to *South Riding*, a work in which Miss Winifred Holtby conceived a County Council as a living organism, intimately concerned in every department with the people's experience, and as capable of interest as the management of a metropolitan hotel or the voyagings of an expensive pleasure liner.

Structurally, the book is subdivided into sections,

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each dealing with some departmental activity of the (mythical) Yorkshire South Riding County Council, Highways, Education, etc., and rendered eminently realistic by stark chapter headings drawn from the Council's minutes. The point that Miss Holtby is trying to drive home is that behind the utilitarian façade exists an interwoven record of speculation, hypocrisy, ambition, disaster, courage, and achievement. It is a framework quivering with the impalpable material of life. The councillors are human—some of them all too human. Indeed, throughout *South Riding* the central informing figure is that of Alderman Mrs. Beddoes (a character moulded by the author's mother, herself an alderman of the East Riding County Council of Yorkshire) ; and the heroic centre, the warm and impetuous and questing Sarah Burton, M.A., headmistress of the Kilpington High School for Girls. It is Sarah's fortune to meet Robert Carne, gentleman farmer representative of an old landed stock, whose waning fortunes are further overshadowed by the presence in a discreet background of a wife afflicted by insanity.

This tragic strand, however, is but one of many. With rare skill and profound depth of feeling we are carried from the council chamber and its deliberations into the personal lives of those above whom the Council holds sway. The threads reach out from the centre to Lydia Holly, the young and brilliant daughter of a poverty-stricken labourer, a girl whose educational career is redeemed at the last moment by purely adventitious circumstances ; to Midge, the patrician daughter of Robert Carne ; to Alderman Snaith, a cynical and well-to-do councillor ; to Huggins, a Wesleyan local preacher, and pawn in Snaith's scheme to take advantage

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of rising values in connection with a new housing estate ; to Astell, the Socialist councillor and dreamer. We watch the decline and fall of Robert Carne, an anachronism in the world of urban values and commercialism. Carne is killed ; but Sarah, in love with Carne, and Mrs. Beddoes live on. There is still work to be done, and a new witness of courage and independence to be established.

“ ‘ Question everything,’ says Sarah Burton, addressing her schoolgirls, ‘ . . . even what I’m saying now. Especially perhaps what I say. Question every one in authority, and see that you get sensible answers to your questions. Then if the answers are sensible, obey the orders without protest. Question your government’s policy, the arms-race question, the Kingsport slums, and the economies on feeding schoolchildren. . . . I implore you, do not forget to question.’ ”

Technically, the book is as sprawling as the administrative department it is supposed to represent. Some of the characters occupy more than their fair share of the picture ; and Miss Holtby falls badly for the literary convention of introducing a preacher whose emblem is the double-cross. By implication, however, *South Riding* extols the importance of public duty seriously assumed and unostentatiously practised. Theory, while finding its place in the discussion, is not unduly paraded. It is as though she realizes (and here is the heart of the matter) that morality and justice in the abstract are very difficult indeed to conceive ; but that there are to be encountered, very near at hand indeed, moral personalities, the just man or the just woman.

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There is an enormous and ever-increasing field in the larger relationships, the problem of living together internationally as well as parochially. The international novel, or at any rate the novel in which the problem of nationhood is studied in a relative sense, is not too plentiful. Sometimes the result of such fiction is to produce an effect the reverse of that intended. One remembers Martin Chuzzlewit's sojourning in the boarding-houses and southern swamps of North America, and the resounding protest that the citizens of the United States made after that very frank interpretation of the American character. The Americans, generous by nature as they undoubtedly are, do not suffer criticism with patience; and twenty-five years later Charles Dickens made amends in a speech at a public dinner, remarking that perhaps the fault had lain as much in the spectator as in the object of criticism. Later writers, however, have realized how dangerous a field is that of international criticism and comparison.

The most ambitious of such books, and probably the greatest this century, is the famous *Jean Christophe* of Romain Rolland. It is impossible within the limit of these pages to deal more than sketchily with this remarkable essay in national psychology; the enormous range and the profound sincerity informing the work. On the face of it *Jean Christophe* (or *John Christopher*, in the competent English translation by Mr. Gilbert Cannan) is the life story of Krafft, a German musician of genius living in a small Rhenish town. After a successful career, beginning as a musical prodigy under ducal patronage, he is compelled to flee his native country in order to attain the freedom necessary to his happiness both as a man and as an artist.

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He crosses the border into France, and goes on to Paris, where he hopes to find the freedom for which he is looking. In Paris he discovers the world of the *poseur*, the incompetent, the presuming *élite*. And the struggle continues in the new field as in the old, between the verity he apprehends and the society which would betray it. In travail often, defeated often, the struggle continues to the very end, until at last we realize that it is not John Christopher that we are called upon to pity—his spirit is unconquerable, bestriding the barriers of nationality with the truth that burns within him—but the inadequate morality with which the nations live. If in the name of truth one frontier is broken, then all are broken, for truth about anything is universal truth.

Of this book Rolland himself said :

“I was isolated ; like many others in France I was stifling in a world morally inimical to me : I wanted air : I wanted to react against an unhealthy civilization, against ideas corrupted by a sham *élite* : I wanted to say to them, ‘You lie ! You do not represent France !’ To do so I needed a hero with a pure heart and unclouded vision, whose soul would be stainless enough for him to have the right to speak ; one whose voice would be loud enough for him to gain a hearing. I have patiently begotten this hero. The work was in conception for many years before I set myself to write a word of it. Christopher only set out on his journey when I had been able to see the end of it for him.”

It was the embattled frontier between France and Germany, and an assembly of ideas no less embattled, that

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prompted the writing of *Jean Christophe*. To-day we have no evidence how far this outstanding book served to dissipate the encrusted nationalism dividing the two countries. The strident dissonance of propaganda falls between, until the harmony of the greater association is torn asunder. That, however, must ever be the lot of those who fight the unending battle between the narrow and the larger conceptions of life. There is no armistice and no mercy : ~

*“ For we who fight till the world is free,
We have no comfort in victory ;
We have known each other too long, my brother,
And fought each other, the world and we.”*

If Rolland discovers the differences of Germany still unresolved, what may be said of the differences obtaining between the British masters of India and the peoples over whom they rule ? There is a condition that may be termed the unity of Europe, sadly disturbed though it may be at the moment. In Europe there is identity of colour, and the momentum of Christendom, a norm of existence peculiarly its own. In India the white man sits as an alien upon an oriental (if somewhat uncertain) throne. The quietism of the East is the antithesis of the restless and aggressive nature of the West. There is not only the colour bar, but the barrier between the ruler and ruled ; the economic bar, and the bar psychological. Fundamentally, the bar religious.

How far certain of these problems have been resolved since E. M. Forster's realistic treatment of the subject in *Passage to India*, published in 1924, it is difficult to say. Congress—since the concession of self-governing reforms

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at home, the rise of an Imperial Nazism in Europe, and a militaristic teaching on the part of Japan—dances to a rather slower tempo these days. But none the less the differences that pose the drama of *Passage to India* still to some extent remain.

With Kipling the British public had grown to regard the Indian peoples as fitting background to the prowess of the English Tommy, the Learoyds and Mulvaney of the eighties, lords of creation for whom the Gunga Dins were only too eager to lay down their lives. E. M. Forster sees the position in a totally different light. It is no longer a question of undisputed authority, but a working accommodation that must be sought between administrators who are still valuable to the country and to British mercantile interests solidly established there, and self-conscious and well-educated Indians, unwilling to concede to the British any further lease of domination. With Kipling, the issue lay between the social order of rulers and ruled, the governors depending largely upon the power of Lee-Enfield rifles to enforce their authority, and the passive nature of the governed to make such authority possible. With Forster it is a contact of equals at a time when the galling priorities still obtain. Not that in the course of his pages the traditional attitude is ever in doubt. There is the forcible (but no less sincere) outburst of Ronny Moore, the City Magistrate of Chandrapore, to his mother in explaining the official position :

“ ‘ Here we are, and we’re going to stop, and the country’s got to put up with us, gods or no gods. . . . I am out here to work, to hold this wretched country by force. I’m not a missionary or a Labour Member

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or a vague sentimental sympathetic literary man. I'm just a servant of the Government ; it's the profession you wanted me to choose myself, and that's that. We're not pleasant in India, and we don't intend to be pleasant. We've something more important to do.'"

Forster poses the issue by bringing together two highly intelligent men, one Fielding, an Englishman, the principal of the little Government College in Chandrapore, and the other, Dr. Aziz, a Hindu medico, also in the Government service. Fielding is a liberal-minded educationist, and by his sympathetic attitude, manages to invoke the affection of the hypersensitive Aziz. A bridge of friendship, it seems, has been built between the alien and the native character. Aziz goes far in breaking down traditional habit that he may be much nearer his friend. Fielding, too, ignores the habitual keep-the-Indian-at-arm's-length-for-God's-sake attitude of his fellow officials. Slowly a certain harmony has been obtained.

The disrupting element appears in the person of Adela Quested, a female English tourist. Visiting the famous caves at Marabar, in the company of Dr. Aziz, she rushes out in great confusion declaring that she has been assaulted by the Indian. When Aziz is arrested, affirming his innocence, racial feeling in the town leaps immediately to boiling-point. The two peoples, British and Indian, align opposing forces. The British must stand firm, shoulder to shoulder, administering justice upon one who has grossly assaulted one of their women folk ; the Indians, assured of the Doctor's innocence, read in this attitude another attempt at Imperial domina-

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tion. In an atmosphere electric with hatred, Aziz is brought before the court. Meanwhile, Miss Quested, having arrived at the conclusion that Aziz isn't guilty after all, and that she made a terrible mistake about the cave incident, decides now to retract her accusation. The Englishry declare such an attitude impossible, since in such a crucial moment it will be interpreted by the other side as an act of weakness. Miss Quested, however, continues to persist in her statement, and Aziz is discharged.

But black bitterness engulfs the Indian as he dwells upon the incident, and Fielding is the first to feel it. The bridge is broken. Community of interest and personal affection go down as mere irrelevancy. And the two men neither see nor communicate with each other for a considerable length of time.

They meet again ; but the old division still obtains, particularly in the heart of Aziz. There can be no mellowing of friendship upon a basis of mutual respect until Englishman and Indian are fully independent of each other, and then, and then ?—"Why can't we be friends now ?" says Fielding. "It's what I want. It's what you want." But the horses didn't want it (concludes E. M. Forster)—they swerved apart ; the earth didn't want it, sending up rocks through which the riders must pass in single file ; the temples, the tank, the jail, the palace, the birds, the carrion, the Guest House, that came into view as they issued from the gap and saw Mau beneath : they didn't want it, they said in their hundred voices, "No, not yet," and the sky said, "No, not there."

After reading *Passage to India* the Plain Man may very well wonder where Forster's gift of analysis is leading,

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for it will be with the meaning and content of the book with which he will be primarily concerned. Is it to Home Rule, or to continued domination? For the indecision, the shiftlessness, the feeble-forcible nature of the Indian protest are nowhere more apparent than in these pages. The book is a satire of contrasts, through which perhaps the irreconcilable may be reconciled by such an attitude as that displayed by Fielding and Mrs. Moore. But, possibly, the time is not yet. It may be that the Indian is still the nerveless and inferior being, needing more than ever the stiffening of an alien civilization. It may be that, conceded the opportunity, he will stand assured upon his own two feet, and take his place among the ruling nations of the world—the Plain Man really cannot say. What he will be thankful for is the clarity of treatment with which the conflicting interests have been presented, and the feeling that at any rate, if a basis of judgment is to be secured, then it will be through the instrumentality of such a mind as this.

CHAPTER X

ON REPUTATIONS

THE secret of reputation is in a permanent public taste. How that taste originates, is compounded, and at last endures, is of course an interesting problem for speculation. That clique and coterie may do much to advance the reputation of an individual author over a limited period of time is one of the commonplaces of literary history. How otherwise can we account for the notice accorded to the sterile obscurantism of Mr. James Joyce, or in a much more justifiable sense to the early work of Joseph Conrad? But what we are most concerned with here is that universality of opinion whereby great writers are established in the affection of mankind, and the alchemy that sets it in motion.

Perhaps the most effective testing house of all is in the prosaic avenues of the public library, where the generations co-mingle, and the seal of public approbation is set more decidedly than anywhere else. Here it is that we are brought to realize the enormous popularity of Charles Dickens. We have listened in the course of recent years to such decrying voices that we had almost begun to be influenced. Caricature one found in his pages, not character; sentimentality, not sentiment. The critics had rummaged into his private life, had brought a searchlight to bear upon his vanity, and most reducing gesture

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of all, had turned to the industry of rewriting for him the most famous of all his novels. But amazingly, ordinary people had continued to read and enjoy Dickens, actually placing him in the foreground of their affection. Their patience had been strained a little by the Johnsonese virtue of Miss Nickleby, the wordy languishing of little Nell, and the tortured spiritual exposure of Ebenezer Scrooge ; but after all, you are compelled to take a man as you find him, blemishes and everything. Without the blemishes indeed, he would hardly be the person you know.

To draw some relative conception of Dickens's importance it is only necessary to make a comparison, not with his great contemporary Thackeray (with whom he was never really in competition), but with the much vaunted creation of R. S. Surtees—Mr. Jorrocks, the hunting grocer. When all allowances have been made—*i.e.* Surtees lack of interest in social problems, in politics, in education—there is still a yawning gulf between two such characters as Mr. Jorrocks and Mr. Pickwick. Both Dickens and Surtees moved in an early Victorian setting, but how different a picture is presented by each author to the reader. Take, for example, the respective trial scenes from *Handley Cross* and *Pickwick Papers*. One has to deal with trouble concerning a horse, the other concerning a woman. Judges, lawyers, witnesses, are there ; but where Surtees soars only fitfully, descending time and again to the level of mere reportage, Dickens maintains an easy and a buoyant mastery throughout. The failure of Surtees lies not in lack of intention, nor indeed of industry, but in a certain vision—the fox-hunting circle that comprised his universe, being also his limitation. There is a severe

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class basis to his merriment, the butt of which is usually the *nouveaux riches*, the sponger, or the servile attendant. Aristocratic huntsmen were a race apart, surveying the scene with Olympian power, the M.F.H. of course, the most glorious of beings. It is a dual world of those who maintain their aspirates, and those who drop them; a world where, because of excessive outdoor life, the humour is of a very primitive order—one of pun, practical joke, and hunting misadventure, the high light of which is a middle-class parvenu sitting up to his neck in a ditch of muddy water.

By contrast, the humour (and therefore the real strength) of Dickens is comparatively class-less. Mr. Pickwick's roving commission alone is the credential of all that will follow. From cricket field to manor-house, from Assembly Hall to the debtors' prison, there is human fellowship and a vast humanity. Small wonder that human beings have grown to recognize its validity, and to concede to such an author a unique place in their affections.

In a peculiar sense a reputation may rest almost entirely upon the skill with which an author is able to manipulate the mentality of the society in which he lives. The unique success of Hall Caine for example, becoming as he did the very wealthiest of writers, is only to be explained in terms of a generation much more familiar with the Bible than this, for it was Caine who realized that the most "respectable" people will turn to sexual scandal if presented in the right sort of Biblical atmosphere. Like Kipling, he developed a kind of Biblical English, the effect of which was to induce a highly moral impression upon the mind of the reader. His plots were old Testament stories, adapted to nine-

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teenth-century needs. The titles alone display the author's full intention : *The Scapegoat*, *The Bondman*, *The Woman Thou Gavest Me*, *The Eternal City*, etc. Marie Correlli, too, came in upon the tide of that fictionized religion, and many another author of lesser consequence.

Sometimes an author would seem to serve an urgent social need. There is some quality in his work that strikes a deeply responsive chord only possible for the generation in which he lives. One at once remembers Jack London, and the enormous popularity of his writings in the first decade of the present century. Evolutionary theory, and the increasing mechanization of mankind, were certainly responsible. To the office worker and city dweller he offered the great open spaces of civilization's frontier, the tough association of the Klondyke, the glamorous beaches of Tahiti. To the limitless horizon of the hobo he added the animal intensity of the wolf-hound. A dramatized travelogue.

If that, however, had been Jack London's only contribution to literature, it is only fair to relate that he would have been but one among many competitors. Rider Haggard in *Allan Quatermaine* and *King Solomon's Mines*, did the same sort of thing excellently. A novel, however, from Jack London's pen was not only a record of stirring adventure, but an essay in philosophic interpretation. He brought into the forefront of his fiction not only the eternal "how," but also an element of the eternal "why" ? When the cottonwoods sent their snowy fluffs upon the torn trail of the gold-pro prospector, or Wolf Larsen drove his crew by foot and fist into the performance of their duties, the reader was made to feel that this was but a microcosm of the physical universe. Nature red in tooth and claw, the mind of White Fang

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operating, curiously human as that of his master, were explicable only in terms of Spencer, Darwin, and Nietzsche, with Marx as an emphatic afterthought. Whether London's intellectual paganism did greatly succeed with his generation is a very difficult question to answer. Certainly it lent to "toughness" a certain rationality of purpose. The war of 1914, however, brought all the meaty adventure that many readers of London had hitherto lacked, and his already waning popularity began to diminish.¹

Perhaps the most fleeting of all reputations is that based upon what may be termed the fiction of speculation, of possible worlds and Utopias. The immense vogue of Jules Verne in the eighties and nineties of last century is now only a memory. Mechanical invention outstripped even the mind of the master, until the wonder of actual accomplishment eclipsed the printed page. Even Mr. H. G. Wells's sensation of 1909, *The War in the Air*, is definitely *démodé*. Books, however, such as *Men Like Gods* and *Brave New World* remain to stimulate an interest in the future.

Every conception of Utopia implies a criticism of contemporary society. For years now Aldous Huxley's line of criticism has been a very decided one. Intellectually he embodied the mood of disillusionment that swept across the post-war world. *Brief Candles*, *Antic Hay*, *Barren Leaves*, by title alone express the attitude with which he looked upon his fellow men and women. But poking fun at the prigs of the arts, and finding satisfaction nowhere, is hardly sufficient warranty for the continued admiration of posterity. The literature of a

¹ It is only fair to add that, like those of Mark Twain and many another, Jack London's later writings were of inferior quality.

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mood, of successive self-loathings, is not enough. Men need to be uplifted and inspired. Courage and endurance are a necessity.

Aldous Huxley's nearest approach to success is in *Brave New World*. More encyclopedic in its range than *Erewhon*, more witty than *Men Like Gods*, it poses for humanity the terrible problem of a scientifically conditioned universe. It stands as a portent and a warning to those who believe in a final prerogative for Science, the terrible new world in which the man of poetic and imaginative mind would become an outcast and an object of unutterable despair. In *Brave New World* the poetic Indian hangs himself, and with this event the story draws to a close.

In spite of its power, *Brave New World* produces a somewhat negative effect upon the mind. Despairing immolation is not enough. There is such a thing, the Plain Man conceives, as living for society—an act of faith much more positive than the pitiable gesture of the suicide. Huxley may claim that the suicide of his chief character is of a symbolical order, and necessary to the rounding off of the story. Be that as it may, one can only conclude as a general proposition, that in times that try men's souls, in personal or in national extremity, the note of courage and hope is an ingredient most necessary to a permanent allegiance on the part of the reader.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

THE field runs illimitably, and always to a shifting focus of interest. There is now a considerable body of fiction dealing with warfare, mainly the crop of the 1914-18 years. Up to the Great War, the unadulterated narration of the doings of men-at-arms had been comparatively nil, if one excludes *War and Peace*, and odd novels like Gleig's *The Subaltern*, and Lever's *Charles O'Malley, the Irish Dragoon*. After the Great War, however, there was a great renewing of experience in terms of autobiography and fiction. *All Quiet on the Western Front* was perhaps the most famous of all the post-war novels; though *Under Fire*, by Henri Barbusse, deserves to be noticed. What the Plain Man will have in mind is the changing attitude to the army displayed by the great majority of Englishmen in the last thirty years, and set out accordingly in fiction. At one time the army was supposed to be not an altogether "nice" subject. With the spread of pacifism, writers felt such an organization to be completely outworn, and turned accordingly to more "enlightened" material. Soldiers and soldiering belonged to the dark ages of humanity. Arms limitation, and even arms abolition, was thoroughly in the air.

With the passage of time this attitude changed. It was seen that liberty assailed by arms would have to be de-

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fended by arms. The assumption that a peaceful attitude would evoke a corresponding peacefulness was doomed to cruel disappointment. The peaceable nation was hailed by the aggressor as a decadent nation, the fitting object for blackmail and plunder. Accordingly, with the establishment of a compulsory militia and a nation in arms, it is no great stroke of prophecy to announce that for a considerable time our attitude towards the army will return to something approximating the attitude displayed by Englishmen during the Napoleonic Wars, with the important exception that the lower ranks will be held in less disrepute as a social body than that of which even Wellington declared himself afraid.

Fiction will reflect this attitude, and the Plain Man will not be surprised at the advent of novels setting out the new position.

That, figuratively speaking, the world will continue to shrink in size is now regarded as a commonplace, so that the trend of fiction will involve a closer study of nations become neighbours because of the new mechanization. There will be a greater intermingling of the peoples.

Greater mechanization will involve also a reassertion of spiritual values. Those novels like *Brave New World* may be anticipated, and as education increases, criticism of the social structure, not as hitherto from the top downwards, but from the bottom upwards.

Upon the fringes of fiction dance and toss a number of the unclassified novels that attract a certain amount of attention because they are associated with nothing whatever save the individual idiosyncrasy of the author. Your own life and action are not affected in the least by having read them. They have stimulated neither a

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sense of duty nor a proper regard for one's fellows. They are the products of self-interest and self-absorption. The Plain Man will learn to recognize these writings for what they are. In the long run he will turn and return with abiding pleasure to the fiction by which he is able to see more beauty in the world, more scope for sympathy and interest in his fellows, and a greater development of his own ineluctable sources of wisdom.

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