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Title Aspects of the modern Short

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ASPECTS OF
THE MODERN SHORT STORY
ENGLISH AND AMERICAN

ASPECTS OF THE MODERN SHORT STORY:

ENGLISH AND AMERICAN

BY
ALFRED C. WARD

WITH TWENTY-TWO PORTRAITS

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TO

F. J.

IN ADMIRATION

GRATITUDE AND LOVE

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

MOST of the books on the Short Story which have hitherto appeared, both in England and in America, have been manuals of practice rather than critical studies. From that fact it might be inferred that would-be writers of short stories outnumber those who read this form of creative literature. Yet it is frequently said that editors fill the pages of their magazines with second-rate and tenth-rate stories because they cannot obtain even an approximate sufficiency of the first-rate work for which, it is alleged, they and their readers are clamouring.

Authors do not believe a word of this, of course—unless they are among the children of good fortune. They insist that their best work is rejected as "above the heads" of the public; and they profess to believe that the public is an ass, that the editor is its driver, and that only those writers who are willing to canter upon the "tosh horse" have any hope of emerging from the shadows of obscurity.

The aim of the present series of brief studies is to undertake an analytical survey of representative short stories by certain modern writers who have

combined literary merit with a popular appeal (the proportion in which these two elements are united varying much from author to author).

Both as a form of entertainment and as a channel for ethical instruction, the Short Story is almost literally as old as the hills. As a medium for the conscious exercise of literary art, however, it is youngest among the literary forms. By reason of its youth in this particular, the Short Story is likely to show a more surprising course of development in the near future than any other type of imaginative writing. At the moment, it is struggling against new and strange impulses inseparable from growth; it is often awkwardly self-conscious; it is sowing wild oats which in some places are rank and vigorous—in other places mannered and anæmic.

The Modern Short Story had its precocious youth in the 'eighties and 'nineties; it now seems to be on the threshold of a burgeoning maturity.

No attempt is made in the following chapters to display this rich and widespread harvest, inasmuch as the author has worked within strictly defined and self-imposed limits. His main aims have been (1) to respond to the charge that it is "quite unusual to see any adequate criticism of short stories in English," and (2) to deal with a few volumes in some detail, and thus to break with the current mode of gossiping brightly about books in general.

It is hoped that the selected bibliography at the end will indicate the author's consciousness of the magnitude of his exclusions from the text.

The unpardonable sin in literary criticism is committed when a critic persuades himself that he has achieved finality.

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Aspects of the Modern Short Story

Chapter One Introductory

THE greatest creator of short stories in world-literature was the greatest figure in world-history—Jesus of Nazareth. Like all early literature, in whatever form, the Gospel parables were transmitted orally; and the consideration that they were given for purposes of spiritual enlightenment has largely obscured the technical perfection of the form in which they have endured. Yet, even technically, they cannot be improved; they can only be enlarged and elaborated.

Who can say how many thousand times since the third decade of the Christian era the themes of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, and other parables, have been amplified and refurbished in a variety of guises? Among all such repetitions, known and unknown, however, there is none that survives to blur the clear-cut outlines of the original narratives.

The special purpose which governed the conception of the parables cannot be held to preclude their being regarded as relevant to a study of the Short Story as fiction: nothing that serves as a

model is rightly regarded as irrelevant. The parables have become fixed in human memory not because man has any natural inclination to retain moral lessons. On the contrary, the lessons are made unforgettable by their perfect medium of conveyance. The moral is no Old Man of the Sea borne uneasily upon the shoulders of the Sinbad of the story: story and moral are indissolubly interwoven; warp is inseparable from woof. The story in them is irresistible to a race of beings which, from the day of Creation, has adored stories; and no one can be attracted by the story in any one of Christ's parables without receiving also the spiritual truth which is at its heart. That is to say, the medium is perfectly adapted to the purpose—and nothing better can be said in behalf of any work of literature.

Divinity, inspiration, purity of soul—to whatever perfect qualities Christ's pre-eminence as a narrator might be attributed, it is nevertheless certain that His manner and style embody elements which cannot be ignored by any (readers as well as writers) who aim to reach an understanding of perfect literary technique in regard to the Short Story.

What, then, are the outstanding features distinguishable in these Gospel stories?

First and foremost, a clear, coherent, and attractive tale.

Second, the story begins when the parable begins; and the parable ends when the story ends—there is no surplusage, no circumlocution.

Third, a naked simplicity is observed and preserved, with the result that the appeal is neither to

highbrow nor to lowbrow, but to all—to the complex mind and to the simplex mind, equally.

Fourth, the characters are typical, without sacrificing individuality. We do not know the names of the prodigal, or of his father, or of his brother; we do not know what they looked like; yet we *know* them. This effective characterization is achieved with the utmost economy of means; indeed, by reason of that economy—inasmuch as there is no obtrusive and gratuitous detail interposed between the picture and the imaginative vision of the reader.

Fifth, the method of narration represents the shortest possible distance between the beginning and the ending of the story; the narrative does not dawdle nor double in its own tracks—it is always swiftly progressive.

There is little need to elaborate or to complicate the analysis. The elements which have been distinguished in this cursory examination will suffice as guide-lines for the consideration of any short story by any author. *First*: as to the quality and value of the plot-material. *Second*: as to the launching of the plot—whether it be without fumbling or fouling; and as to the harbourage of the plot at the journey's end, whether it be with precision and speed. *Third*: as to whether there is simplicity of style. *Fourth*: as to the people of the story—whether they are clearly visualized as individual persons, yet free from abnormality. *Fifth*: as to whether every word directly promotes progressive movement toward the end appointed.

To postulate the ideal, however, is an unsatis-

factory standard of criticism for the testing of human work. There is need to give patient and sympathetic attention to experiment and exploration and fresh endeavour, which involve trial and error, immaturity, and (it may be) certain factors not immediately intelligible to minds unprepared for experimental work.

Patience and sympathy are particularly demanded for due appreciation of some work by the younger generation of English short-story writers in the present day. Amid much that is pretentious and deliberately freakish, there exists a genuine wish to explore new fields of thought opened up by advances in psychological study. Lamentably enough, those who are content to dabble with a new thing *because* it is new, have confused the respective functions of literature and the doctor's consulting-room: they write a travesty of a pathological pamphlet and misname it a short story.

It should not be overlooked that the habit of the contemporary mind is no longer to regard human life as fixed within plainly defined and immutable boundaries. Life is now depicted as an affair of jagged and blurred edges, of hazy and indefinable outlines, where dim half-lights afford little opportunity for clear discernment. The conscious and the subconscious intermingle; death and life are uncertainly poised; the subconscious impinges upon the unconscious. May it not be (the question is implied) that death itself is but a further remove from subconsciousness; and that even death may prove, in the ultimate cycle, to be contiguous to life, in a sense at present unfathomable?

While such speculations engage the human mind, it is natural that literature should reflect the preoccupations. The Short Story has not been less susceptible to these influences than are poetry and the novel. Yet in general, perhaps, the effect has here been less deleterious. The brief prose form lends itself readily to impressionistic effect; it affords a more suitable medium than the novel for excursions into the dim territory of the subconscious; it allows experimental glimpses into "the other-world," which is—how close? how far?

This later contemporary method is unlike the method of Herodotus, of the Arabian Nights, of Boccaccio; it is unlike the method of Kipling, of W. W. Jacobs; and it is out of harmony with the taste of numerous modern readers. In so far as these experiments may be the iconoclastic work of literary rowdies, they call for reprobation; but no one is likely to question the sincerity of purpose of Katherine Mansfield, Walter de la Mare, and others whose tendencies are equally and honestly at variance with traditional modes. One thing at least must be emphasized: much that is regarded as preposterous in the subject-matter of recent prose would pass without question if cast in verse form.[1] Is it well that the farther adventures of the human imagination should be interdicted as foreign to creative *prose*?

Again, objection is made against a particular type of contemporary story on the ground that it has no plot and contains no action. When that complaint is made in regard to some specific piece of work,

[1] See chap. 12.

it is often difficult to refute, inasmuch as the due appreciation of all works of art depends upon the sharpness of perception (and in many cases upon the degree of curious interest) brought by the observer. It is not only in acuteness of hearing and of physical vision that men vary one from another; the intellectual and spiritual variation is much more pronounced. Unless there is approximate harmony between the perceptions of the reader and those of the writer, there is little likelihood of sympathetic apprehension of the artist's aims.

The assertion of deficiency in plot-interest and action may be, on the one hand, a legitimate critical objection, reflecting upon the author's competence. On the other hand, it may be an unconscious piece of self-revelation on the part of the reader, indicating his own sluggish perception.

To say that "nothing happens" in a story, sometimes means little more than that the usual stress is not laid upon cause and effect—that these are not treated as isolated phenomena. Every course of action arises from some cause and produces some effect; but between those two marks there intervenes a *process*. "They fall in love. . . . They marry"—here is a crude statement of cause and effect, the sum-total of many love-stories which meet with popular approval. Readers of another temperament, however, care little about cause and effect, as such. They are content not to be informed either that the characters fell in love or that they married; being, conversely, passionately interested in the emotional processes which transpire within two beings who are passing through

probably the most tremendous experiences possible to a man and a woman.

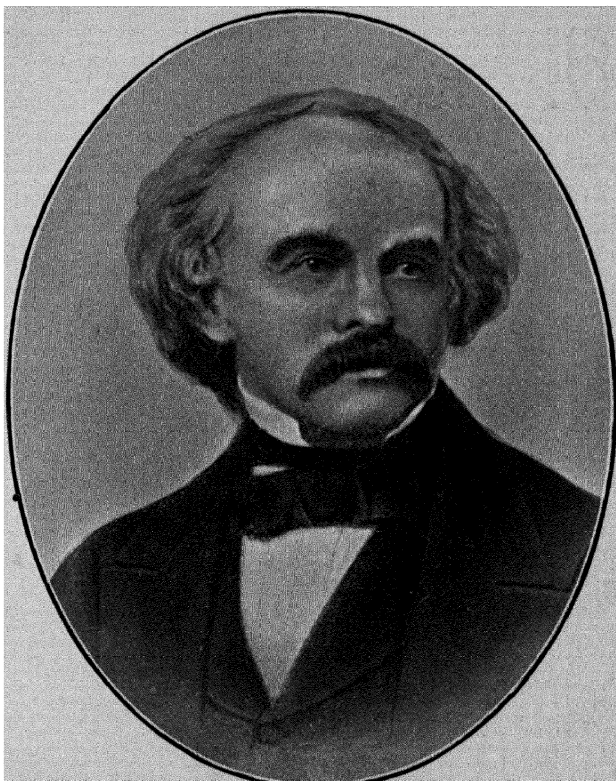
Looking somewhat closely at the short stories of the past century, it is interesting to note that the wheel has come full circle within that period. Between Nathaniel Hawthorne and the "innovators" of our own day there is no great gulf fixed. They meet in the region of half-lights, where there is commerce between this world and "the other-world."

Chapter Two Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Twice-Told Tales"

TWO centuries of New England Puritanism in the ancestral make-up of Nathaniel Hawthorne account for the dominant characteristics in his tales. While acclaiming Hawthorne's power of invention, creation, imagination, and originality, Edgar Allan Poe, his contemporary, protested that the "Twice-Told Tales" included a number of pieces that should have been called essays; and by that comment he opened a controversy which is not yet closed.

In the particular case of Hawthorne, the reason for the frequent absence of that dramatic element which is often regarded as the hall-mark of the story-teller must be sought in ethical rather than in literary considerations. Many of Hawthorne's short prose writings are fictional episodes: they contain no plot, no rounded course of action; and in one of the "Tales" (*Wakefield*) the author actually speaks of himself as writing "an article."

These facts appear to give added force to Poe's objection, until Hawthorne's writings are examined from another angle, when it will be seen that they are governed by the mood of the story-teller rather than by that of the essayist. Hawthorne's appeal is not primarily to the readers' minds, but to their hearts—the emotional invariably takes precedence of the intellectual. Although he is always the Puritan



NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE.

whose aim is didactic, he proceeds by way of the parable, not by that of the sermon.

The exact point at which an essay becomes a fictional episode, and an episode a story, cannot be fixed except by arbitrary distinctions which fail to apply to more than a minority of instances. Unless some test be applied, however, this difficulty of categorizing will arise all too frequently, and especially in relation to the short-story writers of the nineteen-twenties.

If substance and form provide no satisfactory criteria for classification, the determining factor may be found in the spirit and colouring of any particular piece of writing. These are, admittedly, evasive elements which cannot be precisely evaluated; nevertheless, the trained mind learns to distinguish without difficulty between class and class, however fine be the shades of difference.

At first glance, there would seem to be no sound reason for describing Charles Lamb's *Old China* and *Dream Children* as essays, if Hawthorne's *Sunday at Home* and *Little Annie's Ramble* be grouped as short stories. The reflective and gently moralizing tendency is common to both authors in these four pieces, as well as in other instances that might be cited. But their likeness does not reach below the surface. Lamb is wholly meditative; his essays remain part and parcel of his own mind, there is no complete parturition. Hawthorne, on the other hand, is creative; even his merely episodic pieces take on a life and colour of their own; they separate themselves from the author's personal being, however tight the rein which governs them.

Hawthorne's Little Annie is a figure walking upon her own feet, along real streets full of sound and colour and movement. She is a created fictional character, producing the illusion of actual flesh and blood. Lamb, however delightful may be the characters he pictures, does but draw black-and-white illustrations which remain flat upon the page.

Hawthorne's hesitancy to plunge definitely into the magic stream of the story-teller was largely due to his Puritanism. The moralist in him bridled the literary artist, though no more than Bunyan could he keep the artist from breaking through. In Hawthorne we discern, as it were, a threefold process: The Puritan sets out to present his parable; very soon the artist introduces movement and colour (however Rembrandtesque) beyond the terms of the licence which the Puritan had authorized; the third stage comes when the Puritan exercises his moral veto by compelling the people of the story to return into shadow.[1]

This is a process which can be observed in many of Hawthorne's stories: most clearly, perhaps, in the livid light of *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment.* Old Dr. Heidegger had received from an acquaintance a small quantity of water from the Fountain of Youth. The peculiar virtue of this fluid lay in its power to restore the vigour and beauty of youth to everything by which it was absorbed—dead flowers as well as aged human beings.

For the purposes of experiment, Dr. Heidegger called together four old friends, each of whom had

[1] Ernest Rhys, in the *Everyman* edition of "Twice-Told Tales."

had some ruling passion in earlier days—financial speculation, or the pursuit of carnal pleasure, or political ambition; while the one woman of the group, haggard Widow Wycherly, had been a great beauty with a scandalous reputation. Each of them had suffered as a result of youthful misdeeds, therefore they are striking figures for parable. So far the Puritan—who, it must be allowed, is here an admirable technician, getting to the heart of his business within the space of a single paragraph less than thirty lines long.

Thus early in the story the literary artist catches up with the moralist, and assumes control. He proceeds to revel in lovingly detailed description of the doctor's antique chamber and its furniture:

"Rows of gigantic folios and black-letter quartos . . . little parchment-covered duodecimos . . . a bronze bust of Hippocrates . . . a tall and narrow oaken chest, with its door ajar, within which doubtfully appeared a skeleton . . .;"

and there is a "book of magic"—"a ponderous folio volume, bound in black leather, with massive silver clasps." Although this is decidedly sombre, Hawthorne shows as much delight in his picturing as Keats displays in the description of Madeline's chamber in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. The errant artist even allows himself to introduce a seasoning of grim humour:

"The opposite side of the chamber was ornamented with the full-length portrait of a young

lady, arrayed in the faded magnificence of silk, satin, and brocade, and with a visage as faded as her dress. Above half a century ago, Dr. Heidegger had been on the point of marriage with this young lady; but, being affected with some slight disorder, she had swallowed one of her lover's prescriptions, and died on the bridal evening."

The doctor demonstrates the potency of the water from the Fountain of Youth by reviving a withered and crumbling rose, which had been plucked fifty-five years earlier. He afterwards fills four champagne glasses with the effervescing water, and three such draughts are necessary before the four withered and palsied guests are restored to the prime of youth —becoming merry, exuberant and frolicksome, though still under the cynical and disillusioned eye of Heidegger.

At the height of their ecstasy in the renewed joy of youth, Hawthorne the Puritan drives the fictional artist once more from the field; and mirthful shouting has to give way to a course of action which will safeguard the original didactic purpose. The three men begin to fight for the bewitching beauty who has replaced the wrinkled and ashen-hued old crone. Furniture is overturned; the vase containing the Water of Youth is shattered; the four rioters are sobered—they stand still and shiver, as youth begins rapidly to ebb from them again:

"The Water of Youth possessed merely a virtue more transient than that of wine. The delirium which it created had effervesced away. Yes!

they were old again. With a shuddering impulse, that showed her a woman still, the widow clasped her skinny hands before her face, and wished that the coffin-lid were over it, since it could be no longer beautiful."

The sensation produced by that last sentence is one of chill mortality, and the very depth of the impression registers the degree to which the imaginative artist in Hawthorne was able to supplant the preacher-moralist. In the final sentences of this story (following immediately upon the passage quoted) the moral is announced in plain terms, and comes as a deplorable anti-climax, since the lesson has already been enforced—legitimately, artistically, and powerfully—in that last despairing gesture of the Widow Wycherly.

Indeed, the true Puritan spirit is much more effectively represented by Hawthorne the artist than by Hawthorne the preacher. Puritanism is not content with a barren intellectual appeal; it strives to get through to a man's soul, which is, in general, more easily approachable through feeling than through thought. The widow's "shuddering impulse" produces an emotional response in the alert reader, and is followed by a moral reaction which leads him to a heart-searching much more moving than Hawthorne's direct preaching.

The terms "impression" and "emotional response" used above are probably the keywords necessary to a clear statement of Hawthorne's characteristics as a short-story writer. They are terms which are applicable to many of the "Twice-

Told Tales"—to *The Wedding Knell* and *The Minister's Black Veil* as precisely as to *Dr. Heidegger's Experiment.*

The tolling of the minute-bell and the slow procession of the shrouded figure and its retinue[1] create an *impression* of moral fear akin to the *sense of sin* which the Puritan is ever desirous to arouse. Hawthorne's story strives to deepen this impression, until there comes that *emotional response* which, in religious terminology, would be described as the first step to *conversion.* So powerfully does Hawthorne utilize this moral impressionism, and so cumulative is its effect, that in *The Minister's Black Veil* the reader becomes penetrated through and through by a sense of Satanic malignancy, symbolized by the terrifying folds of black crape which concealed Mr. Hooper's features.

Objection might be made that literary art should never have the primary motive of provoking a moral shudder. The legitimate function of criticism in relation to the impressionistic method is, however, to consider the degree of power instilled by the author into his work. To demur against the method —to say that the impressionistic style is less desirable than the descriptive or the dramatic—is mere evasion. A bootmaker is judged by the quality of his boots; he is not condemned because his wares are different in appearance from those of a neighbour who makes kettles.

Common sense and poetic faith are twin requisites for literary appreciation: common sense, that the reader may distinguish between the varying motives

[1] *The Wedding Knell.*

of writers; poetic faith, that he may be prepared to hold in abeyance whatever scepticism and prejudice normally animate him. The test of merit in literature should not be, "Do I like this?"; but, "What degree of success does the writer attain in the special task which he is attempting?" The reader may not wish to be convicted of sin when he reads a volume of short stories; and it is not normally the function of a short story so to convict him. But genius is rarely normal, and is nearly always disturbing. If the reader is convicted of sin (or if he experiences a moral shudder—or is made to weep, or laugh, or turn cold with horror) by the conscious exercise of a writer's genius, then the writer has succeeded in his assigned function.

The impressionistic effects in Hawthorne's stories are the outcome of deliberate purpose in the author.[1] He forged his special instrument of expression in order that he might produce just those reactions which, in the upshot, the vast majority of his readers are made to experience; and it was an instrument that Hawthorne (with Edgar Allan Poe) brought to virtual perfection.

Within the scope of the impressionistic method, it is possible for an author to secure his effects by a variety of means. Kipling is frequently an impressionist; and (also like Hawthorne) a symbolist. Yet it would be difficult to indicate two authors who are more directly at variance in their effects and practical methods. Kipling's impressionism is achieved by the employment of such symbols as a realist would naturally choose—bridges, ships,

[1] Albright, "The Short Story," pp. 88–9.

engines; while Hawthorne's symbols are imponderable and mystical.

When full account has been taken of Hawthorne's Puritan inheritance, there still remains much in the writer's temperament that is not explained until it has been brought into relation with the circumstances of his early years and the almost monastic seclusion in which he then lived. His father died when Nathaniel was four years old, and "the only external heritage which Hawthorne received at his father's death was a darkened home. His mother, beautiful, ascetic, in the human rather than the religious way, took the veil of widowhood, and it was never laid aside." [1] After he had graduated, Hawthorne returned home, and passed three "hermit years" in his mother's house. Of this period he wrote some years later in a letter to a friend: "I had always a natural tendency (it appears to have been on the paternal side) toward seclusion; and this I now indulged to the utmost, so that, for months together, I scarcely held human intercourse outside of my family; seldom going out except at twilight, or only to take the nearest way to the most convenient solitude. . . ."

The powerful influence of this period of seclusion is vouched for by Hawthorne himself, in a famous passage from his "American Note-Books," in which he speaks of the "thousands upon thousands of visions" that appeared to him in his lonely chamber in the family mansion. "Sometimes it seemed as if I were already in the grave, with only life enough to be chilled and benumbed. . . . We are but shadows;

[1] Moncure Conway, "Nathaniel Hawthorne."

we are not endowed with real life, and all that seems most real about us is but the thinnest substance of a dream, till the heart be touched."

The "Twice-Told Tales" are the spiritual product of that period, when he was hoping against hope for the fame which seemed beyond his reach—so far beyond that he felt a chill numbness as of the grave, where only shadows and tenuous dreams could touch him. Unless the mood of those days is kept in mind as the "Twice-Told Tales" are read, it is almost impossible to realize the true import of their pale tint, as of "flowers that blossomed in too retired a shade." The author tells us, in his preface to "Twice-Told Tales," that "the book, if you would see anything in it, requires to be read in the clear, brown, twilight atmosphere in which it was written."

Living so long with shadows, shadows became to him symbols of the actual; and the mystical tendency which was part of his inheritance became confirmed. This correspondence of a mystical temperament and a shadowy environment served to break down the wall which, for the bulk of mankind, separates the material from the spiritual; so that again and again in Hawthorne's stories spiritual apprehension and physical sensation seem to merge. Did the tolling of the bell at the marriage-service (in *The Wedding Knell*) really impinge upon the bodily ears of the bridal party—or was it a supernatural warning to a troubled conscience? Was the dark procession that passed into the church, with the shrouded bridegroom in its midst, an actual gathering of human beings—or a figment of the imagination? A dogmatically exclusive answer can-

not be made to either question. Certainly both bell and shroud were realities; but in Hawthorne's mystical half-light, have we any authority for asserting that material phenomena are more "real" than mystical symbols? Does the transformed life of the bride weigh less in the scale than the iron of the bell and the flax of the shroud?

No finished and finite interpretation can be given of any mystical utterance; and, in this respect, Hawthorne's writings resemble the portraits in his *The Prophetic Pictures.* The author writes therein of two paintings (of Walter Ludlow and of Elinor, Walter's wife):

"Travelled gentlemen, who professed a knowledge of such subjects, reckoned these among the most admirable specimens of modern portraiture; while common observers compared them with the originals, feature by feature, and were rapturous in praise of the likeness. But it was on a third class—neither travelled connoisseurs nor common observers, but people of natural sensibility—that the pictures wrought their strongest effect. Such persons might gaze carelessly at first, but, becoming interested, would return day after day and study these painted faces like the pages of a mystic volume. . . . They sometimes disputed as to the expression which the painter had intended to throw upon the features; all agreeing that there was a look of earnest import, though no two explained it alike."

Hawthorne's tales are one long challenge to what he terms (in *The Snow Image*) "stubborn materialism":

men despise the wonders of God and scoff at " childish miracles," oblivious to the significant truth that it was a Child who, as the Vicegerent of God, uttered wisdom beyond the understanding of the wise.

However burdened as an artist, Hawthorne was a great originator. His extraordinary fecundity as a maker of stories was increased rather than limited by his spiritual austerity. As a Puritan, his heart was that of a simple child who heard no call to question great wonders which sophisticated and sceptical modern minds put aside as incredible. " Incredible " was a word that had no place in Hawthorne's vocabulary, and its absence was an important negative factor in connexion with his creative work. Had he striven for verisimilitude, had he cared to know that posterity would dismiss his moral tags as thoroughly inartistic, he would scarcely have written at all.

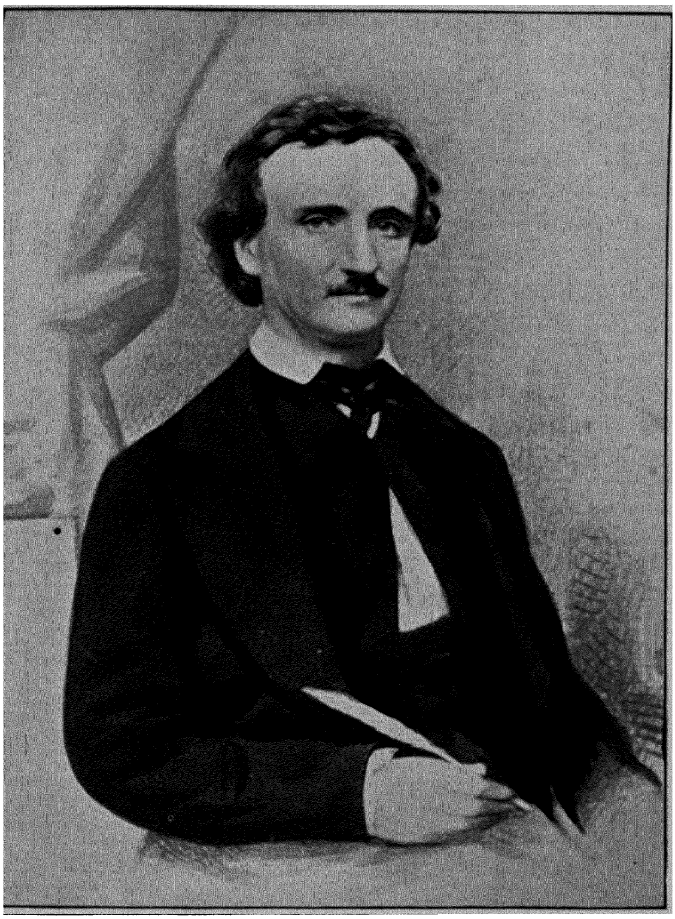
Chapter Three Edgar Allan Poe: "Tales of Mystery and Imagination"

FEAR, that gaunt phantasm which haunted the mind of Ronald Usher with torturing possibilities,[1] is a primary motive in the tales of Edgar Allan Poe. Whatever was likely to summon up shapes of horror in the mind had a morbid fascination for him; and inasmuch as strong disapproval of the tone of his stories is aroused in many readers by the spirit of Poe, there could hardly be a better tribute to his power as a writer than the fact that he continues to be widely read.

Hawthorne's stories are sometimes depreciated by critics on account of what is described as uniformity of tone. They suggest that "a common greyness silvers everything," and that it produces a sense of monotony which is only slightly mitigated by the variety of plot in the stories. That this criticism is not unfounded is implied by Hawthorne's singleness of purpose: whatever plot came to hand had necessarily to be given a religious or ethical bias.

Edgar Allan Poe was one among those critics who charge Hawthorne with lack of variety. He spoke of the "'peculiarity,' or sameness, or monotone" of the "Twice-Told Tales," and found a leading reason for this monotony in "the strain of allegory which completely overwhelms the greater number of Hawthorne's subjects." When we turn from

[1] *The Fall of the House of Usher.*



EDGAR ALLAN POE.

Poe's commentary upon his contemporary to examine his own "Tales of Mystery and Imagination," it is a little surprising to find that his work, also, is open to criticism upon the score of monotony of impression. It is even more surprising to find that (actually in the course of his essay on Hawthorne) Poe employs words which can be used in justification of the conscious employment of sameness. He says: "Without a certain continuity of effort—without a certain duration or repetition of purpose—the soul is never deeply moved. There must be the dropping of the water upon the rock." (Of course, Poe is here speaking of continuity of effort and duration of purpose as they might be employed within the compass of a single piece of writing, and not as affecting the general tone of a whole volume of stories.)

What then is a reader likely to find when "Tales of Mystery and Imagination" are considered in relation to Poe's own utterances as a critic? He will certainly find that, in almost every tale, Poe employs the device as of reiterated dropping of water upon the rock until an indelible impression is made upon the hardest surface. After reading *The Fall of the House of Usher*, or *The Pit and the Pendulum*, or *The Black Cat*, or *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the most superficial testing of his own feelings should satisfy the reader that it is "continuity of effort" and "repetition of purpose" which have moved him. What is true of any one of this group of stories is true of all four, and is equally true of others in the volume.

Moreover, the monotony which characterizes Poe

is a more serious blemish than that which he stigmatized in Hawthorne. Variety of incident, and modification of light and shade in the texture of the stories, perceptibly relieve the uniformity of purpose at which Hawthorne aimed. With Poe, it is not only that his atmosphere is invariably murky and illumined only by that " sulphureous lustre " of which he speaks more than once; nor is it merely that he, too, has a uniform purpose—a purpose much lower than Hawthorne's, and one which is confined almost wholly to a desire to make the reader's flesh creep! The monotony which arises from both the uniformity of atmosphere and the uniformity of purpose in many of his tales is much aggravated by the similarity of a number of his plots. *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and *The Premature Burial* have a deadly sameness only slightly mitigated by a thin veneer of difference, ineffectual to veil their virtual identity.

This persistent duration of purpose in Poe is directly traceable to his own morbidity of mind, a condition which was stereotyped in him by the prolonged excesses of a tragically disordered life.

His aim as a story-teller was the legitimate one of stirring the emotions of readers who had (as he says) " a holy horror of being moved." While it is a simple matter to wish that the colouring of Poe's mind had been less morbid and that he had sought to move his readers by other means, the power of his genius is beyond question; he does succeed in moving us deeply, even when we are unwilling agents. Upon occasion, indeed, he tips the balance definitely

against himself by the introduction of some phrase which inclines us only toward disgust—as in the final sentence of *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*; but, in general, he does effectually hold us rigid with his glittering eye, which, though intensely horrible, is at the same time fascinating.

What, in actual experience, Poe really seems to do, is something much more than to hold us spellbound. He transports us, as it were, to another world that might suitably stand as a representation of hell. This power of imaginative transportation makes Poe a more powerful moralist than Hawthorne could ever be. Hawthorne would wish to persuade men into heaven—though at times his persuasion is admittedly more than a trifle urgent! Poe, on the contrary, would assuredly terrify them from hell.

The Tell-Tale Heart is one of the most effective parables ever conceived. Shorn of its fantastic details regarding the murdered man's vulture-like eye, and the long-drawn-out detail concerning the murderer's slow entrance into his victim's room, the story stands as an unforgettable record of the voice of a guilty conscience. Beneath the floor lies the victim's body; the police-officers sit chatting pleasantly with the murderer, who has met them with perfect outward calm and apparently satisfied them that the old man whom he had killed is absent in the country. Then, above the cheery talk of familiar things, he begins to hear " a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton "—the sound of the ceaseless beating of the tell-tale heart. By its insistent pulsation he is driven into a state of increasing terror and frenzy,

until he tears up the flooring-boards and reveals his crime.

Despite its merit as a parable, *The Tell-Tale Heart* is marred by the insanity of the chief character. From the very first sentence his madness is apparent through his desperate insistence upon his sanity; and the preliminaries of his crime go to prove that madness. The vital weakness of Poe's stories in this kind is his repeated use of the motive of mental abnormality. Psychological fiction (and Poe was among its earliest practitioners) depends for its effect upon the study of the human mind in its *conscious* state—whereas insanity is, to all intents and purposes, a condition of unconsciousness.

Is it not possible to contemplate a re-writing of *The Tell-Tale Heart* in a manner which would preserve its unique character as a parable of the self-betrayal of a criminal by his conscience, while at the same time vastly increasing its interest as a story of human action? As Poe writes the story, we have the spectacle of a demented creature smothering his helpless old victim without reason or provocation, other than the instigation of his own mad obsession: "Object there was none. Passion there was none." This absence of motive robs the story of every vestige of dramatic interest, for it is an elementary axiom in criticism that what is motiveless is inadmissible in literary art. The provision of an adequate motive for the murder, and the subsequent commission of the murder by one who is otherwise sane, would bring the story on to the plane of credibility and dramatic interest. If the circumstances of the story were thus altered, the implacable workings of con-

science and the portrayal of their cumulative influence upon the mind of the criminal, could scarcely fail to have a much more powerful effect upon the mind of the reader than is actually the case in the story as it stands.

Two things, at least, should be remembered, however, when we make these strictures in regard to Edgar Allan Poe's work. *First*, that he had ever before him the aberrations of his own troubled mind —doubtfully poised at all times, perhaps, and almost certainly subject to more or less frequent periods of disorder : consequently, it was probably more nearly normal, for him, to picture the abnormal than to depict the average. *Second*, that literary men in general, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, were still in the trough of the wave of German romanticism, which exalted extravagant and clamorous and stormy sentimentality above the quieter, deeper, truer moods of human feeling.

Considering, then, the temperamental drawbacks by which Poe was beset, and also that the naturalistic mode in literature is the fruitage of more recent times, he should be judged by standards different from those that serve for other writers. The wonder surely is that Poe should be able still to sway modern readers with such unprepossessing material.

Wherein lies the true secret of his power ?

Words constitute what is probably the most intractable material in which any artist can choose to work ; and Poe's power is to be traced to his masterly manipulation of words. In his hands, they become plastic as wax, flexible as a rapier, corrosive as acid, excoriating as whipcord, irresistible in

their action as the perpetual dripping of water from a height. It is particularly for similes suggesting pain or punishment that one seeks, when desiring to convey the effect of Poe's words. Were it his style merely that is in question, it might be apposite to say that it is limpid and direct; but his actual literary style is overshadowed by the effects which he produces outside the range of verbal felicity. Poe's choice of words, and the particular manner in which he associates them, might therefore seem at first glance to be unimportant, as compared with the effects produced by his words. But the effect undoubtedly springs in an important degree from the author's subtle skill in verbal arrangement.

Although many regard *The Fall of the House of Usher* as Poe's finest story, he nowhere fulfils his artistic purpose more potently than in *The Pit and the Pendulum*—which, as a story of the Spanish Inquisition, has the advantage of a setting external to the writer's mind.

According to Poe's own principle (stated in the essay on Hawthorne), the skilful literary artist who proposes to work in the medium of the short story should first conceive, "with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect* to be wrought out"; he should then combine "such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the pre-established design." Much would require to be added to these sentences in order to reduce to

a formula the art of short-story writing, even as Poe alone conceived it: the one thing that should be added here, is on a point to which he does not refer—the importance of the ending of a story. Inharmonious or inorganic endings are among the outstanding defects of Hawthorne's literary management in "Twice-Told Tales." The old-time fable customarily broke off its narrative at the most entirely fascinating point, and unblushingly prefaced its bald concluding sentences with the chilling word: MORAL. Hawthorne varies this procedure only so far as to omit the label; and his conclusions are almost always thoroughly inartistic. In this matter of endings, Poe shows much greater skill than Hawthorne.

The Pit and the Pendulum begins according to a method which Poe frequently employed—the method of insinuation, as distinct from the method of statement and description. Criticism is limited to the method of statement and description; and, accordingly, it is necessary for the present purpose to state at once, in plain terms, the very things that Poe deliberately avoids stating, because his purpose is to instil the knowledge into the minds of his readers by means which are forcible in their very indirectness. The first fact that a commentator upon this story has to state, is a fact which does not emerge until the tale is done: *viz.* that the hero, a victim of the Inquisition, is ultimately released from his torture-chamber by the commander of the French army which captured Toledo from the Spaniards.

The story begins at the moment immediately

following that at which it ends—the moment after the prisoner's release. With the second sentence of the narrative, however, we are carried back to the earlier moment of the prisoner's condemnation before the Inquisitorial Court, and an impression of the scene is suggested to the reader through the blurred vision of the benumbed man :

" The sentence—the dread sentence of death—was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears. After that, the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum. It conveyed to my soul the idea of *revolution* —perhaps from its association in fancy with the burr of a mill-wheel. This only for a brief period ; for presently I heard no more. Yet, for a while, I saw ; but with how terrible an exaggeration ! I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white—whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words—and thin even to grotesqueness ; thin with the intensity of their expression of firmness—of immovable resolution—of stern contempt of human torture. I saw that the decrees of what to me was Fate, were still issuing from those lips. I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables of my name ; and I shuddered because no sound succeeded. I saw, too, for a few moments of delirious horror, the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies which enwrapped the walls of the apartment. And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At first they wore the aspect of charity, and seemed white slender angels who

would save me; but then, all at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fibre in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery, while the angel forms became meaningless spectres, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them there would be no help. And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave. The thought came gently and stealthily, and it seemed long before it attained full appreciation; but just as my spirit came at length properly to feel and entertain it, the figures of the judges vanished, as if magically, from before me; the tall candles sank into nothingness; their flames went out utterly; the blackness of darkness supervened; all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades. Then silence, and stillness, and night were the universe. I had swooned."

This is a particularly favourable passage in which to examine Poe's power of suggestion, because it is free from the cruder kind of insistent morbidity that he so often employs. He starts with the intention of creating a powerful imaginative impression of the sensations of a man who has been sentenced to meet his death by a means which has not been particularized, but which he knows will be inhuman and terrible. Poe is psychologically true when he represents the first reactions to that sentence as producing a state of coma. Nature softens her worst blows by inducing a state of semi-consciousness; and Poe aims to represent that state.

He can work effectively only through the medium of his readers' senses; and the particular channel he chooses for creating the important first impression is the sense of hearing: "the voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum"—likened, later, to "the burr of a mill-wheel." From the channel of sound, Poe passes to the channel of sight: "I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. . . . I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. . . . I saw . . . the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies which enwrapped the walls of the apartment . . . my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At first they . . . seemed white slender angels who would save me."

Having utilized the senses of hearing and sight, Poe deepens the impression by bringing into operation the sense of bodily feeling: following a sensation of deadly nausea, the victim felt every fibre in his frame thrill, as if he had touched the wire of a galvanic battery. Later in the story, a further channel of sense impression (that of smell) is employed, as "the peculiar smell of decayed fungus" arose to the prisoner's nostrils in the darkness of his cold, damp, and slimy cell.

As the tale proceeds, the whole gamut of the reader's emotions is brought into play, and Poe strikes upon the human instrument one chord after another, with the assurance of a master. We may rebel against a process in which we, as readers, become more or less passive instruments of response; we may close the book and decline to read any more: that is of no consequence, however. Poe's purpose is to play upon us, as instruments, a

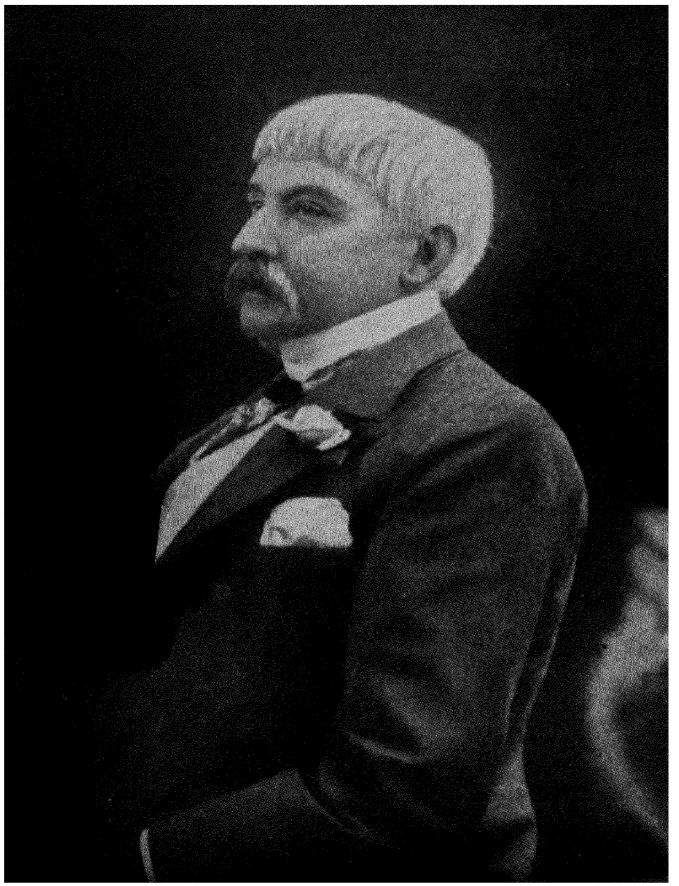
symphony of suffering; he succeeds wholly in his purpose with very many of those who read through to the end; and he succeeds in part, at least, with those who cry, "I will have no more of this!"

The power of any such literary method as this is necessarily limited. No author can do more than occasionally repeat the symphony of suffering. Nature takes care of us to that extent. No normal person's flesh will creep repeatedly under the influence of every story in a volume. Horror produces its own anti-toxin and automatically inoculates us against further horror, temporarily at any rate. So that, even in Poe's expert hands, the reader becomes indifferent; and from feeling how deadly is Poe's power of suggestion, he may, after a prolonged sitting, say: "How dull!" But next week, or next month, or next year, if he return to "Tales of Mystery and Imagination" (and most probably he will return), his response will again be strong.

Edgar Allan Poe was a pioneer; his deficiencies were those of a pioneer. He had to blaze a trail in new territory, he was led sometimes to employ devices that were crude and ugly; none the less, he opened up new vistas for the short-story writer, and many have followed in his path.

Because they paved the way for an army of other writers, Poe's detective stories represent an important part of his work. He was the originator of that type of detective story in which deductive reasoning is made the basis of investigation. Indeed, *The Purloined Letter*, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, and *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* contain much

reasoning to little story. Some of Hawthorne's tales may be very close to the essay form; Poe's detective stories are, almost entirely, essays in criminology. He gathers evidence and puts it under the microscope with a degree of patience that most readers are unable to emulate. What story he does embody consists, unfortunately, largely in unimpressive characteristics that have been lifted almost unchanged into the stories of more recent writers. The intolerable Watson has his prototype in Poe's pages; Sherlock Holmes's pipe is there, too; and there, also, are those fatuous and wondrously obtuse police officers who have made the fortunes of so many private detectives, in fiction if not in fact.



[*Photo by Geo E Clarke, Camberley.*

BRET HARTE.

Chapter Four Bret Harte: "The Luck of Roaring Camp"

NOT long after "The Luck of Roaring Camp" was first printed in the *Overland Monthly*, Bret Harte began a triumphal progress across the American continent. It was in 1868, when the last survivor of the Irving-Poe-Hawthorne triumvirate had been dead for several years; and American fiction in the new generation was not promising any adequate replacement of this pioneer group which had seemed about to establish an American tradition in literature.

While the sentinels upon the literary watch-towers in the Eastern States were thus feeling that the night was far too long, a star of surprising magnitude appeared where it was least expected. A hand accordingly beckoned from Boston, and Bret Harte left San Francisco in order to join the staff of the *Atlantic Monthly* at a salary of ten thousand dollars a year. His eastward railway journey was graced by scenes of enthusiasm and esteem such as are now jealously denied to any who do not derive from the reigning dynasty of Hollywood, Los Angeles. . . .

There is no need to dig deeply in order to understand why Bret Harte's short stories carried him to immediate fame and fortune. The pleasant slumbers of Washington Irving, the shadowy sobriety of

Hawthorne, and the sulphureous vapours of Poe, did not make for the gaiety of nations; nor did such characteristics warm the hearts of humanity or make the whole world kin. When these earlier writers dealt with human beings, it was usually at a distant remove, and in an allegorized or mesmerical medium.

Bret Harte's happy service was to bring readers at one leap into the vitalizing sunshine of golden California: where "sweet-scented grass, which the children loved to keep in their desks, intertwined with the plumes of the buckeye, the syringa, and the wood-anemone, and the dark blue cowl of the monk's-hood, or deadly aconite"; where the delicacy and confident innocence of Miss Mary the schoolmistress dwelt alongside the drunken debauchery of Sandy Morton and the curses of Mother Shipton.

What the "great reading public" loves, is not subtle gradations, but sharp contrasts of bright sunlight and deep shadow. It desires not only to see innocence and villany engaged in combat, but also to be led to believe that a goodly number among the devils of this world have embryonic angel's wings. The deep-drinking, hard-swearing, reckless gamblers of the Western gold-mining camps were depicted by Bret Harte as susceptible to strangely generous impulses, and as capable of being abashed and reformed (at least for a while) by speechless innocence or helpless need.

The type of literary critic who bases his judgments upon an unblemished record of human inexperience, finds no difficulty in dismissing Bret Harte's stories

with a curl of the lip and an all-embracing condemnatory word: "Sentimentalism!" The themes used by Bret Harte are certainly ingenuous. Roaring Camp changes its character in one short year; and, ceasing to resemble an annexe of hell, becomes like unto a masculine Dorcas meeting—just because it has had to undertake the guardianship of a nameless infant whose despised and outcast mother died at its birth. Miggles, an attractive daughter of joy, retires from the public eye in order to devote herself lovingly and whole-heartedly to a paralyzed and dumb imbecile, who in the days of his strength had been her lover. When the outcasts of Poker Flat are snowed up, dissolute old Mother Shipton starves herself to death so that a girl companion shall have the week's meagre rations which the old woman has kept untouched. Tennessee's partner, notwithstanding that Tennessee has used him badly, is willing to sacrifice all his personal possessions if Judge Lynch will acquit Tennessee. And even after that fruitless offer of a bribe has imperilled his own neck, Tennessee's partner faithfully waits by "the ominous tree," so that he may carry the body of his friend on its last silent journey. When the drunken occupants of Simpson's Bar become moved at heart by the babbling of a sick boy on Christmas Eve, one of their number rides fifty perilous miles on horseback at dead of night in order to bring back a few poor toys to the child:

"And even so, bedraggled, ragged, unshaven and unshorn, with one arm hanging helplessly at his

side, Santa Claus came to Simpson's Bar and fell fainting on the first threshold. The Christmas dawn came slowly after, touching the remoter peaks with the rosy warmth of ineffable love. And it looked so tenderly on Simpson's Bar that the whole mountain, as if caught in a generous action, blushed to the skies."

A writer of fiction who ventures to show the outcropping of human sensibility in natures free from the anæmic influences of urban civilization, is unlikely to escape the double charge of improbability and sentimentality. As will be seen in the next chapter, Ambrose Bierce held strong views in regard to the demand for probability as a necessary factor in imaginative literature. At this point, it need only be suggested that not one of the situations, summarized above from Bret Harte's stories, violates human experience of probability. The nearer men and women approach to the rougher contacts of life and death, the more probable it becomes that they will obey illogically-generous impulses, and pursue those impulses with a simple-hearted consistency which the cultured misname sentimentality.

Apologetic is uncalled-for in any critical survey of Bret Harte's work, once his plots are accepted at their own high worth. He handles his chosen situations with assurance, and combines virility with delicacy of treatment as only an artist who is also a master-craftsman can. Moreover, it must be recognized that his stories have a much more complex organic unity than those of Poe or Hawthorne; and

that, while their structure is of greater complexity, their aim is simpler and more direct.[1]

The parabolic intention of Hawthorne, and the more violent impressionism of Poe, were secured by insistence upon a single particular factor; so that the resultant work, technically, was something of a monstrosity. Bret Harte's primary and paramount aim was to tell a story that would create the greatest possible interest in the greatest possible number of readers. The singleness of that aim involves many problems of craftsmanship: it means that the writer has to work out a method that will enable him to be all things to all men—usually an ignoble endeavour in the moral sphere, but representing a quest for perfection in the purpose of a literary artist. He must, in the first place, guarantee close approximation to reality in proportioning his work. Normally, a living creature must have the natural outward form and all the common characteristics of its species, before it can secure universal appreciation upon other grounds. Deformity engages only sectional attention, for reasons which vary from section to section. Whether regarded from the angle of plot or from that of construction, the stories of Hawthorne and Poe are not fully-

[1] The influence of Dickens's work upon Bret Harte is demonstrated by his several biographers. In some instances he consciously imitated the English novelist; but—"Bret Harte's imitations of Dickens occur only in a few passages of a few stories. When Bret Harte nodded, he wrote like Dickens. But the better stories, and the great majority of the stories, show no trace of this blemish. Bret Harte at his best was perhaps as nearly original as any author in the world." (Harold Childs Merwin, "The Life of Bret Harte," London, 1911.)

rounded and complete. Their plots provide only partial aspects of strictly-limited glimpses of life; their technique does not embrace more than a section of the story-teller's craft—both incident and characterization are neglected. There is every probability that literary work of this character—whatever may be its excellences within the limits of its own terms of reference—will appeal only to readers of more than common patience, or to those who have the necessary curious interest in "whatever men do"; it is almost inevitably prohibited from reaching the universal audience down the generations.

The breath of genius bloweth where it listeth; and much artistic work of fine quality is able to establish contact only with the few whose perceptions are unusually acute. Breadth of appeal is usually taken to indicate an admixture of mediocrity in literary work; whereas depth of appeal, even to a small audience, is often accepted as a guarantee of excellence and special genius. Since their respective merits were divergent in kind, there might seem to be little purpose in comparing Hawthorne and Poe with Bret Harte. Thus to place these three writers in juxtaposition does, however, serve more clearly to define, by force of contrast, certain special features in Bret Harte's stories.

In a general view, the following points may be noted in "The Luck of Roaring Camp" volume:

(1) The "field" is much more closely circumscribed in time and place than in Poe and Hawthorne, who introduce little *locale*.

(2) Character-drawing plays a dominant part.

(3) Little use is made of the impressionistic method. Effects are allowed to "creep in *at the eye.*"

(4) Natural description is employed as a means of emphasis (see, for example, the passage quoted above from *How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar*), for the purpose of heightening contrasts, and to suggest atmosphere.

(5) Pathos and humour greatly strengthen the human note.

From the particular view-point of technique, Bret Harte's beginnings are of special interest. Hawthorne employed the device of an introductory paragraph which quietly surveys the scene and leads up to the main theme. Poe usually strikes a bizarre chord which thrills along the blood.

Harte has a characteristic method of beginning with a staccato phrase which, as it were, calls the passer-by to halt, and provokes curiosity :

"There was commotion in Roaring Camp."

"We were eight including the driver." (*Miggles.*)

"I do not think that we ever knew his real name." (*Tennessee's Partner.*)

"Sandy was very drunk." (*The Idyl of Red Gulch.*)

"His name was Fagg—David Fagg." (*The Man of No Account.*)

"It had been raining in the valley of the Sacramento." (*How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar.*)

This is an effective device which has been perseveringly imitated by later and lesser short-story

writers; but it is a dangerous method of beginning, because it can so easily degenerate into a barren verbal mannerism. Each one of the opening sentences reproduced is something much more valuable than a mere staccato phrase: each one of these sentences contains a promise. If we are told that there was commotion in Roaring Camp, it is surely an implied promise that the informant has interesting news to tell as to the why and wherefore of the commotion. Again, who is there among men that could learn either that "We were eight including the driver," or that "Sandy was very drunk," without immediately becoming possessed by a consuming desire to know more? To hold out an alluring promise or to rouse the tantalizing itch of curiosity in the first half-dozen words is one of the few irresistible ways of beginning a short story.

Even when Bret Harte's thrust is less immediate than usual, he contrives to be no less intriguing:

"A subdued tone of conversation, and the absence of cigar-smoke and boot-heels at the windows of the Wingdam stage-coach, made it evident that one of the inside passengers was a woman." (*Brown of Calaveras.*)

"As I opened Hop Sing's letter, there fluttered to the ground a square strip of yellow paper covered with hieroglyphics, which, at first glance, I innocently took to be the label from a pack of Chinese fire-crackers." (*Wan Lee, the Pagan.*)

"As Mr. John Oakhurst, gambler, stepped into the main street of Poker Flat on the morning of the 23rd of November 1850, he was conscious of a

change in its moral atmosphere since the preceding night." (*The Outcasts of Poker Flat.*)

It is probably true that most readers begin upon a short story in a more or less perfunctory mood, which necessitates the stimulation of their interest from the very outset—a reason sufficiently practical to incite the writer to study the technique of beginnings, altogether apart from any artistic impulse. The " average reader " approaches a novel in a spirit of endurance; he is prepared to begin slowly, and to condone an occasional flatness. But he will not abide such things in a short story.

Important as are beginnings, however, they are but beginnings; and the short-story writer is only on the threshold of his problem when he has succeeded in capturing the interest of the reader: there is still to be faced the much greater difficulty of maintaining the pitch of the story throughout, and of finishing at that one inevitable moment beyond which the reader's interest drops dead. The course of a successful short story is not analogous to a successful aeroplane-flight. In the former, there must be no graceful downward slide, concluding with a level run at diminishing speed. The reader may safely be left to make his own landing.

Bret Harte is perhaps less successful in endings than in beginnings; but his conduct of the main narrative of his stories is nearly always exemplary. He has occasional lapses, when he obtrudes his own personality quite gratuitously, and interpolates some comment that self-criticism should have

deleted. An instance of this kind occurs in *The Idyl of Red Gulch*, when the author says, of Sandy :

"As I should like to present him in a heroic attitude, I stay my hand with great difficulty at this moment, being only withheld from introducing such an episode by a strong conviction that it does not occur at such times. And I trust that my fairest reader, who remembers that, in a real crisis, it is always some uninteresting stranger or unromantic policeman, and not Adolphus, who rescues, will forgive the omission."

Though this glimpse into the workshop is deplorably out of place as an interruption of *The Idyl*, it states a literary principle of the first importance in relation to Bret Harte's own work. Here he registers, in unambiguous language, his regard for those laws of probability which he may be thought sometimes to violate ; and the more closely his stories are examined in the light of emotional experience, the greater is likely to be the admiration aroused by his ability to represent the universal in terms of the particular—to show some of the essential features of the whole human race through the peephole of a Californian mining-camp.

What may be called the microcosmic method is a highly interesting feature of modern fiction. Hardy's Wessex, Arnold Bennett's Five Towns, Sheila Kaye-Smith's Sussex, as well as Bret Harte's California, are little worlds which provide a familiar environment for the authors' character-studies, and enable them to build up a realistic background.

This serves as a fixed set-scene, and releases the whole force of the writers' creative energies for purposes more vital than mere preoccupation with scenery. Psychology, by suggesting the intimate relation between character and environment, has prohibited the conscientious writer of fiction from sketching-in a remote external setting about which he knows little or nothing. Most probably, of course, ninety-nine per cent. of his readers will know less, but that affords no refuge to an author who is anything more than a tallyman or a hysteriast. A sincere author knows that if he writes of the Egyptian desert without further understanding of the scene than is to be gained from a fortnight at Shepheard's Hotel or an hour at the cinema, his sheiks will be a libel upon both man and beast! But if, being a man of Kent and saturated with the spirit of his county he keeps to his Kentish scene, he is able to show the infinite variations of the countryside as a natural and convincing setting for characters who will be not only men and women of Kent, but also (and more importantly) men and women of the world—using that phrase without its customary stigma. Thus, Tess Durbeyfield, Edwin Clayhanger, Joanna Godden, belong in the flesh to Wessex, Staffordshire, Sussex; but in spirit they belong to the world and humanity.[1] Similarly, Bret Harte's Stumpy, Oakhurst, Miggles, Tennessee's Partner, and others, are bodily denizens of mining-camps in California; in harmony with Nature's teaching, they adopt her system of protective coloration, and conform—basely, no doubt—to their

[1] But see chap. 11, as to the limitations of this method.

environment. Pierce below that veneer of conformity, however, and Stumpy and the rest stand alongside the best of their brothers and sisters wherever found—prepared for magnificent sacrifices of self, and to bear other people's burdens in utmost obscurity.

Small though his community of splendid rapscallions is, Bret Harte secures wide variety both in theme and character; while the whole range of his stories is shot through and through by pathos and irony and humour, mingled as inextricably as these elements are usually found to be in actual life. The pen that could trip so amusingly in the rhyme of *The Heathen Chinee*, could also agonize with Cherokee Sal in the hour when she lay under the primal curse of woman, isolated from all save her half-contemptuous masculine associates, in the rude cabin on the outer edge of Roaring Camp.

And that same pen could depict, without a false stroke, the pathos of the scene inside the hut when, with Cherokee Sal lying dead, a strange procession paced by the improvised crib wherein lay the two-hours-old infant:

"The door was opened, and the anxious crowd of men, who had already formed themselves into a queue, entered in single file. Beside the low bunk or shelf, on which the figure of the mother was starkly outlined below the blankets, stood a pine table. On this a candle-box was placed, and within it, swathed in staring red flannel, lay the last arrival at Roaring Camp. Beside the candle-box was placed a hat. Its use was soon indicated. 'Gentlemen,'

said Stumpy, with a singular mixture of authority and *ex-officio* complacency—'Gentlemen will please pass in at the front door, round the table, and out at the back door. Them as wishes to contribute anything toward the orphan will find a hat handy.' The first man entered with his hat on; he uncovered, however, as he looked about him, and so unconsciously set an example to the next. In such communities good and bad actions are catching. As the procession filed in, comments were audible—criticisms addressed perhaps rather to Stumpy in the character of showman: 'Is that him?' 'Mighty small specimen;' 'Hasn't mor'n got the colour;' 'Ain't bigger nor a derringer.' The contributions were as characteristic: A silver tobacco box; a doubloon; a navy revolver, silver mounted; a gold specimen; a very beautifully embroidered lady's handkerchief (from Oakhurst the gambler); a diamond breastpin; a diamond ring (suggested by the pin, with the remark from the giver that he 'saw that pin and went two diamonds better'); a slung shot; a Bible (contributor not detected); a golden spur; a silver teaspoon (the initials, I regret to say, were not the giver's); a pair of surgeon's shears; a lancet; a Bank of England note for £5; and about 200 dollars in loose gold and silver coin. During these proceedings Stumpy maintained a silence as impassive as the dead on his left, a gravity as inscrutable as that of the newly-born on his right. Only one incident occurred to break the monotony of the curious procession. As Kentuck bent over the candle-box half curiously, the child turned, and, in a spasm

of pain, caught at his groping finger, and held it fast for a moment. Kentuck looked foolish and embarrassed. Something like a blush tried to assert itself in his weather-beaten cheek. 'The d——d little cuss!' he said, as he extricated his finger with perhaps more tenderness and care than he might have been deemed capable of showing. He held that finger a little apart from its fellows as he went out, and examined it curiously. The examination provoked the same original remark in regard to the child. In fact, he seemed to enjoy repeating it. 'He rastled with my finger,' he remarked to Tipton, holding up the member, 'the d——d little cuss!'"

They debated together as to an appropriate name for this last arrival, and one day Oakhurst, gambler-in-chief, "declared that the baby had brought 'the luck' to Roaring Camp." At a sober open-air celebration, some days later, Stumpy accordingly christened the lustily-crying infant as Thomas Luck. Twelve months afterward, Roaring Camp and its inhabitants had become transfigured by the unconscious influence of the child, for whom the very "birds sang, the squirrels chattered, and the flowers bloomed":

"Nature was his nurse and playfellow. For him she would let slip between the leaves golden shafts of sunlight that fell just within his grasp; she would send wandering breezes to visit him with the balm of bay and resinous gum; to him the tall redwoods nodded familiarly and sleepily, the bumble-bees

buzzed, and the rooks cawed a slumbrous accompaniment."

When the winter of that year came, Roaring Camp found itself a " confusion of rushing water, crashing trees, and crackling timber," as the great flood leapt upon it and carried away the cabin where the child lived with Stumpy, his self-appointed foster-father : " the pride, the hope, the joy, The Luck, of Roaring Camp had disappeared." The men were returning from a vain search when a relief-boat came up the river, bearing as passengers a man and an infant who had been taken from the water two miles away :

" It needed but a glance to show them Kentuck lying there, cruelly crushed and bruised, but still holding The Luck of Roaring Camp in his arms. As they bent over the strangely assorted pair, they saw that the child was cold and pulseless."

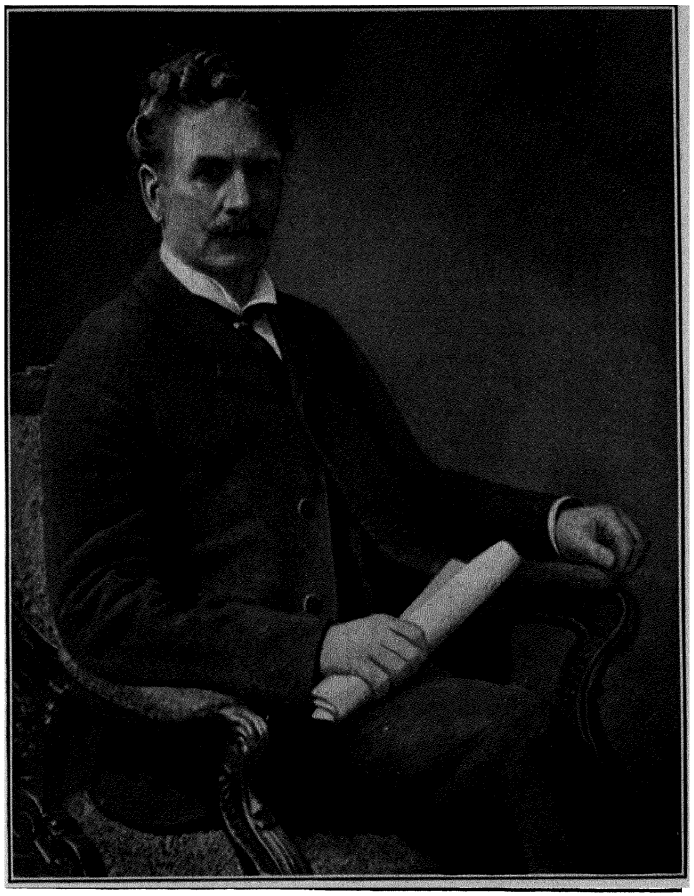
A dead child in the arms of a dying man would lure a second-rate writer into maudlin outpourings, sending dignity and decent reserve to the four winds. Bret Harte's place among short-story writers must be gauged as much by the pitfalls he avoids as by his positive merits. He was a highly accomplished craftsman ; he was also an artist whose delicacy and restraint are shown, not least, in his avoidance of the sunken reefs that beset the passage of those who adventure amidst emotional deeps.

Chapter Five Ambrose Bierce: "In the Midst of Life"

MUCH bandying-about of Ambrose Bierce's name has not produced any definitive judgment in regard to his merit as a short-story writer; nor has it made his work popular or well known among English readers. "In the Midst of Life" is the only one of Bierce's books generally available in England, although the American collected edition of his works fills twelve imposing volumes. A few pieces from other books have been included in the English edition of "In the Midst of Life," and the volume as it is known to readers in this country contains most of the stories upon which Ambrose Bierce's reputation depends.

If all criticism were as perfunctory and fatuous as the majority of statements made about Ambrose Bierce's work, its case would be desperate indeed. One name—Edgar Allan Poe—has been repeated *ad nauseam* in notices of "In the Midst of Life," although Bierce's resemblance to Poe as a writer does not seem to be evident in any special degree. Poe wrote stories of terrible happenings; so did Bierce. But the happenings are widely dissimilar in kind; and the methods of the two writers are altogether unlike.

No doubt it is true that Bierce was influenced by his predecessor: after 1850, few American short-



AMBROSE BIERCE.

story writers who were also short-story readers succeeded in escaping some moulding touch from Poe. This is a quite different matter, however, from the customary implication that Ambrose Bierce was mainly an imitative disciple of Poe. Indeed, it is in their weaknesses that the closest points of resemblance in their works are to be found, for when Ambrose Bierce is at his best he is on a level that Poe never touched. If it were apposite or profitable to compare him with any other short-story writer, Bret Harte would seem to be closest to him; yet between these two, also, there are manifest gulfs of separation. Nevertheless, they both record an active and vigorous kind of life; they are both interested in individual character rather than in states of being or moral consciousness; they both employ the acid of irony to bite deep lines in their pictures; they both secure their most powerful dramatic effects through swift and vivid description.

The *differences* that could be cited as between Bret Harte and Ambrose Bierce are many. Here it is sufficient to say that the former is nearer to normal humanity and less susceptible to mental aberration—though this must be accounted for by the less tolerable experiences that befell Bierce. There is a salutary and sweetening element of pathos in "The Luck of Roaring Camp"; in Bierce there is much troubled stirring of the bitter waters of pity and pain.

The last-named characteristic gives to his work a strangely "nineteen-twentyish" quality, such as is found in C. E. Montague; and it is provoked by a

similar cause. Just as Montague's most memorable stories represent his painfully disillusioned mood of reaction from the exalted sentiments of the early war days of 1914, so Ambrose Bierce's best work represents a mood of protest against the horrors that he had seen while on active service during the American Civil War. He had unusual ability as a literary craftsman ; he was also a man with a message for his generation ; but he was not a great artist. He could not always effectually conceal his technical cunning ; sometimes he sought to be so clever and cunning that he omitted essential details in the construction of his story ; and as a crusader against the horrors of war he too often threw order and reticence overboard, and foamed at the mouth in righteous anger. Our own generation has good reason to deal sympathetically with Ambrose Bierce in regard to his fulminations against the bestiality of war ; yet even we who have been made callous by the realities of both war and peace, experience a sickening feeling of revulsion as we stumble upon details of dismemberment, and of corruption in death, such as he introduces into *Chickamauga*, *A Tough Tussle*, and *The Coup de Grâce*.

On the one hand, then, Ambrose Bierce declines to rely upon the power of the suggestive phrase in relation to his subject-matter ; on the other hand, he leaves the reader to fill gaps in the constructive framework without any sufficient guiding clue. How, *precisely*, did Lieut. Byring meet his death in *A Tough Tussle* ? The reader may make any one of several possible, though inconclusive, guesses ; but inconclusive guesses are the worst conceivable ending

here, because the whole story is poised upon the doubtful issue.

Again, in *A Watcher by the Dead*, an excellent idea for a story is blemished by the fact that the supposed corpse was, really, a medical student shamming death; and when one has granted the pretence and its tragic outcome, it is only to encounter a muddled concluding page, with an unpardonably facetious finale.

As might be inferred from the title, death is the theme common to almost all the stories in this volume. They are divided into two groups—"Soldiers" and "Civilians"—the book having first appeared in 1892 as "Tales of Soldiers and Civilians," a title which was changed in later editions to "In the Midst of Life."

Bierce, a native of Ohio, was born in 1838[1] and fought for the North under General Sherman in the American Civil War, being promoted to the rank of major before he was incapacitated by a severe head-wound. When the struggle was at an end, he set himself to write the naked truth about war, just as some contemporary soldier-authors did during, and following, the Great War. Like them, Bierce found that the truth about war was not an easily marketable commodity, and he forswore the short-story art in middle age as a protest against public indifference. He afterwards filled various official and business posts, and for a period was in London as associate-editor of *Fun* with Tom Hood the younger. Later in life he set out on a journey into troubled Mexico, and his fate is uncertain.

[1] "Cambridge History of American Literature," Book 3, chap. 6.

According to some accounts he was assassinated in 1914; another rumour is that he met his end in the trenches of Flanders in 1915. (He would then have been seventy-seven years old !)

As a writer of imaginative prose, his ambitions were entirely monopolized by the short story. He despised the novel as being a vehicle for " mere reporting," a form of fiction in which the story is confused with overlaid impressions, and effaces its own effect.[1] He had a corresponding contempt for " the magazine story," which, he said, " must relate nothing " !—

" Like Dr. Hern's ' holes ' in the luminiferous ether, it is something in which nothing can occur. . . . It must provoke neither thought nor emotion ; it must only stir up from the shallows of the readers' understanding the sediment which they are pleased to call sentiment. . . .

" In point of fiction, all the magazines are as like as one vacuum to another, and every month they are the same as they were the month before, excepting that in their holiday numbers at the last of the year their vacuity is a trifle intensified by that essence of all dulness, the ' Christmas story.' "

Neither consistency in the characters of people in fiction, nor probability in their behaviour, was to Ambrose Bierce a matter of serious critical import. He checked the judgments of intellectualized criticism by his own observations of life, and refused

[1] Essay on *The Short Story* in " The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce," vol. x.

to acknowledge any *norm* which hampered an author's freedom of action in dealing with his created characters :

" All men and women sometimes, many men and women habitually, act from impenetrable motives and in a way that is consistent with nothing in their lives, characters, and conditions. . . .

" He to whom life is not picturesque, enchanting, astonishing, terrible, is denied the gift and faculty divine, and being no poet can write no prose. . . ."

He thereupon proceeds to relate one of those " incredible happenings " with which life is embellished for the confounding of the " probability " critics ; and, he adds, " nothing is so improbable as what is true. Fiction has nothing to say to probability ; the capable writer gives it not a moment's attention, except to make what is related *seem* probable in the reading—*seem* true."

Ambrose Bierce's stories represent a literal application of his theories, the practical worth of which can accordingly be judged as the stories are read. Most of those stories have " nothing to say to probability," but they have the ability (displayed in greater or less degree) to make what is related seem probable and true.

Bierce's antipathy to enslavement by laws of probability did not go very far beyond the theoretical and practical assertion of an academic principle, however. He was not one who could give to airy nothings a local habitation and a name : unlike the Chinese gentleman in Bret Harte's story, he had

no faculty for producing human beings out of nothingness. The imaginative structures which Bierce built may embody many improbabilities, but the truth remains that his work is always strongest when it has a factual basis of experience vitalized by strong personal emotion.

Thus it comes about that his soldier-stories are much more powerful than those in the civilian group. War had stirred, deep down within him, admirations and antipathies of a kind that peace conditions rarely perturb or even reach. His war stories frequently represent "a cry from the heart," such as should inspire us to veil pained ears and eyes, rather than to hide grinning mouths.

To many of his readers it will surely seem incredible that the following comment could be made about Ambrose Bierce (who, let it be recalled, was the author of *Chickamauga* and *The Affair at Coulter's Notch*): "His failure was his artificiality, and his lack of sincerity and truth to the facts of human life."[1] The curious might ask wherein lies the lack of sincerity in the two stories named—or, indeed, in almost every one of the soldier-stories.

The same critic stresses the quality in Ambrose Bierce which has been repeatedly made the occasion for unmeasured eulogy—namely, that he was "a craftsman of exquisite subtlety."[2] Frequently he was. But so far at least as the "Soldiers" section of "In the Midst of Life" is concerned, his subtle craftsmanship falters more frequently than his sincerity. Without doubt, it is his unbridled

[1] "Cambridge History of American Literature."

[2] *Ibid.*

sincerity that accounts for overmuch insistence upon the physical dreadfulness of war. A writer who was "an artist merely for the sake of his art," rather than an idealist mainly for the sake of truth, would have glozed over the revolting details of war, not dwelt bitterly upon the mutilation of shell-struck victims, or upon the animal scavengers that haunt the battlefields.

Vindication of Bierce's sincerity does not involve any depreciation of his ability as a literary craftsman, however; although, in this respect, many readers might hesitate to go all the way with the extravagant admirers of his work. It is very doubtful, indeed, whether he stands as high as Bret Harte in all-round technical skill. Certainly Bierce's range is more limited, with the result that he has fewer instruments to manipulate.

Among the finest and most characteristic examples of his technique is *A Horseman in the Sky*. Here, marked economy of means is employed in the body of the story, and its ending is not far from perfect. A paragraph-by-paragraph analysis of *A Horseman in the Sky* may effectively suggest both the technical economy and the artistic sufficiency of this story:

Paragraph 1.—On a hot afternoon, in Virginia in 1861, a sentry is lying asleep at his post, face downward in a clump of laurel.

Paragraph 2.—Description of the road and the cliff-top close beside which he is lying.

Paragraph 3.—Description of the valley below—a *cul-de-sac*.

Paragraph 4.—In the valley are five regiments of

Federal infantry whose lives depend upon the sentry's vigilance.

Paragraph 5.—The sentinel's name is Carter Druse; he is a son of wealthy Virginians, but has determined to join the Northern army.

Paragraph 6.—Carter Druse's father had told him to do what he considered to be his duty, although he accounted the young man a traitor.

Paragraph 7.—The sentinel is suddenly and silently awakened as by some invisible messenger of fate.

Paragraph 8.—A hundred yards away, on a pedestal of rock overhanging the cliff, an enemy soldier on horseback is silhouetted against the sky.

Paragraph 9.—Just as the sentinel is on the point of shooting, the mounted man turns his face toward the hidden weapon.

Paragraph 10.—The sentinel falters in his act, and almost swoons.

Paragraph 11.—He levels his rifle again; but again hesitates.

Paragraph 12.—He fires—at the *horse.*

Paragraph 13.—An officer of the Federal army, in the valley two thousand feet below, suddenly sees a horse and its rider leaping downward from the top of the cliff.

Paragraph 14.—The rider on the falling horse is still sitting upright and soldierly.

Paragraph 15.—The horse and rider crash to earth.

Paragraph 16.—Half an hour later the officer returns to camp, after having gone in search of the man and horse.

There remain about thirty lines, mainly of dialogue, which constitute the ending. These require to be quoted in full:

"This officer was a wise man; he knew better than to tell an incredible truth. He said nothing of what he had seen. But when the commander asked him if in his scout he had learned anything of advantage to the expedition, he answered:

"'Yes, sir; there is no road leading down into this valley from the southward.'

"The commander, knowing better, smiled.

"After firing his shot, private Carter Druse reloaded his rifle and resumed his watch. Ten minutes had hardly passed, when a Federal sergeant crept cautiously to him on hands and knees. Druse neither turned his head nor looked at him, but lay without motion or sign of recognition.

"'Did you fire?' the sergeant whispered.

"'Yes.'

"'At what?'

"'A horse. It was standing on yonder rock—pretty far out. You see it is no longer there. It went over the cliff.'

"The man's face was white, but he showed no other sign of emotion. Having answered, he turned away his face and said no more. The sergeant did not understand.

"'See here, Druse,' he said, after a moment's silence, 'it's no use making a mystery. I order you to report. Was there anybody on the horse?'

"'Yes.'

"'Who?'

"'My father.'

"The sergeant rose to his feet and walked away. "'Good God!' he said."

The excellence of that ending cannot really be considered apart from the context, since it grows naturally and organically from the body of the narrative.

Further analysis of the story suggests the following general constructive outline:

BEGINNING.—Par. 1. The Protagonist Introduced.
Pars. 2–4. The Setting Described.
[*Pars.* 5, 6 (*Interlude*). *Protagonist and Antagonist.*]
MIDDLE.—Pars. 7–16. The Action.
(*a*) pars. 7–11. Preparation.
(*b*) par. 12. Commission.
(*c*) pars. 13–16. Resolution.
ENDING.—Par. 17 *et seq.* Dénouement and Emotional Climax.

In relation to this story, two objections might possibly be advanced upon technical grounds.

First, that the unity of time, which would otherwise have been perfectly preserved, is violated by the passages designated above as *Interlude* (pars. 5 and 6). In order to show the relation between protagonist and antagonist, the artist goes beyond the limits of his frame, as it were, and tacks on a retrospective cameo, which cannot be assimilated to the main picture, and remains an excrescence.

Second, it is questionable whether there was any necessity for details of the fall from the cliff, particularly as the device necessitated the intrusion into the narrative of the officer and the commander—neither of whom is otherwise required.

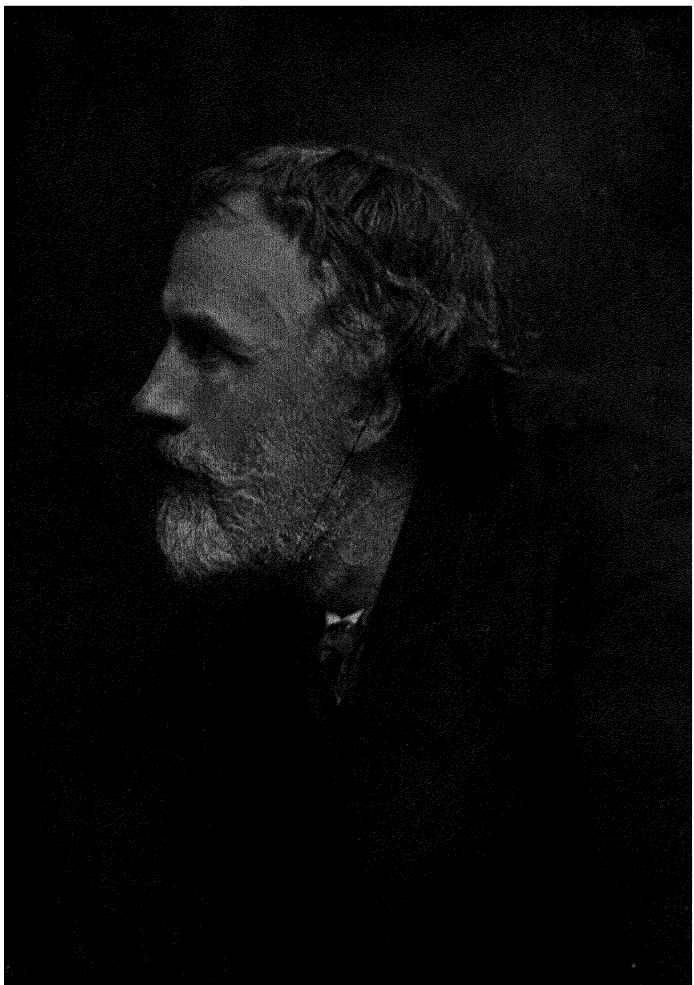
In a further word as to the ending of this story, it may be pointed out that, on the one hand, there is no suspicion of anti-climax; while, on the other hand, there is no suggestion that the final word has been left unsaid. If, in poetry, the inevitable word counts for much, no less artistic value attaches to "the inevitable moment" at which, ideally, every short story should end. To say too much is fatal if the author aims at complete artistic unity. And what degree of imperfection may be represented by a story which stops short of its inherent moment of finality, can be judged if the last sentence be deleted from *A Horseman in the Sky*:

"'Was there anybody on the horse?'"
"'Yes.'
"'Who?'
"'My father.'"

A ballot taken among "average readers" might show a marked preference for ending at that point. The emotional appeal thus made would probably be more immediate, but it would be much cruder. A reader of unbalanced feelings might, if he were so inclined, wrap himself in emotions torn to tatters, from the material that such an ending offers. What state of heart and mind and soul did Carter Druse put into those two words? Did he utter them in

the spirit of transpontine drama or in the spirit of Attic tragedy? We are not told; nevertheless we know! "The sergeant rose to his feet and walked away. 'Good God!' he said."

For the reader, the rest is silence. . . .



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GEORGE MEREDITH.

Chapter Six George Meredith: "The Tale of Chloe," etc.

ALL things in George Meredith's work lead up to the *Essay on Comedy*—the peak and crown of his literary achievement. Nothing else that he wrote is so finely informed by individual genius; and to whatever extent greater praise may be rendered to his fictional writings, it cannot be overlooked that these are frequently but foothills over which the author passed to his elucidating statement of philosophic comedy. Sometimes they are gently rising foothills, which Meredith consciously threw up to bear the feet of those who could not hope to reach the summit of his Mount Difficulty, yet from whence such people might look upon that pinnacle which, to not a few eyes, is wrapped in perpetual cloud.

In other instances, to scale the sharp crags of these foothills is admittedly a more sobering adventure than to strike for the ultimate height; but the short stories, *The Tale of Chloe*, *The House on the Beach*, and *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper*, can be regarded as hillocks upon which babes may safely try their first steps. This suggestion of a less-elevated mood in the author must be qualified, however, by ready acknowledgment that Chloe is unexcelled for beauty among Meredith's flowers of English womanhood: in her, a rich sense of the human comedy goes confidently and fearlessly

side by side with the sense of human tragedy into which it merges at the last. Again, and conversely, "Wilsonople" and his gadfly are among the riper produce of the Comic Spirit, in her most sunny and spirited mood. Still, it is true that neither the one story nor the other is insuperably hedged about by crevasses and crazy bridges of esoteric wit; and an even closer approach to the common level is registered in *The House on the Beach*, which might almost be described as Meredith-cum-Barrie, since Martin Tinman is half-brother to Sir Harry Sims [1]—both Meredith's story and Barrie's play revealing the terrifying spectacle of egoism at work among the *bourgeoisie*.

If, in an oblique rendering, Barrie's characteristic symbol may be regarded as the typewriter, Meredith's symbol is more spiritous! In the Meredithian world, a palate for good wine is the keystone of the arch that spans the nobly civilized. Let but a man's wine be bad, and not only will he be mocked at every step by laughing satyrs, but his house, even, will be in deadly danger of falling—just as Tinman's falls. Is a man reputed a miser?—his cellar will prove him! Is he acclaimed a snob?—consider the price of his wine!

Only rarely did the Comic Muse lead Meredith into shady middle-class byways; and when the stately lady did happen to be thus far indiscreet, it was probably not Meredith himself who felt least uneasy. . . . His thwacking of barbers and tailors and drapers is so unmerciful, that it has somewhat the appearance of self-scourging, a penance dutifully

[1] *The Twelve-Pound Look.*

undertaken by the Great Mel's son. In line with this procedure, he is specially hard upon Martin Tinman, the retired tradesman turned landed proprietor and civic official, who buys his herrings cheaply on the beach and carries them home to make a feast preparatory to rehearsing for a Court ceremony to which he aspires.

As Bailiff of the Cinque Port of Crikswich, Tinman is to present an address to the Queen on the occasion of her daughter's marriage. Before the admiring elderly sister who is his housekeeper, he rehearses authorship, pronunciation, deportment and such, with hourly application. He hires a cheval-glass from a tradesman at Crikswich; but it distorts his Court-costumed figure, and is sent back for replacement. While the mirror is being carried on the back of the upholsterer's man deputed to remove it from the House on the Beach one windy night, a stranger walks straight into the deceptive object, taking it for Tinman's doorway.

The stranger, Mr. Van Dieman Smith, is Tinman's old friend. Years earlier he had deserted from the army, emigrated to Australia, and fallen into fortune, forsaking his baptismal name of Philip Ribstone. Martin Tinman is troubled by this materialization from an ingloriously plebeian past, and shows no enthusiasm in welcoming his old friend, who, however, has brought home an agreeable daughter, Annette. Both father and daughter are enamoured of England; and Van Dieman Smith, by outbidding Tinman for local properties, adds fuel to the fire already lighted by the Australian's faculty for argument, and his lack of appreciation of the Bailiff's wine—a " sugared

acrid liquor " which had " the devil in it," and was of " a character to kill more than the temper "—all for thirty shillings the dozen ! In the upshot, Tinman threatens to betray Smith to the military authorities, unless Annette agrees to marry him. Rather than submit to her father's being punished or driven out of England again, Annette is prepared to make the sacrifice, notwithstanding that she is well inclined towards a young journalist, Herbert Fellingham, who has been irreverently harsh upon the troubled subject of his rival's wine ; and has further merited enmity by publishing a satirical report of Tinman's visit to Court.

Annette enters into the bargain, but persistently hesitates to fix the wedding date. Fellingham interviews certain military powers in London and elicits that no grave punishment will fall upon Smith, alias Ribstone. So there comes a day when Tinman receives a letter from Smith, calling off the bargain ; in response, the thwarted suitor writes to the Adjutant-General of the Horse Guards, purposing that the letter shall be posted in London, to insure against the chances of local interception.

That night, we read :

" Sleep was impossible. Black night favoured the tearing fiends of shipwreck, and looking through a back window over sea, Tinman saw with dismay huge towering ghostlike wreaths, that travelled up swiftly on his level, and lit the dark as they flung themselves in ruin, with a gasp, across the mound of shingle at his feet.

" He undressed. His sister called to him to know if

they were in danger. Clothed in his dressing-gown, he slipped along to her door, to vociferate to her hoarsely that she must not frighten the servants; and one fine quality in the training of the couple, which had helped them to prosper, a form of self command, kept her quiet in her shivering fears.

"For a distraction Tinman pulled open the drawers of his wardrobe. His glittering suit lay in one. And he thought, 'What wonderful changes there are in the world!' meaning, between a man exposed to the wrath of the elements, and the same individual reading from vellum, in that suit, in a palace, to the Head of all of us!

"The presumption is, that he must often have done it before. The fact is established, that he did it that night. The conclusion drawn from it is, that it must have given him a sense of stability and safety.

"At any rate, that he put on the suit is quite certain.

"Probably it was a work of ingratiation and degrees; a feeling of the silk, a trying on to one leg, then a matching of the fellow with it. O you Revolutionists! who would have no state, no ceremonial, and but one order of galligaskins! This man must have been wooed away in spirit to forgetfulness of the tempest scourging his mighty neighbour to a bigger and a farther leap; he must have obtained from the contemplation of himself in his suit that which would be the saving of all men—imagination, namely.

"Certain it is, as I have said, that he attired himself in the suit. He covered it with his dressing-

gown, and he lay down on his bed so garbed, to await the morrow's light, being probably surprised by sleep acting upon fatigue and nerves appeased and soothed."

Low comedy, it has been said, consists in the revelation of incongruity. Is it not certain, then, that Mr. Martin Tinman is a monument of low comedy? His house is washed to ruins by the tempestuous sea, but at the last moment he is rescued. As the coastguards hand him to the shore, the wind blows the skirts of his dressing-gown over his head, and "the world, in one tempestuous glance, had caught sight of the Court suit." Here is incongruity *in excelsis*: Nature enraged and ravening; Tinman encasing himself against her assaults—in a Court suit! Could the farcical element in life provoke man to further extravagance than this? Yet Meredith wishes to find a saving grace even in the welter of Tinman's absurdity. Why did the man get into his Court suit while the heavens were raging and the house crumbling around him? Because—thinks his creator—because he was moved by that "which would be the saving of all men—imagination, namely."

Imagination is not sufficiently developed in Tinman to save him from absurdity, but it may be capable of development in a degree that shall avert tragedy from those who are in contact with him. For to what might not imagination grow in one who experienced some vague prompting of an idea that the wrath of heaven could be stilled through the virtue of a uniform upon which had merely rested

" in a palace " the eyes of she who is " the Head of us all " ? . . .

Snatches of verse from Meredith's early volume, " The Shaving of Shagpat," recur to mind in association with Tinman, and suggest that the fall of the House on the Beach has, perhaps, other implications than the farcical. One stanza from " Shagpat " which is applicable to this case is, significantly, an expression of a main principle in the Meredithian philosophy :

> Lo ! of hundreds who aspire
> Eighties perish—nineties tire !
> They who bear up, in spite of wrecks and wracks,
> Were season'd by celestial hail of thwacks.

Tinman is, it cannot be gainsaid, an aspirant who does not tire, who did not perish : never was man so seasoned by celestial hail of thwacks as this man. The true test of character is subsequent to his passing from our view. Does he bear up ? Our prognostication can only be given in the light of the author's forward glances : Tinman was not void of imagination—that, at least, is a promise of vigorous survival.

The House on the Beach skirts the domain of farce, even if it is not continuously within those borders. Certainly, to change the metaphor, it is attuned to the key of low comedy, and scarcely enters into the aërial quiring of the Comic Muse. The reader may secure from the story of Martin Tinman, however, articles of apprenticeship to that greater lady's service ; while in *The Case of General Ople and Lady Camper*, he can travel a further step toward

acclimatization in the somewhat rarefied atmosphere that is Meredith's native mental element.

O Sword of Common Sense! Our surest Gift

—so begins the *Ode to the Comic Spirit*—and it is with this weapon that Lady Camper belabours General Wilson Ople. In her hands, however, it is a broadsword for beating, rather than the rapier for piercing which we observe in action in "The Egoist" and in other places. Partly, we may believe, this noticeable dereliction of the more finely-tempered form of intellectual *finesse*, is necessarily involved in the adaptation of the Meredithian manner to the short-story form. There must be some coarsening of texture, if the fabric is to bear the sharper impact of the reader's mind: for, it must be repeated, the type of leisured subtlety and slow evocation of situation and idea that are part and parcel of the craft of fiction in the novel, can have no place in the short-story art. As the latter is more limited in its field of movement, so should its movements be brisker—even as a sprinter outpaces the cross-country competitor.

The retired military man, typified by General Wilson Ople, is met again in "Diana of the Crossways," where Sir Lukin Dunstane discovers that "idleness is the devil." Both these warriors find that unemployment is a great incentive to philandering; but whereas, in the novel, the chain of circumstance is lengthened to encompass tragic possibilities, both near and remote, the amorous "Wilsonople" is brought to a swifter and less tragic recognition of the consequences of refined selfishness.

Widowed Lady Camper, summoning her widower neighbour, the General, to discuss the question of marriage between her nephew and his daughter, finds herself at cross-purposes with the warrior, who mistakes her words for personal advances and leads up to a proposal. The match between the young people is mutually favoured, but the General hesitates to make full monetary provision for Elizabeth, out of regard for his own future as a husband. In resentment, veiled by a spirit of high comedy, Lady Camper proceeds to plague the General. She goes to great pains to let him know that she paints her face; she claims to be over seventy years old; she objects to his stereotyped manner of speech, and forbids him to use certain genteel phrases to which he has clung tenaciously:

"She had betrayed most melancholy signs of sourness and agedness as soon as he had sworn himself to her fast and fixed.

"'The road is open to you to retreat,' were her last words.

"'My road,' he answered gallantly, 'is forward.'

"He was drawing backward as he said it, and something provoked her to smile.

Suddenly, Lady Camper departs for the Continent and Egypt. Thereafter, during the course of some months, the postman is, to General Ople, only comparable with the plagues of Egypt. Lady Camper's frequent communications comprise satirical caricatures of the General, in all manner of ludicrous

postures : his most dignified attitudes and speeches are distorted to travesties which, nevertheless, disturbingly resemble the originals. In some of these flights of fancy, General Wilson Ople becomes Wilsonople, an imaginary city, with soap-bubbles for castles and temples ; in others, the " gentlemanly residence "—his beloved phrase for the suburban villa—becomes a mere sentry-box.

These sallies might be thought adequate as thwacks for the warrior, but—and here is the true Meredithian hand—it is left to the General himself to administer worse. His whole mind is obsessed " by the aspect of a lurid Goddess, who penetrated him, read him through, and had both power and will to expose and make him ridiculous for ever." As a consequence of this obsession, he shows the caricatures everywhere, growing more and more distraught, and coming by stages unconsciously to imitate in his own behaviour the fantastic images which Lady Camper showered upon him. On an afternoon following her return to London, the General shows the latest sketch to a group of ladies at a garden party :

" He . . . remarked on the gross injustice of it ; for as he requested them to take note, her ladyship now sketched him as a person inattentive to his dress, and he begged them to observe that she had drawn him with his necktie hanging loose. ' And that, I say, that has never been known of me since I first entered society.'

" The ladies exchanged looks of profound concern ; for the fact was, the General had come without any

necktie and any collar, and he appeared to be unaware of the circumstance."

But the gadfly who had stung him so badly, herself applied the antidote; and "it came to pass that a simple man and a complex woman fell to union after the strangest division."

The case of Diana Warwick is witness to what wreckage may ensue upon the casual exploits of a self-centred simple man. Lady Camper is an avenger of her sex, utilizing "the sword of common sense" with no daintily gloved hand. The *Essay on Comedy* notifies us that for the display of the Comic Spirit in action, three things at least are requisite: sound sense, a capacious mind, and capacity for thoughtful laughter. These requisites Lady Camper possessed in no stinted measure—the quantity was not meagre; as to the quality, possibly that was not of the finest—the subtle aroma and bouquet of true wit not having scope in the short-story form for proper pervasion.

Perhaps Lady Camper and General Ople do not join the select company of the great among characters in comedy, but the former indubitably has considerable power of comic perception, which can be estimated, says the *Essay*, "by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them less: and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes." As to whether or not General Wilson Ople could claim, under that last clause, to possess any capacity for comic perception it would be hazardous to speak.

The Tale of Chloe is unique in Meredith's work. The note of acute tragedy with which the story ends is no natural concomitant of his theory of Comedy, although (more frequently than is commonly realized) the veil between comedy and tragedy is a mere tattered gossamer. The fewness of the words in which the plot of the story may be told is out of all proportion to the fullness of artistic skill devoted to its shaping.

A young dairymaid who has been wedded by an elderly peer, shows a disconcerting desire for a round of gaiety to which the husband's years are ill fitted. He accordingly commits her for a month to the care of Beau Beamish, autocrat of the Wells, who admits her to his well-disciplined community, under the fantastic pseudonym of the Duchess of Dewlap. Her chaperone during the month is to be one Chloe—a name hiding the identity of a lady of good birth and beautiful character, who, some time before, had been heartlessly deserted by a lover in whose behalf she had spent her fortune. Concurrently with the young Duchess's coming, Chloe's former lover returns—to her, it is at first assumed. Chloe soon understands, however, that it is the Duchess Susan who has drawn Caseldy; and learning that an elopement is contemplated, Chloe determines to take the one sure way of preventing the harvest of misery which the Duchess would assuredly reap thereafter.

Two passages in the story are mutually illuminating (when brought together in quotation without their intervening context), as serving to show Meredith's dramatic irony. In the meadows one

afternoon, Beamish and Chloe and Mr. Camwell, an unrequited young admirer of Chloe, find the Duchess walking with Caseldy. As the party converses, Chloe swings from her fingers a double skein of silk that she has been plaiting and knotting, and young Camwell requests it as a gift for remembrance. Chloe declines to yield the skein, which she calls "her necklace," whereupon Caseldy interposes with the whisper :

"'You can't think of wearing a thing like that about your neck ?'

"'Indeed,' said Chloe, 'I think of it.'

"'Why, what fashion have you over here ?'

"'It is not yet a fashion,' she said.

"'A silken circlet will not well become any precious pendant that I know of.'

"'A bag of dust is not a very precious pendant,' she said.

"'Oh, a *memento mori* !' cried he.

"And she answered, 'Yes.'"

The night comes when Duchess Susan is to fly with Caseldy, and she is all impatience to get her attendant Chloe out of the way. Looking from the window in the twilight of dawn, the Duchess sees Caseldy waiting. In the sitting-room, she stepped deliberately in the dusk, and crept along by the wall until she "came to the door, where a foot-stool nearly tripped her."

"Here her touch was at fault, for though she knew she must be close by the door, she was met by an

obstruction unlike wood, and the door seemed neither shut nor open. She could not find the handle; something hung over it. Thinking coolly, she fancied the thing must be a gown or dressing-gown; it hung heavily. Her fingers were sensible of the touch of silk; she distinguished a depending bulk, and she felt at it very carefully and mechanically, saying within herself, in her anxiety to pass it without noise, 'If I should awake poor Chloe, of all people!' Her alarm was that the door might creak. Before any other alarm had struck her brain, the hand she felt with was in a palsy, her mouth gaped, her throat thickened, the dust-ball rose in her throat, and the effort to swallow it down and get breath kept her from acute speculation while she felt again, pinched, plucked at the thing, ready to laugh, ready to shriek. Above her head, all on one side, the thing had a round white top. Could it be a hand that her touch had slid across? An arm too! this was an arm! She clutched it, imagining that it clung to her. She pulled it to release herself from it, desperately she pulled, and a lump descended, and a flash of all the torn nerves of her body told her that a dead human body was upon her."

The Duchess Susan was saved from deception and ruin, and from the heartbreak that Chloe had known. What the influence of Chloe alive could not effect, was brought about by Chloe sacrificed—a *memento mori*, a pendant bag of dust upon a silken circlet.

This is the saddest and perhaps the most lucently beautiful prose story that ever came from

Meredith's pen. Moving to her self-appointed end against the clamorous stream of pleasure-seekers, breasting the current of artificiality and falsity, Chloe is a serene and quietly tragic figure, rebuking yet somehow harmonizing with her surroundings. Clearly visualized though she is, she is portrayed with such subtilized art as to appear rather an emanation of a different order of being than a creature of flesh and blood. Her vitality cannot be questioned, however. She is no bloodless puppet, no figure of allegory, no embodied moral idea. The strange air of remoteness which she carries as an aura about her, comes from our consciousness of her well-informed innocence. For her, the hand of time has ceased to make any movement upon the dial of life; and since her death can save a sister's life, then let the profit of her death atone for her lost life.

. . . . . .

Meredith probably contributed little to the development of the short story in respect to its art and craft: his greatest strength lay in other directions. But the three stories here considered do at least show that Meredith recognized the short story as a literary form which could not carry the complicated structure common to his novels, and which demanded simplification and firmness of outline.

Again, in the figures of Chloe, General Ople, and Martin Tinman, Meredith showed that characterization need not be scamped in the short story, even as he showed that full and effective characterization must be secured by other means than by simply adding two and two together, or by any mathematical

or mechanical means whatever. He sought always to capture the swift-flying thought, and to give permanence to mental impressions and visual pictures that flash into being for a moment and then are gone.

[*Photo by Elliott & Fry.*

HENRY JAMES.
(1890.)

Chapter Seven Henry James: "The Turn of the Screw"

CONTEMPORARY authorship threatens to become a conspiracy to delude people into believing that reading is a substitute for thought. With an engaging air of confidence, the popular novelist seeks to suggest that literary taste is conditional upon two things—and upon two only: first, that the aspirant should pay a library subscription; and second, that for a certain number of moments daily the new-fledged subscriber's eyes should pass over the lines of print in volumes recommended by the library assistant.

Once or twice in a generation, however, there appears a writer who demands that a certain activity and mental alertness shall be displayed by the reader. Such a one refuses to foster the idea that a writer is able of himself to instil information into an atrophied brain. And certainly such an author is all eagerness to banish the idea that the writer should do everything, the reader nothing.

More than one reason could be found for associating the names of George Meredith the Englishman and Henry James the American; but a most conspicuous reason is that each of them regarded prose fiction as a co-operative art, entirely unproductive until the reader brings his mind into living touch with the mind of the author. The

mental field wherein Meredith and James are to be met holds no drowsing-place for the lotus-eater.

When a person of unathletic mind is told that Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is the finest ghost story in the world, there must come a great temptation to reply that it might be—if there were any " real " ghost or any " real " story in the piece ! The occasion for criticism of this kind lies in the consideration that while Henry James was a careful—almost a finicking—artist, he recognized the limitations of creative literature and never tried to achieve the impossible. To the point of nauseation it should be reiterated, in literary criticism, that a work of prose fiction is, and must ever be, fragmentary. A novel which begins with the birth of the hero and ends only with his death, is still no more than a fragmentary rendering of life—or even of *one* life; it remains a work of monumental omissions. The writer's question to himself is, always, " What shall I omit ? Shall all my hero's thoughts and acts ' be reduced to lists of dates and facts ' ? Shall I tell them what he did, and leave them to imagine (or to ignore) what he thought and felt ? Or shall I follow the psycho-analytical method, and reveal all his complexes and subconscious reactions ? Or shall I give them a mixed grill ? " According as the author makes answer to himself, so does he fix the type of audience that will listen to him.

A somewhat sceptical young person observed with surprise, on looking through the pages of a popular illustrated magazine, that several pictures therein showed men being floored by the fists of other men ;

and he was filled with immediate humility at realizing how completely he, in his own person, must have missed an important and evidently pervasive element in civilized life! He was, of course, merely encountering the works of writers who had determined to show what men *do* rather than what they *think*. . . . It is no wonder that readers accustomed to this method of treatment should insist that in *The Turn of the Screw* the author has no story to tell.

When Henry James faced the special problems involved in this piece of writing, he saw that drastic omissions were essential if his record was not to be lengthened inordinately. The anecdote around which his " story " was to grow, concerned an old wives' tale of two servants who had died, and whose spirits had afterwards endeavoured " to get hold of "—to influence for evil—two young children with whom they had been closely connected in life. As Henry James turned that theme over and over in his mind, he recognized that although it might be a simple matter to set it down in crude and blundering terms, what was actually required for perfect artistic presentment was a most carefully-guarded leading of the reader, so that the theme should be exempt from all risk of crude and blundering interpretation.

Ghosts in fiction commonly follow very highly conventionalized rules in regard both to attire and to surroundings and action! Ghosts in fiction usually wear white; they usually appear in surroundings which are definitely ghost-like and eerily dim; they usually glide and wring their hands. . . .

Henry James's fastidious art could not submit to

employ stereotyped fictional lay-figures of that kind. Also, he knew that a ghost at first-hand might create any one of many diverse sensations in the minds of readers; whereas he required that his ghosts should create just the one single set of sensations that was imperative for his exact purpose. Therefore the reader must receive the ghosts at second-hand; that is, through the experience of another character in the story, who would record these special sensations, and communicate them unchanged to the reader.

Further, the author's purpose was to convey the idea that the two dependents had, while living, exercised a devilishly evil influence upon the two children; and that, after death, they strove persistently to retain their malignant power. But what particular form should that evil be shown to take? What evil could be particularized that should be, at once, provocative of horror and free from moral offence as applied to the children. Should it be stealing? The probability was that stealing would not convey an impression adequately sinister for a ghost story. And, indeed, when the list of possible offences is surveyed, what offence is there that does not depend for its force entirely upon the ethical and religious code of the individual reader? In what method of fictional statement, then, was Henry James to find the solution of his problem? Both the problem and the answer are to be found in words from his own pen:

"There would be laid on [the ghosts] the dire duty of causing the situation to reek with the air of Evil. . . . How best to convey that sense of the

depths of the sinister? . . . What, in the last analysis, had I to give the sense of? Of their being capable of exerting, in respect to the children, the very worst action small victims so conditioned might be conceived as subject to. . . ."[1]

The author may be interrupted at this point of transition from problem to solution, in order to stress the word "convey" which he uses in the foregoing sentences. The problem for him is not the problem of *statement*—but that of *conveyance*, of insinuation. There is need to stress this fundamental difference, because upon a clear perception of it depends the reader's appreciation of the whole story. If mere *statement* is the author's aim, then his task is a simple one: he makes his statement—and there an end. Should the reader interpret that statement in some individually peculiar sense, the author assumes no responsibility. But if the author's purpose is to *convey* to the reader some single definite impression that is in his own mind, then he shoulders the responsibility of contriving a universal formula through which (as it were by a hypodermic syringe) he can inoculate the mind of the reader.

Though this special endeavour upon the part of Henry James swings in the direction of impressionism, a sharp distinction is seen if comparison be made with, say, the literary devices of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe treated the reader's mind as a conformable substance, to be shaped by repeated impact; but whatever the final achievement may be in either

[1] Preface to vol. xvii of the Complete Edition of Henry James's Novels and Stories.

instance, Henry James's insinuative method is conducted by other and more delicate processes. He proceeds (in the *Preface*) :

" Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough . . . make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications."

Thus does Henry James free himself from a considerable incubus. One of the most difficult endeavours to which a writer can set himself in imaginative literature, is to convince readers that fictional characters are either truly saintly or possessed of literary genius. Almost inevitably, occasions arise when, to prove his point, it is imperative for the author to cite some direct evidence in support of the contention—to particularize a saintly act, or to reproduce a specimen of the writings which are alleged to be " great." Then, of course, the bubble blown by the author is most likely to burst incontinently. Ideas of saintliness vary from person to person ; while as to conviction of genius, unless the author is himself of outstanding creative power he cannot carry off any attempt to justify his hero's claim to greatness. In such circumstances, the moment the author commences to expatiate and ceases to insinuate, that moment his bubble is imperilled. Accordingly, says Henry James, in further reference to *The Turn of the Screw* :

" There is not only from beginning to end of the matter not an inch of expatiation, but my values

are positively all blanks, save so far as [readers, through] an excited horror, a promoted pity . . . proceed to read into them more or less fantastic figures."

The Turn of the Screw is, throughout, a piece of most highly-wrought literary artifice, in the sense that no effect is accidental. Where the narrative is vague it is intentionally so—to the purpose that the reader may proceed to do *his* share of the work by inserting his own " more or less fantastic figures." Where, upon the other hand, Henry James renders things in a more explicit form (*e.g.* the seasons of the year, the places in which the apparitions appear, the beauty of the children) it is for the equally assured purpose of curbing any tendency to imaginative riot in the individual reader's disposition. Admittedly, the reader is presented with blanks which he must himself fill in ; but he must employ the system of currency which the author has in this case predestined : payment cannot be made in debased coin which befits only the values of a third-rate story of violence.

Our first and crude reactions to *The Turn of the Screw* will, in any case, probably need to be redressed by further pondering. We shall tend to ask questions which, as we afterwards come to see, trespass into fields which the author has deliberately put beyond his range of vision in this instance. We may have the impulse to ask for more detail in regard to the earthly lives of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, whose apparitions are here made central in our consciousness. What were the precise relations

between the two, and between them and the children? What was the mystery connected with their deaths? Why are they malignant toward the children, even after death? What was the beginning of it all?—and what the end?

That last twin question confronts us with one striking feature of the story—a feature which is characteristically Henry James: namely, that *The Turn of the Screw* has neither beginning nor end. To adapt words used in his introductory pages, the author "takes up the tale at a point after it has in a manner begun"; and, it may be added, he draws to a close before it has in a manner ended. Belonging as we do to a generation which has been spoon-fed by writers, we demand our A and our Z; but Henry James's interest in the situation does not arise until A (the *cause*) is passed, and it ceases before Z (the ultimate *effect*) is reached. His concern is wholly with the intervening phenomena.

If another metaphor may legitimately be sought upon the chessboard, we could say that the author is not interested either in the nice neat preliminary ranking of the men upon opposite sides of the table, or in the fact that one of the kings will be in an inescapable position of capture if the game is carried to its ultimate issue. The interest is not in the setting of the board, but in the movements of the pieces; it continues through the whole process which is engaging the contestants' minds; and it ends with a position which ensures checkmate. Both the preliminary setting of the board and the final sweeping of the board are without significance to the players, and should be so to the spectators also.

Similarly, it is of no consequence in relation to *The Turn of the Screw* that our curiosity as to antecedent facts is not satisfied. We may imagine what we please as to Peter Quint and Miss Jessel in the days before we met them; for Henry James, they were then simply "in their box." Important those antecedent circumstances may have been—yet not more so to the story in hand than the turner's wheel which shapes the chessmen in the workshop is important in the game of chess.

Figures and pictures troop to mind when one attempts to express the type and quality of Henry James's writings. The technical contrivance of *The Turn of the Screw* suggests a transparent vessel, filled with vapour which slowly liquefies from moment to moment, drop cohering with drop, until the vessel is filled with a clear though icy fluid which has raised its level in the vessel almost imperceptibly. So in the story, from the first sentence to the last, an almost imperceptible "something" is being added every second until the measure of ordered sensation is full.

From the hour that the young unnamed twenty-year-old governess goes to Bly, an old family mansion in Essex, to undertake sole charge of Miles the boy, "scarcely ten years old," and Flora, younger and "most beautiful," we are in an environment of outward beauty, at the centre of which beats a secret heart of darkness. The disharmony of the outward and the inward, and the divergence of spirit between the innocent young governess and the vile ghosts (which, in Henry James's own expression,

are " not ' ghosts ' at all . . . but goblins, elves, imps, demons "), are directly contributory to the main purpose of the writing. By so much as the actual material environment might by a lesser artist have been made to approximate to the sinister, in that degree would the horrific power of the apparitions have been diminished. And if the attempt were made to " convey " the fearfulness of the apparitions direct to the reader's mind, the depth of that impression would be conditioned by the degree of contamination to which the receiving mind might already have been submitted. No other way is open, therefore, but to " convey " to the reader the precise impression received by the clean mind and spirit of a courageous girl fresh from the air of a country parsonage.

On the afternoon that she arrived at Bly, the rooks circled above the clustered tree-tops and cawed in the golden sky, as her carriage bore her onward to meet, in Flora, the most beautiful child she had ever seen. The housekeeper, Mrs. Grose, was a " stout simple plain clean wholesome woman," who proved a tower of strong commonsense to the governess during the days of strain that were to come. For a first hint of something wrong, there arrives a letter from the headmaster of the boarding-school at which little Miles is just finishing his first term, announcing, without reason given, that the boy is to be sent home and cannot be allowed to return to the school. When the governess first meets the child, his " positive fragrance of purity " rebukes the idea that he could have been capable of evil demanding expulsion, and she does not refer to the

matter to him at all. Thereafter, follow golden weeks when the children and their governess spend day after happy day, hearkening to "all the music of summer," and communing amid "all the mystery of nature."

Suddenly there breaks into this bright serenity a series of horrible visitations by the ghosts of Peter Quint, a former valet, and Miss Jessel, a former governess—faint glimpses of whose past are vouchsafed to us through hesitating words spoken by Mrs. Grose to the new governess.

Usually, the ghosts came in broad daylight, dressed in the everyday clothes of their lifetime; and their appearance was as "definite as a picture in a frame." The two do not appear together, and Mrs. Grose does not see them at all; though the governess confides in the housekeeper, at the same time striving carefully to shield the children from all knowledge of the mystery.

There comes a terrible day when the figure of the dead woman appears on the far side of a lake in the grounds, while the governess and Flora are together by the water. Neither says anything to the other, but the governess becomes aware that the child knows of the ghostly presence, and that it is no new thing to her.

Confirmation is provided, by later happenings, of the truth which flashed upon the governess at that moment—that some secret and cruel bond exists between the two children and Quint and Miss Jessel. A desperate but silent and prolonged struggle now ensues between the living and the dead for the possession of the children—a struggle in which

the governess feels that she is losing, slowly but irretrievably.

The breaking-point is reached on an occasion when Flora has slipped away, and is found in a quiet corner of the grounds, with the figure of Miss Jessel close by. The governess accuses Flora of conspiracy, but the child lyingly denies all knowledge of her meaning, and flies into a passion of resentful hatred. To Mrs. Grose, however, she reveals the truth by uttering shocking words in abuse of the governess, and by showing something akin to demon-possession. In the hope of breaking the evil spell which is upon the child, Mrs. Grose consents to take Flora to London, where resides the children's guardian, who had in the beginning forbidden the governess to complain or appeal to him about anything whatsoever.

Left behind at Bly, the governess strives against the influence of Peter Quint, in an endeavour to save Miles's soul from Satanic dominance. She feels that if only she can bring the child somehow to confess his trouble to her, the act of confession will break the fearful compact. Even as Miles is at the point of confession, the apparition appears again, and the boy goes through an agony of inward suffering. He does partially confess: among other matters, that he was expelled from school for "saying things"—things too bad for the headmaster to repeat. The governess is convinced that Miles can be finally and fully saved from his "possessor" only by complete and unreserved confession. She presses him for a frank statement, and brings on the last struggle. Peter Quint's "white face of damna-

tion " is again seen, close against the outside of the window, but he is baffled, and the child's soul is rescued. In the very moment of release through confession, however, Miles—in the governess's words :

" uttered the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss, and the grasp with which I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion ; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped."

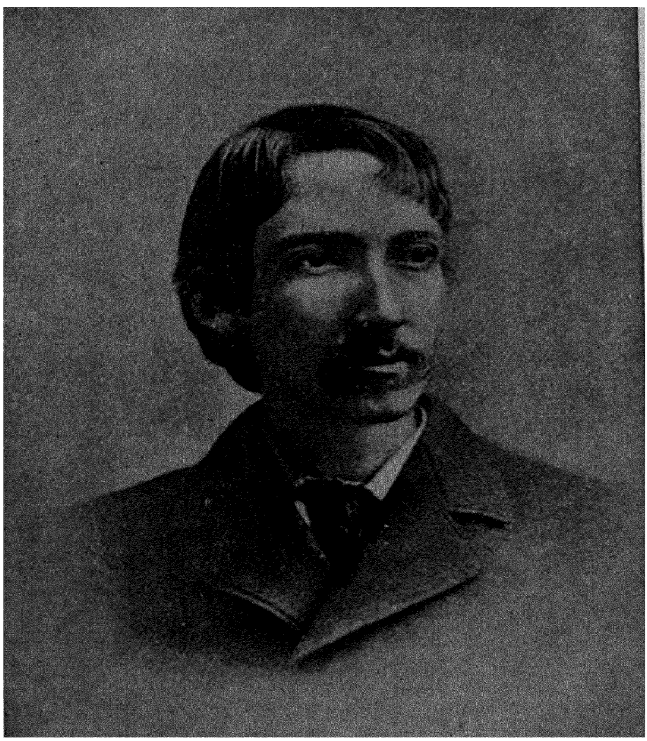
So subtilized is this story in its perfected art, that no commentary can altogether avoid a coarsened rendering. Attempts to fill in with written words the blanks which Henry James has left, lead but to barren crudity. It is only in his own curious yet most sensitive phraseology that Henry James's spirit and mind and art can be rendered without loss.

Chapter Eight Robert Louis Stevenson: "The Merry Men"

STEVENSON'S earliest short stories (the "New Arabian Nights" series) ran in the pages of magazines in 1878; nine years later, Kipling's "Plain Tales from the Hills" (his first prose volume) was published. It is with these two collections—belonging, roughly speaking, to the eighteen-eighties—that the cult of the short story by British writers may be said to begin: half a century or so after the form had been naturalized in America.

Even in regard to that late date, it is necessary to particularize *British* rather than *English* writers, since it was the Scottish mind and the Anglo-Indian that first found expression in the short story on the eastern side of the Atlantic. English writers might be mentioned who had practised in this branch of literature long before the eighteen-eighties; but there was none—certainly not Meredith—who had found in the prose short story a medium that befitted his genius incomparably better than any other form. Almost without exception, these earlier experimenters had been novelists first and foremost, and short-story writers only incidentally.

"A deal of Ariel, just a streak of Puck, much Antony, of Hamlet most of all, and something of the Shorter-Catechist": thus had W. E. Henley catalogued a few of the ingredients that go to the



[*From Stevenson's Works* (*Pentland Edition*: *Cassell*).

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON.
(Taken in California)

making of a Robert Louis Stevenson. Not improbably, a somewhat closer analysis might reveal more than a trace of Don Quixote and Falstaff. At least, where Stevenson the short-story writer is concerned, it may be felt that the delicious freakishness of the one and the full-bodied humour of the other each contributed to the diverse moods which govern tales ranging from *The Sire de Malétroit's Door*, through *Providence and the Guitar*, to *Markheim* and *Thrawn Janet*. But in these and other stories there is also Puck and Ariel and, markedly, the Shorter-Catechist.

Why, with Stevenson, did attention become sharply focussed upon the short story in English literature? The material facts of the growth of periodical literature, and the emergence of a new reading public with no great time to spare, must not be overlooked; yet the primary reason in the case of Stevenson is not to be found there. By more than a few, it has been maintained that R. L. S. the essayist out-tops any other aspect of R. L. S., in spite of the fact that the Samoan natives found the one right name for him in *Tusitala*—the tale-teller. Stevenson's upbringing and all his characteristics inclined him toward the spinning of yarns, and his mind had been crammed with weird tales.

He grew up, therefore, with a wealth of fictional matter at command; and he possessed a moderated gift of invention. It was at this point that his limitations determined that he should be a maker of short stories rather than of novels. He had no *sustained* power either in narrative or invention. When he essayed a novel, the resultant book always fell far short of the five or six hundred pages custom-

ary in Victorian novels; and, even so, he had frequently to whip his mind, which usually proved an unwilling steed on such excursions. All would go swimmingly for a matter of fifty pages or so—after that, a prolonged and despairing halt ere a fresh impetus was provided.

Necessity rather than choice, therefore—a lack of "staying-power" rather than any special predilection—determined Stevenson's adoption of the short-story form; and to this must be added that the short story is more readily adaptable to the moralizing and sermonizing tendency which was dear to Stevenson the Shorter-Catechist. Four, at least, of the six stories in "The Merry Men" have a more "serious" intention than mere provision of entertainment. In the "New Arabian Nights," not even the incident of *The Young Man with the Cream Tarts* is allowed to go by without "a bit of a preach" from Prince Florizel; while *A Lodging for the Night*—which begins so well—simply fades into a vapour of moral discourse from "a very dull old gentleman."

Whatever compulsion a limited inventive equipment may have exercised in turning Stevenson's attention to the short story, the circumstance nevertheless proved to be a fortunate one. He brought to this department of fiction, artistic consciousness and deliberate craftsmanship which a more fertile mind could scarcely have stayed to contribute. Since the core was so small in compass, the substance imposed upon it demanded more than average attention. When Denis de Beaulieu stumbles inside the Sire de Malétroit's open door,

and is given the choice either of immediate marriage with a girl he has never seen before or of being hanged before sunrise, the situation seems most promising. At that early stage, however, the story as a dramatic conception ends, and all the rest might be described as melancholy bickering between Denis and Blanche, followed by hiccups of grief, and a final Lyceum curtain as Denis takes the supple body of Blanche in his arms and covers her wet face with kisses! When Markheim murders the antique-dealer on the fifth page of the story, the action is finished; and the remaining twenty pages are given up to the murderer's meditations and hallucinations. In *Will o' the Mill* there is, quite intentionally, no dramatic movement: the hero does not plunge into the stream of life and activity at all—he stagnates on its verge.

These assertions would seem to militate against the suggestion that Stevenson was essentially a tale-teller; yet it would be difficult to substantiate any proposition that effective tale-telling postulates prodigality and richness of invention. Mr. Ernest Bramah's "Kai Lung" tales are among the most joyous things in modern story-telling. Not because of any full-bloodedness in their plots, but because of their altogether delectable verbal embroidery. Is there any evidence that the old-time minstrel poured out incident after incident in a fine dramatic crescendo? The probability is that his "tale" constituted only the thinnest possible thread, and that it was by felicitous decoration he held the attention of his crowd.

Neither *embroidery* nor *decoration* is apposite as a

term to be used in reference to Stevenson's stories. Among the foremost principles of his art was the conviction that, wherever possible, one sentence should be made to do the work of two. In other words, he practised what Walter Pater preached—that, in regard to prose style, "all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage."

As a writer, Stevenson's handicaps were considerable. Limited power of invention, allied with a scrupulous regard for economy of expression, necessitated the importation of other elements to fill the gaps. One such element favoured by R. L. S. was, of course, the moralizing element. But his resources did not end there. Natural description played its part (*cf. Olalla* and *Will o' the Mill*); as also did humour (*Providence and the Guitar*), and diablerie (*Thrawn Janet*), and sentiment (*The Sire de Malétroit's Door*), and bizarrerie (*A Lodging for the Night*), and the colouring which travel in far lands enabled him to give (*The Bottle Imp*, etc.).

When all exceptions and provisos have been sufficiently stated (and their statement is necessary for the salutary and friendly protection of Stevenson from extravagant appraisement) three facts remain: that Stevenson gave invaluable service as a pioneer of the short story in English literature; that his influence upon later writers has been deep and incalculable; and that however "thin" his plots and however extensive his "padding," he captures and retains the reader's interest with a skill which was and is the secret of R. L. S.'s popularity. So far as it is possible to analyse that secret, we may say

that its pabulum consisted in a measure of generalized human experience and understanding of the main phases of human emotion.

A census calculated to elicit a verdict as to Stevenson's most popular short story, would probably show the votes fairly evenly distributed among six or ten pieces. A large number of writers of short stories were asked by a New York newspaper, in 1914, to name " point-blank " the best short story in English. Stevenson's *A Lodging for the Night* was one of two stories which gained a large majority of votes over all other stories.[1] That verdict was no doubt given because of the verve and brilliancy and dramatic colouring which are striking features in the first half of this " story of Francis Villon." (And it is not without significance, perhaps, that literary men should have chosen a story in which a literary man is the central figure.) A vote taken among " average readers " would probably show that *The Sire de Malétroit's Door* commands wide popularity, on account of its pathos and sweet sentiment—at which the hypercritical reader gibes, maintaining that both pathos and sentiment in this story are shoddy and insincere.

And so, if readers were canvassed section by section, it would most likely be found that *Markheim*, *Thrawn Janet*, *The Suicide Club*, *The Bottle Imp*, *Will o' the Mill*, and several other stories each command a large following, for the very reason that Stevenson's outlook upon life was not that of any particular class or type. Above all things he was a humanist; and in nothing was he incomprehensibly

[1] H. T. Baker's " The Contemporary Short Story."

profound. He had most of the domestic virtues, and a good many of the civic; he possessed the courage and fortitude which many men admire and delight to exercise—by proxy; his religion was all-embracing and non-dogmatic; and with it all, he was an adventurer and a bohemian. As we read him, we choose what we love most from among those characteristics; and—what is the really significant fact—however we are constituted, most of us find something in him to which we respond vigorously, something which excites admiration and even affection (neglecting those who profess to feel only strong disliking).

Setting aside the question as to which is Stevenson's "best" story, and turning to "The Merry Men," we find in that volume three of his most remarkable stories standing together—*Will o' the Mill*, *Markheim*, and *Thrawn Janet*. These do not represent the whole range of his work in the briefer kind of fiction, but at least one from among them would almost certainly find a place in nearly every list of his best three stories.

Will o' the Mill is a piece of philosophical satire, arraigning the Quietist doctrine. As a child, Will often stands outside the mill where he lives with his adopted parents, and watches with wondering eyes and curious thoughts the great procession of people that passes through the quiet valley, bound for the cities and the sea. The boy's questions as to what lies beyond the confines of the valley, cause the miller to take him to a hilltop overlooking "the cities, and the woods and fields, and the bright curves of the river, and far away to where the rim of the

plain trenched along the shining heavens." Will is filled with an intense desire to go down into the world of men ; and as the days go by he can scarcely restrain his passion to be away. After a time, the miller turns his mill into an inn ; and when Will is sixteen, a certain fat young man who comes to spend the night persuades him that his longings are futile and vain, that to strive for what is beyond our reach is foolishness, and that contentment with immediate things is the final wisdom. The fat young man asks :

" ' Did you ever see a squirrel turning in a cage ? and another squirrel sitting philosophically over his nuts ? I needn't ask you which of them looked more of a fool.' "

So Will emulates the squirrel sitting philosophically over his nuts, and, after the miller and his wife have died, becomes a prosperous innkeeper. When he is thirty years old, Will proposes to Marjory, the parson's nineteen-year-old daughter, but he proves a very unenterprising lover. One day he remonstrates with her for plucking flowers ; saying that they are better and prettier in the garden, and that gathering them for the purpose of possession is rather like " killing the goose with the golden eggs." At the same moment it occurs to him, by similar reasoning, that getting married is not worth while, and the engagement is broken off. After three years, Marjory marries someone else, and twelve months later Will is summoned to her death-bed. Thereafter, time passes over Will's head like a quiet stream

lapping above a smooth stone. When men invite him to leave his valley, he shakes his head and says: "I am a dead man now: I have lived and died already." When he has reached the age of seventy-two, he makes his one and only journey. A great carriage comes for him in the dead of night, and Will is led contentedly to the vehicle by a stranger who says: "I am a good friend at heart to such as you." "And when the world rose next morning, sure enough Will o' the Mill had gone at last upon his travels—with his only friend, Death."

Knowing how passionately Stevenson himself, invalid though he was, desired life and all its active interests, we may regard the existence of Will in that secluded valley as intended to represent death-in-life; a cowardly abrogation of aspirations and duties, an ignoble submission to the conditions of the sty which is comfortable with its sufficiency of straw. But what the author as philosopher and moralist disapproves in the story of Will, the author as literary artist has to suggest and display and emphasize.

By innumerable touches, the death-in-life of that valley is brought home to us. Its quietness and demoralizing ease; its languor and remoteness; its soul-destroying isolation and complacency: all are made clearly evident. The splendour of renunciation becomes a mere travesty in this life of aimless self-sufficiency: the discipline of doing without superfluities becomes degraded into the refusal to strive after essentials. As the Indian fakir's arm becomes withered and atrophied by persistent and wanton disuse, so, by similar perversion, the

soul may be virtually destroyed. Here, in this story, is an earnest of Stevenson's quality as a tale-teller. As a fact, he has no tale to tell. He aims merely to express and to illustrate the moral proposition that life without effort is death-in-life. Yet he succeeds in framing a parable which admirably fulfils his purpose, without ever losing grip upon the reader's interest and without nauseating him with ponderous precepts. Here is a reversion to the atmosphere of Washington Irving's Sleepy Hollow, for another purpose.

Devolution is the underlying idea in several of Stevenson's stories. In *Will o' the Mill* the retrograde process is conducted along passive lines in the individual; in *Olalla*, an example of racial devolution is displayed in its penultimate manifestation, before a once-noble family finally flickers out in bestiality and disappears into darkness; and in *Markheim*, we are given another instance of devolution as affecting the individual—this time as a consequence of positive wrong-doing. Markheim has committed lesser crimes before he murders the dealer in an antique-shop on Christmas Day while the servant-girl is out and the victim is alone. Again the author's endeavour is to make the atmosphere accordant with the nature of the incidents recorded. Markheim obtains entrance to the shop on the pretext that he requires a Christmas present for a lady with whom he is to dine that night. The dealer suggests a fifteenth-century handglass, which Markheim immediately and vehemently rejects as a "damned reminder of years, and sins and follies"—a "hand-conscience." As the

dealer stoops to replace the glass, Markheim stabs him. Then the murderer's ordeal begins. The ticking of a score or so of clocks in the shop; the dark shadows nodding and swelling and dwindling as the candle-flame flickers in the draught; the unexpected chiming of the clocks; and a sudden knocking on the outer door by a casual visitor: all these help to intensify the murderer's nervous tension—and the reader's suspense. At length Markheim screws up his courage sufficiently to mount the stairs to the drawing-room above, in search of the dealer's money. He sits down to sort out the keys:

"And as he sat thus, at once busy and absent, he was startled to his feet. A flash of ice, a flash of fire, a bursting gush of blood went over him, and then he stood transfixed and thrilling. A step mounted the stair slowly and steadily, and presently a hand was laid upon the knob, and the lock clicked, and the door opened."

The visitant is Markheim's own evil spirit; and in a long colloquy the murderer is made to see that, despite good resolves, all his efforts at reform have been abortive and that his path is inexorably downward. Only one door to freedom remains for him—to cease from action and pay the penalty of his crimes. When the dealer's servant-maid returns and rings the door-bell, Markheim confronts her "upon the threshold with something like a smile. 'You had better go for the police,' said he: 'I have killed your master.'" With those words the story is brought to a close which is as effective as its begin-

ning. *Markheim* is as much a sermon as any discourse that ever came from a pulpit. Even as in Hawthorne's stories, the artist may be seen struggling with the moralist and trying to keep him within the bounds of a readable and intriguing narrative. For about half the story this effort succeeds; but with the appearance of the visitant, the artist is shouldered aside, and does not reassert himself until the very end. From the standpoint of æsthetics, it is no doubt impossible to regard that colloquy as other than an unwarrantable intrusion. Nevertheless, the parable type of short story is so long-lived that it is useless to cavil. Granting the permissibility of the parable type, and predicating the beginning and end of *Markheim* as written by Stevenson, it is infinitely easier to say that the dialogue referred to is inartistic, than it is to suggest a changed method of treating the theme without further offence to principles of literary art. The transition from the world of matter to that of intangible presences is abrupt and incredible; there has been no prior suggestion of our being poised waveringly between the material and the psychical; and the adjustment required to accommodate us to the sudden demand upon poetic faith is only to be made with difficulty. Once that adjustment is made, however, we find no more difficulty in accepting Markheim's visitant than we find in accepting the Good and Bad Angels of *Faustus*.

The human mind more readily responds to large demands upon credibility than to small demands. *Thrawn Janet* is the tale of a devil-possessed, crooked old Scotchwoman, housekeeper to the Rev. Murdoch

Soulis, minister of the moorland parish of Balweary. Mr. Soulis preaches against the cruelty of his parishioners, who persist in treating Janet as a witch. Confirmation of the popular belief comes to the minister one July day, however, when he encounters of man of " great stature, an' black as hell " sitting upon a grave in the kirkyard. This black man takes a hop, step, and a jump across the river and up to the the manse, followed by the minister, to whom Janet denies any knowledge of such a person. Not long afterward, following a terribly hot season, the minister is awakened one night by noises :

" There cam' a stramp o' feet as if men were wars'lin', an' then a loud bang ; an' then a wund gaed reishling round the fower quarters of the house ; an' then a' was aince mair as seelent as the grave."

On going into his housekeeper's room he finds the crooked old woman dead—hanging from a single nail by a single thread of worsted for darning hose. A still stranger thing happens. The dead woman walks downstairs and out of the house, and as the corpse enters the garden " the Lord's own hand out of the heavens struck the horror where it stood ; the old, dead, desecrated corpse of the witch-wife, so long kept from the grave and guarded by devils, flared up like a brimstone match and fell in ashes to the ground." Thereafter, the minister became a severe, bleak-faced man, who preached disquieting sermons about the devil and the terrors of eternity. . . .

Such happenings make much greater demands

upon human credence than anything in *Markheim*; yet we may accept every word of *Thrawn Janet* in as childlike a spirit as R. L. S. himself listened to similar stories told to him in childhood by his old nurse Alison Cunningham. The Scottish dialect used in the tale of Janet adds to the illusion of actuality in the story, which, as a piece of folk-lore, touches deeps within us. It would seem as absurd to speak of "technical excellences" in relation to *Thrawn Janet*, as it would to speak of "effective stage-management" in regard to a real thunderstorm.

Stevenson was one of the most mannered among English writers, and a well-trained artificer in words, but he had in his keeping the keys to elemental forces that reck nothing of stylistic niceties. R. L. S. is beloved not because he dressed his phrases in purple and fine linen, but because he knew that fairies, and bogies, and tears, and courage, and kindly sentiment, are cherished in common by the greatest and the least among men.

Chapter Nine Rudyard Kipling: "Life's Handicap"

IN contradistinction to certain other writers whom he named the kings of literature, an eminent journalist once wrote down Rudyard Kipling as "the literary blacksmith." That term of depreciation may here be conveniently annexed as an aptly descriptive and not dishonourable label. Blacksmithery is an honest and ancient craft, in high repute with poets as well as postillions; and, *on his day*, Rudyard Kipling's literary strokes go home as unswervingly as those the smith directs at the glowing mass on his anvil.

In another sense, too, "blacksmith" is apposite. No other modern author—nor any other author of any date—has so exalted iron and steel. Kipling is the prose laureate of the Machine Age; and his ships and men throb with a passionate joy of life which can be summed up in the one word *efficiency*. Whether for soldier, or civil servant, or horse, or steamship, or locomotive, efficiency is the one and only password which would induce Kipling to grant admission to his particular paradise. Let a man be compassionate if he will; but the necessity for efficiency is immitigable. Efficiency is the soul of the universe according to Kipling; efficiency can receive its keenest edge only by the wear and tear of the day's work; and since the day's work may be done more efficiently by a machine than

by a man, it is not at all certain that *·007* and the *Dimbula* would not have a higher place in the Rudyardian paradise than even Mulvaney and McPhee and Tallantire—who, being but human, are subject to error and the inefficiency that arises therefrom. Kipling's cold-blooded detestation of men who fall short of his ideal, is suggested in two sentences from *William the Conqueror*, the story of a great famine which ravaged the province of Madras. The time came when the famine was within distance of being completely conquered, and we are told that "things were going well with [Sir James Hawkins's] world. Three of his more grossly incompetent men had died, and their places had been filled by their betters." Neither Kipling nor India has any mercy upon human failure.

To write dithyrambics to efficiency brings its own pains and penalties, of course, since their author must himself cultivate the efficiency of an expert. Here it is that Kipling triumphs. If he is to write of a locomotive, he informs himself fully as to all the anatomical complications of his gleaming mechanical hero: he "gets" the technical jargon, and becomes as fluent in its use as driver and stoker and greaser and fitter combined. He knows the names of things and understands their functions; he neither stammers nor hesitates nor fumbles. He embarks upon a literary job in full confidence, because he knows that every bit of material will be ready to his fingers' ends at the requisite moment. And such adequacy of equipment is not so common in contemporary literature that we can affect to depreciate or despise it.

In Kipling, therefore, a specific phase of modern life reached its apotheosis. Nowadays, perfect mechanism—whether metallic or human—no longer satisfies the mind and soul of man as the ultimate goal of life. Yet it was an ideal that had merits and advantages. It gave a definite basis to human effort; it possessed material form and offered a graspable anchorage to the human animal in a sense that spiritual ideals do not. When men were able confidently to put their trust in things of steel—in "reeking tube and iron shard"—the world was at least a place of realities, and no hazy drift of remote and doubtful aspirations. . . .

Kipling began to write in the middle of the 'eighties. He was born in Bombay, and following five years' schooling at the United Services College in Devonshire (which he afterwards reflected in "Stalky & Co."), he returned to India as a journalist. Then began to appear, in Lahore, the paper-covered booklets through which Kipling's work first became known, and very soon the world grew intensely interested in this young Anglo-Indian; while he, being intensely interested in the world, travelled far and wide.

Before the day's work of the engine-driver and the ship's engineer began to engage him, Kipling wrote of the social life and the official duties of India's British administrators—soldiers, civil engineers, district commissioners, doctors, and others who constitute the British garrison. He saw these men and their wives and sisters bearing the burden of Empire, and forthwith he became over-conscious of the weight of that burden upon the Anglo-

Saxon race. The Indian native is pictured by Kipling as endurable only when he accepts the position of a willing serf under the wise and entirely altruistic British overlord. Toward the Indian with Western education, Kipling is contemptuous; and for the nearest foreigners, the Russians, he displays something less moderate than contempt. As an outcome of this contagious attitude, a blatant and arrogant Imperialism coloured English literature throughout more than a decade, being apparent even in the famous *Recessional* of the 1897 Diamond Jubilee—a poem in which Kipling's humility, even, is noticeably dictatorial.

One would wish to speak only of the purely literary qualities of Kipling's work, but the author himself makes such a course almost impossible. Nearly all his Indian stories demand that the reader shall, at the outset, grant certain large premises: such as that the British are God's chosen race; and that, in consequence of divine selection, the British can do no wrong. From those initial postulates, Kipling would exempt only the few English members of Parliament who occasionally plead the cause of the Indian native, and one or two high officials who similarly offend. Such evidences of racial prejudice cannot easily be set aside in any study of Kipling's work.

The Head of the District,[1] an otherwise fine story, depends for appreciation wholly upon the reader's readiness to take it for granted that Mr. Grish Chunder Dé, M.A., a Bengali with an Oxford degree, is both a fool and a coward. Any man

[1] In "Life's Handicap."

may be a fool and a coward, of course, and no special exception need be claimed in behalf of Chunder Dé; but Kipling presents him as both fool and coward not because he is a specimen of average humanity, but because he is a more or less educated Indian, and particularly because he is an Indian who has been at an English university. In order to emphasize the view that Chunder Dé is a thorough-going poltroon, Kipling sneers histrionically at all who regarded the Bengali in a different light —from the Viceroy down to the native editor of a Calcutta newspaper. Of the Viceroy it is asked:

"What more easy to win a reputation for far-seeing statesmanship, originality, and, above all, deference to the desires of the people, than by appointing a child of the country to the rule of that country? Two hundred millions of the most loving and grateful folk under Her Majesty's dominion would laud the fact, and their praise would endure for ever. Yet he was indifferent to praise or blame, as befitted the Very Greatest of All the Viceroys. His administration was based upon principle, and the principle must be forced in season and out of season."

Imperialistic realism, it would appear, cannot brook administration that chooses to consider principles as of greater significance than the evidential value of temporary local conditions. And when Kipling turns his devastating glance upon the unhappy imagined Indian journalist, his sneer becomes much more elaborate:

" ' The Viceroy's Excellence Gazette ' . . . was at pains to thank ' Our beloved Viceroy for once more and again thus gloriously vindicating the potentialities of the Bengali nations for extended executive and administrative duties in foreign parts beyond our ken. We do not at all doubt that our fellow-townsman, Mr. Grish Chunder Dé, Esq., M.A., will uphold the prestige of the Bengali, notwithstanding what underhand intrigue and *peshbundi* may be set on foot to insidiously nip his fame and blast his prospects among the proud civilians, some of which will now have to serve under a despised native and take orders too. How will you like that, Misters ? We entreat our beloved Viceroy still to substantiate himself superiorly to race-prejudice and colour-blindness, and to allow the flower of this now *our* Civil Service all the full pays and allowances granted to his more fortunate brethren.' "

" Many things are true which only the commonest minds observe." . . . If criticism of Kipling appears sometimes to be envenomed and to display a political taint, is it not because the author has given provocation by using his literary genius as an instrument for political and racial propaganda ? With the author's hand so heavily against him, it is preordained that Chunder Dé should be a hopeless failure in the hour of crisis, and that the British officials should be called upon to salvage a serious situation, which they do with triumphant ease.

The political prejudices of Kipling have an important bearing in the literary sense, inasmuch

as they limit his appeal and hamper the free exercise of his creative genius. *The Head of the District* is far from being merely a mass of sneering prejudice, but its interest cannot be more than episodic and incidental, since the dramatic organism suffers dismemberment, as it were, and its limbs are unsuccessfully grafted upon a foreign torso. Nor is this story an isolated example of such aberration in Kipling. *The Man Who Was* would be a more moving tale than it actually is, if the Russian, Dirkovitch, were less picturesquely abominable.

We come back to the "blacksmith" metaphor: this time to suggest that Kipling is at his best when he is able to bring into play the specific qualities of a muscular and robust mind. He is deficient in subtlety, and is rarely able to convey to the reader more than he actually says. Whatever type of subject-matter may be in hand—the emotional, the satirical, the horrible, the humorous, the heroic—Kipling cannot work without the very last ounce of available material on his anvil, and rarely is he able to fashion it with any tool more delicate than a sledge-hammer.

Such inability to persuade his words to do more than function efficiently—such failure to breathe into them a life-spirit which is more potent than the virtue of plain statement—may be illustrated from "*The City of Dreadful Night.*" We require a standard of comparison at this point, and it can be found by referring to any one of a dozen episodes in Joseph Conrad's books. Kipling's evident purpose in "*The City of Dreadful Night*" is to acquaint Western people with the "feel" of the "dense

wet heat" which hangs over Lahore and other cities of the Indian plain on a sweltering night in the hot season. Joseph Conrad sets himself a somewhat similar task in *Typhoon*, when, before the onset of the tempest, his object is to convey the "feel" of the "clammy heat" which made the air seem thick, and made Captain MacWhirr gasp "like a fish." The effect of Conrad's writing is, almost literally, to make the sympathetic reader, also, gasp like a fish. By his great ability in creating atmosphere, he wraps the pages of *Typhoon* in that heavy blanket of dense wet heat which Kipling is able only to *describe*. Conrad makes little employment of straightforward description; he knows that the reader will perform the act of auto-visualization, if only the author succeeds in making him *feel*. Kipling's method is merely to describe, in the vain expectation that we shall thereby come to experience the actual sensation within ourselves.

"*The City of Dreadful Night*" is exemplary as a travel-picture and as a fine piece of descriptive writing, but it has practically no "atmosphere." We are told that it was too hot for a white man to sleep; that the July rains had washed the skeletons out of their graves in the Mahomedan burial-ground; that the sleeping natives lay like corpses in the open air; that the women and babies were restless on the house-tops; that "some poor soul had risen to throw a jar of water over his fevered body"; that a woman perished at midnight of the heat. The total effect is an impressive picture, and incidentally some striking cameos of tropical

night scenes are given; but of any real *conveyance*, or *transmission*, or *communication* (whichever technical literary term be preferred) of sensation from the author to the reader there is little, if anything. The major fact about the soggy stifling heat of a tropical night is not that it is externally either picturesque or horrible (according to the degree of artistic appreciation in the observer), but that the suffering human subject is too troubled in body and mind to receive any impression other than one of maddening discomfort. He becomes a writhing mass capable only of febrile ejaculations and intolerable inward irritation. And it is very largely by suggesting such internal effects that Joseph Conrad succeeds in getting the sensation of heat *out of his pages* and *into the reader*.

Strikingly efficient though Kipling is in manipulating words as the material for narrative, he can no more work magic with them than a blacksmith can hammer a snowdrop out of a piece of white-hot metal.

Kipling's virility is shown notably in such stories as *The End of the Passage*, *The Return of Imray*, and (especially) *The Mark of the Beast*. The last-named records how Fleete (who had gone to India to look after his estate near Dharmsala), in a fit of drunken foolishness, "polluted" a heathen god by grinding the ash of a cigar-end against the forehead of the red stone idol. One of the fanatical native devotees, a "Silver Man" [leper], rushed from the temple, "making a noise exactly like the mewing of an otter, caught Fleete round the body and dropped his head on Fleete's breast. . . .

The priests were very angry until the Silver Man touched Fleete. That nuzzling seemed to sober them." Next day, Fleete had a black mark upon his breast, a mark shaped like one of the blotches upon a leopard's hide; and he was possessed by an insatiable appetite for underdone chops—" all red and juicy." The horses in his stables showed signs of panic when he went near them; and on the second evening, when his two friends arrived back at Fleete's bungalow, they found him grovelling on all-fours in the garden. A few hours later he developed the characteristics of a wild beast, and had to be bound hand and foot to his bed, a doctor pronouncing the case as hydrophobia, and beyond all hope of recovery.

Fleete's friend, Strickland, had other views, however. He captured the Silver Man, who was prowling beast-like around Fleete's bungalow, and by coercive methods (too realistically horrible for even Kipling to describe) the leper was induced to touch Fleete again, this time with a healing hand. The white man recovered, and remembered nothing except that he had slept deeply after his drinking bout. It is, as the author concludes, " a rather unpleasant story "; and its text is that " East of Suez, some hold, the direct control of Providence ceases." In this story, Kipling produces the desired effect of horror from an incredible theme by making it so efficiently unpleasant that both the incredible and the unpleasant pass into the realm of make-believe where all things are credible (*vide* Stevenson's *Thrawn Janet*). *The Mark of the Beast* is a fairy-tale of a particularly nightmare-ish

kind, written by the man who was afterwards to write authentic fairy-tales—not of Indian "silver men," but of English Puck and his Sussex company.

The "difference" which is held to apply east of Suez gives point to many another story by Kipling. In *The Return of Imray*, an Englishman is killed by a trusted Indian servant, and his body laid upon the rafters above the ceiling-cloth of his bungalow. Some months after the inexplicable disappearance, Imray's body is found; and with little ado, Bahadur Khan, his former body-servant, confesses the murder and explains the cause:

"'Sahib, consider. Walking among us, his servants, he cast his eyes upon my child, who was four years old. Him he bewitched, and in ten days he died of the fever—my child!'

"'What said Imray Sahib?'

"'He said he was a handsome child, and patted him on the head; wherefore my child died. Wherefore I killed Imray Sahib in the twilight, when he had come back from office, and was sleeping. Wherefore I dragged him up into the roof-beams and made all fast behind him. The Heaven-born knows all things. I am the servant of the Heaven-born.'"

After very few more words, Bahadur Khan chooses his own way out of the world by stepping back upon the fangs of a venomous snake. *The Return of Imray* is tuned, at least as to its latter part, to the precise note of fatalistic simplicity which makes the East at once too childlike and too

profound for comprehension by the complex and superficial West.

. . . . . .

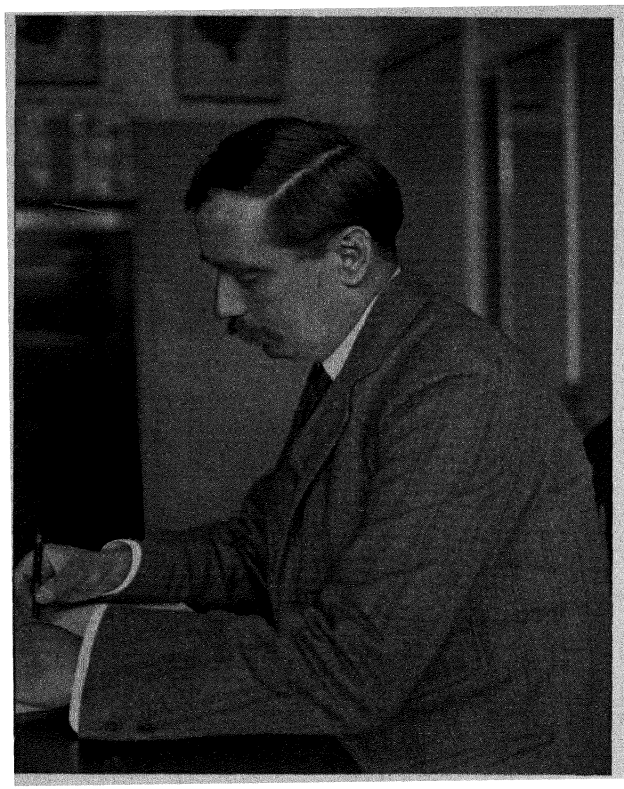
Criticism, at best, is an ungrateful task—and often a seemingly barren one; for what natural liking at first approves, cooler judgment frequently snatches away. If the development of literary taste deepens appreciation of greater and permanent writings (as, indisputably, it does), it also narrows or entirely closes certain channels of less-exacting enjoyment.

Grateful memories derived from earlier reading of Kipling seem to be jarred by subsequent re-reading in a more sophisticated mood. There were days, for many readers, when his three musketeers —Mulvaney, Learoyd, and Ortheris—seemed as good as Dumas's trio; but doubts creep in, and questions as to whether *The Incarnation of Krishna Mulvaney* (to name but one story of the "Three") is really funny, or whether it is only buffoonery of a circus kind. Is Mulvaney a fraud, after all? Is Learoyd really dull, as we were sometimes temerarious enough to suspect even in the past? Does "mean-souled little Cockney viper" sufficiently describe Ortheris, who once seemed something of a hero? Or are these three truly comic creations? And what of *Brugglesmith*?—and of *The Village that Voted the Earth was Flat*?—and of . . . ? But such questions are too disquieting!

At the worst, however, there remain the "Just-So Stories," and *Moti Guj—Mutineer*, and *William the Conqueror*, and *'007*, and *The Devil and the Deep Sea*, for delight. Yet we cannot take even

that delight undisturbed, for has not Dr. Arthur Compton Rickett asserted[1] that the "artistic interest [of *·007*, *The Ship that Found Herself*, and *Bread upon the Waters*] is a trifling matter"; and that "*The Devil and the Deep Sea* is sheer engineering pedantry—no layman could possibly take pleasure in it"? . . .

[1] "A History of English Literature."



H G WELLS

Chapter Ten H. G. Wells: "The Country of the Blind"

THE world went very well in the days when H. G. Wells was producing short stories. He had not then received that inward illumination which convinced him that he was born to be a modern Atlas, and bear the whole weight of the inhabited globe upon his shoulders in a courageous endeavour to defy time and space and bring in Utopia!

It was the period—in the 'nineties—when H. G. Wells wrote largely for the fun of writing, and for sheer joy in inventing things. He says:

"I found that, taking almost anything as a starting-point and letting my thoughts play about it, there would presently come out of the darkness, in a manner quite inexplicable, some absurd or vivid little incident more or less relevant to that initial nucleus. Little men in canoes upon sunlit oceans would come floating out of nothingness, incubating the eggs of prehistoric monsters unawares; violent conflicts would break out amidst the flowerbeds of suburban gardens; I would discover I was peering into remote and mysterious worlds, ruled by an order logical indeed but other than our common sanity."

Here, and elsewhere in the introductory essay to "The Country of the Blind," H. G. Wells throws light upon the days, almost three decades since, when short-story writers were many and prolific. He thought (at the time of writing that introduction in 1911) that the short-story phase of English literature was already dead and gone; and in that year such a view was defensible. Now, more than twelve years later, the art of the short story has revived, yet with differences sufficient to make a study of Wells's methods distinctly interesting and illuminating.

Whether the scene of these stories is set upon sunlit oceans or in suburban gardens, the events are invariably transacted according to a plan which cannot be measured by rules deducible from "our common sanity." And if we would take refuge from the difficulty of criticising his subject-matter by turning to principles of construction and style, the author is ready to discredit any such endeavour by proclaiming:

"Insistence upon rigid forms and austere unities seems to me the instinctive reaction of the sterile against the fecund. . . . I refuse altogether to recognize any hard-and-fast type for the Short Story, any more than I admit any limitation upon the liberties of the Small Picture."

Generally-received canons, whether of art or of conduct, are not negatived of course by any individual refusal to recognize them; but as a fact, in his short stories, H. G. Wells is not the revolutionary

his proclamation suggests. His themes may be unique, but his forms do approach a roughly generalized type. The stories are all eminently readable, though in a specifically technical sense they are undistinguished. Affectations or conscious tricks of style are rare in them; and in his short-story period the mannerisms characteristic of the maturer Wells were still unstereotyped. That now most familiar Wellsian hero, the rising young statesman who strikes a moral and ethical attitude as he sings: "All for love and the world well lost" (*cf. A Dream of Armageddon*) was then still a *rara avis*; and the notorious outbreaks of "dots" were sporadic rather than endemic. . . .

The only definitely "mannered" story included in "The Country of the Blind" (which contains "all the short stories . . . that I care for any one to read again") is the artificial trifle *A Vision of Judgment*—a strange medley in which facetiousness mixes very ill with the pomposities of a prose-poem. Of the remaining thirty-two stories, *A Slip under the Microscope* and *Jimmy Goggles the God* are least meritable; leaving thirty stories which might be grouped under four headings: Comedies (including Farces); Horrors; Fantasies; Parables.

In a broad view, the outstanding characteristics of these thirty pieces are that they are packed full of matter, and that they represent, in a really extraordinary degree, the free play of the human imagination. Considered in this aspect, the absence of technical distinction becomes almost a positive merit, as representing the exercise of a workmanlike sense of adequacy, to the exclusion of all possibly obtrusive

technical fashioning. The stories, as to their external form, are no doubt as plain as deal packing-cases; and for Wells's purpose that is a more fitting outside than any gracefully proportioned casket with austere line could be. The content, not the casing, is his concern; by which it is not at all intended to imply that beauty (or even fine writing!) has no place in these stories. More often than in his novels there is apparent a luminous eloquence, as the author flashes meteorically into passages of acutely visualized description. There is the vision of the spheres vouchsafed to the disembodied operation-patient in *Under the Knife*, where a sense of spellbound wonder is stirred in the reader not so much by the actual picturing (excellent though that is) as by the conveyed sense of an incredibly rapid passage to the outposts of the universe.

Loose and flabby writing has often been a blemish in Wells's later work, but in *Under the Knife*, in *The Star*, and in *A Dream of Armageddon*, there is evidence as to what a master of English he could consistently have been if he had chosen to write less in recent years. He was, in the beginning, an author who knew how to write surpassing well—and had surpassing much about which it was worth while to write. *That* Wells breaks through from time to time even in the sociological novels (*cf.* the description of the voyage down the Thames in "Tono Bungay"; the fall of the aeroplane in "Joan and Peter"; and the sinking of the submarine in "The Undying Fire"); but in the short stories he had not woven round about himself that cocoon of

prolixity which has stifled many valuable faculties in him.

The Comedies and Farces group in " The Country of the Blind " includes *The Jilting of Jane* (the earliest Wells story)—being the adventures of a servant-girl who threw a boot at her rival on the wedding-day. This was not a promising beginning for the man who was to lay the whole universe under contribution for subject-matter ; but it is at least interesting to think that Jane might have been sister to Arty Kipps or Mr. Polly. In Mr. Polly's world lives, also, Mr. Coombes (*The Purple Pileus*), who was " sick not only of his own existence but of everybody else's " ; and who eats a strange fungus in the hope that it will poison him and give release from a nagging and domineering and extravagant wife. The purple pileus does not kill Mr. Coombes ; on the contrary, it makes him " fighting drunk " and enables him to become master in his own house. This story has a touch of the fantastic Wells who is now so familiar—as also has *The Stolen Bacillus*, in which an anarchist, thinking to infect London with cholera, mistakenly steals a tube of the bacteria which causes blue patches on monkeys!

The best and most characteristic story among the pseudo-scientific farces is certainly *The Truth about Pyecraft.* An intolerable bore to all his acquaintances, Pyecraft was the fattest clubman in London. He begged Mr. Formalyn to give him a weight-reducing prescription, taken from a collection of recipes which originated in India. Formalyn, being one day summoned by telephone to Pyecraft's flat in Bloomsbury, finds the fat man " right up close

to the cornice in the corner by the door, as though someone had glued him to the ceiling." Pyecraft had always spoken of his bulk as "weight" instead of "fat"; and the Hindu prescriptions employed words with literal precision! The patient lost weight but not size, and became like a lighter-than-air balloon—a condition impossible to rectify except by means of Mr. Formalyn's plan to sew leaden weights into Pyecraft's clothing. Uproariously fantastic though the whole idea is, a kind of March-Hare logic is consistently followed. Supposing that those fat people who are continually desiring to "lose weight," could have their wish literally fulfilled—what would happen? The plain answer to that question exists in *The Truth about Pyecraft.* How he ate all the heavy food he could procure—"pork 'e's had, sooit puddin', sossiges, noo bread," said his landlady; how he had to be put under a solid mahogany table to keep him temporarily away from the ceiling; how he slept beneath his wire-mattress instead of on top; how he transferred his Turkey carpet from the floor to the ceiling: these and other entertaining matters are madly comic and comically mad, but they do represent a meticulous working-out of that "order logical indeed, but other than our common sanity" which H. G. Wells puts forward to explain the line pursued in his short stories.

Questions which have never ceased to run in H. G. Wells's brain are: "Why should the world always conform to pattern? Why should man's logic always be supreme? What reason, apart from use and wont, is there to suggest that the

universe, the planets and their inhabitants, will always retain their present relative status ? Suppose the order of things did change, fundamentally, in some sudden and inexplicable way. . . . Suppose ! "

That " Why ? " and that " Suppose ! " are the basis of nearly all Wells's short stories.

Suppose ants evolved directive intelligence, and worked out a highly specialized social organization, welded themselves into a single nation, and became armed with a deadly poison. . . . What could the human race do against swarming millions of tiny enemies of this species ? Such a course of " supposing " produced the story of *The Empire of the Ants*, an empire at first confined to the upper reaches of the Amazon :

" So far, their action has been a steady progressive settlement, involving the flight or slaughter of every human being in the new areas they invade. They are increasing rapidly in numbers, and Holroyd at least is firmly convinced that they will finally dispossess man over the whole of tropical South America.

" And why should they stop at tropical South America ? "

The Empire of the Ants is one in the group of stories here labelled " Horrors." It has seven companions in the collection, and among the disturbing things born of H. G. Wells's " supposing " are flying spiders (*The Valley of Spiders*), a blood-sucking orchid (*The Flowering of the Strange Orchid*), a mighty flying animal in Borneo which attacks an

astronomer in the dark (*In the Avu Observatory*), and flesh-eating sea-pigs with tentacles many feet long, which kill bathers and boaters at English watering-places (*The Sea-Raiders*).

These stories (and also some placed in the category of Fantasies) are the work of an author who has the gift to induce, in his readers, " that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith." We do not strain at the improbabilities involved; we enter into the spirit of his " supposing," because we, too, are continually asking " Why ? " in connexion with many common and uncommon things in life. It is probably true to say that every man and woman contains somewhere hidden—either near the surface or deep down—the thwarted spirit of a child whose " Why ? Why ? Why ? " was never fully answered and whose " Supposing . . ." was invariably nipped by the perishing frost of adult impatience. Now and again, that thwarted child once more bursts into utterance, through an adult mind—insisting upon answers to its questions, and revelling in untrammelled exercise of the imagination. Then it is that the world gets its original geniuses, producing works which—whether they be like *The Faerie Queene* or like " The Food of the Gods "—are a child's supposings translated into adult dialect. Moreover, the horrors imagined by H. G. Wells are horrors indeed, but they are, mostly, no more terrifying than those independently summoned up by many a child; and Wells's imaginative horrors are convincing because he presents them with an appearance of faith in their authenticity. He is not merely inventing or

" making-believe " ; he is setting imagination free to create its own shapes about some germ of an idea, and the result is a reality more intensely powerful than actually existent objects.

When, on the other hand, Wells traffics in horrors that are certainly derived from actualities of the " grown-up " mind, he fails abysmally. *The Cone* has several features which should ensure its receiving good reviews in high-class periodicals ; nevertheless, it is a repulsive and revolting story, which no prating of " literary merit " could possibly excuse ; and only little less undesirable is *The Lord of the Dynamos.*

More than a dozen stories in this volume may conveniently be listed as Fantasies, although the word lacks the pungency and astringency that should be suggested in connexion with these tales. *The Story of the Late Mr. Elvesham* tells of a young man who was induced to drink a glass of " doctored " liqueur by an elderly man who had promised to leave him a fortune. When the prospective " heir " starts to get out of bed next morning, he notices a remarkable physical change in himself and finds that he has become in all outward respects like the aged and withered Egbert Elvesham—who entirely disappears, having evidently possessed himself of the young man's strength and lease of life. This theme of transferred personality is one which seems to exercise an increasing fascination for writers, and it has provided, in particular, the plot for one of Walter de la Mare's novels, " The Return," although that book has a mystical element such as does not enter into the Wells story.

The *chef d'œuvre* among the Fantasies is *The Star*. From that New-Year Day when three observatories recorded some eccentricity of behaviour by the planet Neptune, until the time months later when astronomers on Mars observed slight changes in the earth's surface, the story of that great missile flung through the solar system is told with a rapidity of movement corresponding to the meteoric flight of the strange star which had collided and united with Neptune, forming one vast mass of incandescence. The concussion swung these conjoined planets out of the normal orbit, into the path of the sun; and they swept onward toward the earth at a hundred miles and more a second, the velocity increasing moment by moment:

"Hereafter the laughter ceased. The star grew —it grew with a terrible steadiness hour after hour . . . until it had turned night into a second day. . . . It rose over America near the size of the moon, but blinding white to look at, and *hot*; and a breath of hot wind blew now with its rising and gathering strength, and in Virginia, and Brazil, and down the St. Lawrence valley, it shone intermittently through a driving reek of thunder-clouds, flickering violet lightning, and hail unprecedented. . . .

"So the star, with the wan moon in its wake, marched across the Pacific, trailed the thunder-storms like the hem of a robe, and the growing tidal wave that toiled behind it, frothing and eager, poured over island and island and swept them clear of men: until that wave came at last—in a blinding

light and with the breath of a furnace, swift and terrible it came—a wall of water, fifty feet high, roaring hungrily, upon the long coasts of Asia, and swept inland across the plains of China. For a space the star, hotter now and larger and brighter than the sun in its strength, showed with pitiless brilliance the wide and populous country; towns and villages with their pagodas and trees, roads, wide cultivated fields, millions of sleepless people staring in helpless terror at the incandescent sky; and then, low and growing, came the murmur of the flood. And thus it was with millions of men that night—a flight nowhither, with limbs heavy with heat and breath fierce and scant, and the flood like a wall swift and white behind. And then, death. . . ."

Worse than this came in the wake of the star; but the final catastrophe was averted, for the meteor swept by the earth and rushed headlong into the sun. Thereafter a new brotherhood grew among men; the frigid zones of the earth lost their frozen fields, becoming " green and gracious "; and mankind moved northward and southward, toward the poles.

This story offers something better than studied technical rendering; it offers a vision fused at white heat from a rich imagination, maintaining its own momentum and equilibrium.

Turning to the Parables in " The Country of the Blind," we find three stories that can be thus designated: *The Door in the Wall*, *The Beautiful Suit*, and *The Country of the Blind*. The first describes how Lionel Wallace, when a little fellow

between five and six years old, wandered through West Kensington streets one day, and came to a green door set in a white wall. The door attracted the child, as it were magnetically, so that he opened it and discovered a wonderful and beautiful garden stretching far and wide, with distant hills. He found delightful playmates there; and, afterwards, a grave and sombre woman who took him to a seat and showed him a book:

"The pages fell open. She pointed, and I looked, marvelling, for in the living pages of that book I saw myself; it was a story about myself, and in it were all the things that had happened to me since ever I was born."

In a while the grave woman stooped to kiss the boy's brow, and at that moment he found himself crying in a long grey street in Kensington. He thought he would be able to find that door again whenever he went to look for it; but he could not. He did see it again, several times in his life, but it was always in some different locality; and Wallace was always prevented by some immediately urgent worldly call from passing again through the door. A time came when he determined that nothing whatever should keep him away from the wonderful garden whenever next he should see the green door in the white wall; and one morning his body was found in a railway excavation near East Kensington Station, beyond a hoarding in which a small doorway was cut. . . . The advantage of both this story and *The Beautiful Suit* is that

they may be interpreted according to the temper of the individual mind. Wallace's mysterious garden might be any one of those fine aspirations by which men are moved, and from which they are debarred by the fret and wear and tear of the workaday world. Men cry: "We have no time for the beauty that lies beyond the door in life's wall. We are too busy to-day; let our time for rest and the sweet things of life be to-morrow." And when that remote to-morrow dawns at last, the wonderful garden of which they had the freedom in childhood, eludes them after all, and in the hour of delusion they walk behind a hoarding—into the pit beyond. Yet that is not all, maybe. H. G. Wells says of Lionel Wallace:

"I am more than half convinced that he had, in truth, an abnormal gift, and in sense, something—I know not what—that in the guise of wall and door offered him an outlet, a secret and peculiar passage of escape into another and altogether more beautiful world. At any rate, you will say, it betrayed him in the end. But did it betray him? . . . By our daylight standard he walked out of security into darkness, danger, and death.

"But did he see like that?"

J. D. Beresford[1] interprets "The Invisible Man," one of Wells's longer works, as a statement of "man's revolt against imprisonment in the flesh," and suggests that a similar idea is expressed in the story named *The Country of the Blind.* But

[1] "H. G. Wells" (Nisbet, 1915).

there are sensible differences which make it difficult to agree with that allocation. If, however, Beresford had chosen to classify *The Door in the Wall* as a parable of " man's revolt against imprisonment in the flesh," there would seem to be little opportunity for questioning the interpretation.

In regard to *The Country of the Blind*, would it not be a more nearly accurate exposition to say that it presents, figuratively, the man of genius (or the man of normal vision, or the man of imagination, or wisdom, or understanding) as in revolt against his social environment, and not against his own incarnation? In the heart of South America lies an imagined mountain valley, all the inhabitants of which have been blind for many generations. Into that Country of the Blind there stumbled a man, Nunez, possessed of full vision; and remembering an old proverb—" In the Country of the Blind the One-eyed Man is King "—he felt certain of attaining power among that people. Instead, they regarded him as a demented creature; and when Nunez rebelled against them he was whipped and imprisoned in darkness, and afterwards made a menial. He fell in love with Medina-saroté, his master's daughter, but his suit was acceptable to the Elders only on the one condition that he would submit to an operation prescribed as a certain cure for the criminal idiocy from which he was considered to suffer. The operation proposed the removal of his eyes—irritant bodies which affected his brain, said the doctors. After an agony of revolt against the plan, Nunez agreed, in order that he might not be separated from his lover; but on the evening

preceding the operation-day he rebelled finally, and set forth to climb the great mountains which bounded the Country of the Blind:

"When sunset came he was no longer climbing, but he was very far and high. He had been higher, but he was still very high. His clothes were torn, his limbs were blood-stained, he was bruised in many places, but he lay as if he were at his ease, and there was a smile on his face. . . .

"The glow of the sunset passed, and the night came, and still he lay peacefully contented under the cold clear stars.

Thus Nunez chose the shining heights of death rather than the darkened ways as of a human mole.

H. G. Wells has told that story of Nunez and Medina-saroté in the Country of the Blind, many times. Once Nunez was called Dick Trafford, Medina-saroté was named Marjorie Pope, and instead of *The Country of the Blind* the story was called "Marriage." The "blind men" were then represented by the drones of the human hive, into whose power Trafford was betrayed all ignorantly by Marjorie, his wife, whose extravagance and futility demanded that he should submit to become like other men—money-grubbing and blind to the visions which Dick's eyes discerned through the medium of his scientific genius.

Give up your own special and fine though unprofitable work; become like other men, and get the money which makes life easy and love a bower of comfort and delights: thus Marjorie, in effect, to Dick.

Give up your eyes and your disturbing visions of a beautiful world ; become like other men in this country, so that our love may be fulfilled : thus Medina-saroté, in effect, to Nunez.

Neither *The Country of the Blind* nor " Marriage " is a statement of " man's revolt against imprisonment in the flesh," but of the uncommon man's revolt against the tyranny of the common man and of the unimaginative woman.

Chapter Eleven

Joseph Conrad[1]: "Typhoon"

UNBOUNDED admiration provides a bad foundation for literary criticism, and it is the disability under which the present writer labours in approaching Joseph Conrad's work. Not until ardent enthusiasm has worn thin is it possible to bring the cold light of reason to bear upon a hero and his deeds. It may indeed be that his activities consist largely in misdeeds; but that matters little to the hero-worshipper, who sees everything through a golden mist—which may as a fact permit true vision, but which is more likely to exercise some unapparent "corrective" influence. Those who enrol under the banner of Conrad have little desire to shout his praises with a multitudinous voice. For them, his preëminence is a self-evident and concrete fact, not a theory which needs to be buttressed with argument and clamorous reiteration. They suspect, on occasion, that he is not entirely perfect; for have they not traversed more than one desert of print, with exhausting effect? But it matters not. The true Conradian is an ecstatic; aridity is not a permanent discouragement to him, because the lure and the light are always

[1] This chapter was finished seven days before Joseph Conrad died on August 3, 1924. It stands here substantially as first written—a tribute offered in sincerity and humility to the memory of one who was "worthy of undying regard."

ahead, and the disciple presses on, never tc find himself desolated at the end.

A Conrad *cult* could not be other than a disagreeable thing, considering how much Conrad belongs to the open air and the free life of nature. So his admirers do not shout from the house-tops: they are content to point to him and his work, challenging the heretics to find his peer anywhere among the novelists in English literature.

What follows in this chapter, therefore, is to be read as a critical exercise resting upon an invisible foundation compounded of all the verbal material for homage which the English language has at command.

. . . . . .

The "Typhoon" volume has been chosen for comment here, because it registers so well the world-outlook which enabled Conrad to come to his creative and interpretative job more abundantly equipped to provide a fully-rounded representation of human life than any other imaginative writer in prose. And assuredly it is life "in the round" that he aims to depict in all his work. In a bald and partial preliminary definition of his world-outlook, it is inevitable to dwell upon Conrad's cosmopolitanism. Conrad the cosmopolite represents, of course, only one phase of that multiple personality which embodied, also, Conrad the artist, Conrad the psychologist, Conrad the mystic, Conrad the romantic, Conrad the enchanter. His cosmopolitanism, as illustrated by the stories in the "Typhoon" volume, will, however, indicate one source from which arises that extraordinary "difference" between his writings and all other writings whatsoever.

The microcosmic school of fiction[1] does, at its best, get down to certain fundamental qualities in life which are common to California and Catford and Cape Town and Canton. Yet it cannot be overlooked that the method of this school is, in truth, a method of reduction and elimination. It does not render life's richest and fullest manifestations, but the barest and least complex. These novelists reduce life to its simpler terms, and cut away many of the major differences which, to whatever degree they may be conditioned by purely local circumstances, are nevertheless vastly important when the aim is to view human life as to its infinite diversity as well as to its fundamental unity.

When it is said that the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under their skin, a very considerable allowance must be made for the thickness of skin in both women. The professional cricketer who remarked that though it might be desirable for the social distinction between "gentlemen" and "players" not to be obtruded in public, off the field the players would rather be left to themselves, thank you! was expressing something almost as deep-rooted as the primitive sisterhood alluded to in Kipling's line. Social differences and racial differences are recognized and cherished even by many who are among the under-dogs. However lamentable the fact may be in sociologists' eyes, the pervasion of economic theory has so far broken no more than the surface of the slave-mind.

As Conrad looks at the world, he seems to see at one glance both the hidden unity of human life and,

[1] See *ante*, pp. 54–55.

superimposed, its infinite diversity. The regional (or microcosmic) school arrives at the idea of unity in human life mainly through the suggestive promptings of a limited emotional experience—by a process of brilliant guessing, which just happens to be rightly directed.

Conrad's cosmopolitanism, his world-outlook, has an exceedingly important bearing upon his rendering of life, and endows his work with some part of that unique spirit which sets him apart from all other writers in our literature. He came to us as a stranger, speaking not our tongue; yet he did not come to us haphazardly, but as a lover at last united with the infinitely desirable loved one.[1] He came, moreover, as one whose wide experience of active life on the seven seas and in divers lands had taught him the twin truth that although (*a*) men and women of whatever nationality are members of one world-wide human family, (*b*) that family is split by differences of race and temperament and development which cannot be obliterated by the stroke of any pen. He distinguishes racial differences as he would distinguish variable characteristics among blood-brothers and sisters; but he does not recognize any such apparently insurmountable barriers as many an Englishman, for example, considers to be set between himself and people of other nations. The Englishman too often regards it as a divine ordinance that Englishmen and Englishwomen should be predominant, even among characters in imaginative literature. Conrad came

[1] "I had thought to myself that if I was to be a seaman then I would be a British seaman and no other. It was a matter of deliberate choice." ("A Personal Record.")

to us free from any such preconceived racial ideas; obsessed by no national prejudice; "presenting" heroes and heroines from the four corners of the world; making Pacific-islanders, Swedes, "niggers," South Americans, Central Europeans, Englishmen, equally "sympathetic" or equally unlikeable.

The most prominent people in "Typhoon and other Stories" include an Ulster Irishman, a Scottish marine engineer, an English country lass, a Central European castaway, an Alsatian innkeeper, an English coasting-skipper, a Scandinavian pilot, and others; while, in the whole number of his novels and stories, there is a much more heterogeneous body of people, all of whom Conrad reveals and makes understandable with the utmost economy of expression consistent with his elaborate but forceful system of psychological revelation. At such times as he requires only a sketch-portrait, he can create so unforgettably that a six-line reference in one book is sufficient to make an indelible impression on the reader's subconscious mind; and when the same character is met again without forewarning in a later book, the former impression rises at once into the realm of consciousness.

The employment of technical jargon is not entirely dispensable in literary criticism, and the term *three-dimensional* is useful to describe Conrad's method of presenting life and men and human activity. The flat canvas which suffices for the painter is too limited for the full exercise of the novelist's art; and for his special purpose of showing life sculpturally—in its length and breadth and height, and in its varied configuration—Conrad has adopted a special technique

of presentation. At first it seems to be a freakishly oblique and contorted technique, and it no doubt discourages many readers from going on to the fuller enjoyment which falls to a persevering reader's share. Marlow's creator has used the fictional character who bears this name[1] for a purpose similar to that which determined the shape of Browning's *The Ring and the Book* : the purpose being to gather evidence from a wide range of sources in order to illuminate a particular problem from several angles, and thus to bring out Truth, as distinct from a merely partial aspect of truth. But whereas Browning repeated his theme through the several mouths of principals and witnesses and commentators, Conrad utilizes Marlow, individually, to a similar end.

In " Lord Jim " the first few chapters comprise a straightforward record of the central event which gives rise to everything that follows. Later, the narrative is taken up at another point by Marlow, who not only expresses an individual view of Jim's affairs but also communicates statements made in his hearing by other observers. As the outcome of this indirect method, the reader receives an at-least-threefold view of the tragic crisis in Jim's life, and the affair does finally emerge in an " all-the-way-round " (or *three-dimensional*) form.

Superficially, the foregoing matters appear to have little application to *Typhoon*, yet their statement is a necessary prelude to examination of an important element in this story. It has so far been suggested that Conrad's endeavour is to detach his writings from any sort of flat *merely literary* background; to

[1] See " Lord Jim," " Chance," *Youth*, etc.

present them sculpturally—in the round—and therefore to give a stronger illusion of reality, which is further intensified by the lifelike spirit the author breathes into them. This technique has been mentioned here as to its operation in, (*a*) Conrad's general presentation of human life, by means of evidence in action drawn from characters representing several nationalities; (*b*) Conrad's presentation of a particular series of incidents through the medium of evidence drawn from a number of witnesses and commentators —largely by proxy and through the mouth of Marlow. We may now add to the series, (*c*) Conrad's presentation of individual character in Captain MacWhirr (*Typhoon*): for we have there an instance of sculpturesque portraiture; the three-dimensional effect being again secured through the medium of accumulated evidence drawn from varied sources. There is in *Typhoon*, therefore, a fascinating adaptation of Conrad's unique technique to special problems peculiar to the short-story form.

Novelists have no natural limitation of space. Publishers acquiescing, a novel may be a hundred and fifty pages long, or it may run to fifteen hundred pages. That is to say, an author may (in ideal economic circumstances) take just as much or just as little space as he needs for developing his characters precisely as he wishes. But since a closely circumscribed space-limit is normally assumed to confine the short-story writer, characterization is commonly limited to brief glimpses. Even Henry James, who occupies much more than normal short-story space, does not give anything like full-length portraits in his tales. And in general, short-story writers have submitted to

the limitations and given their characters either in *strips* (*i.e.* some single trait in a man's character shown through a fairly extended time-space), or in *snaps* (*i.e.* a rapid picture of a man seen only as to the rough generalities of his character).

Conrad does more than this in the case of Captain MacWhirr: he gives us the whole man. This is not to say that by using similar technical devices he could give us the whole—or even the essentials—of any and every man. He could not thus briefly envisage Captain Anthony, or Mrs. Gould, or Lingard, or Doña Rita. In order that his technique may operate effectively in a limited time-space, the author has to secure simplification elsewhere—and he does it drastically, yet (for this particular story) without sacrificing so much as one iota of vital matter. Here is the simplification, in the first sentence of *Typhoon:*

"Captain MacWhirr, of the steamer *Nan-Shan*, had a physiognomy that, in the order of material appearances, was the exact counterpart of his mind: it presented no marked characteristics of firmness or stupidity; it had no pronounced characteristics whatever; *it was simply ordinary, irresponsive and unruffled.*

In the words here italicized, Conrad has cleared away all that might hinder the representation of a whole character in a short story. If Captain MacWhirr had been *complex, out of the ordinary, sensitive and "jumpy,"* a full-length novel would have been needed to characterize him in the sculpturesque style. Nevertheless, Conrad has not evaded the problem or begged

the question by thus simplifying his hero: the situation demands such a man; the particular theme could not be developed with any other type of man. In every way, *Typhoon* demonstrates the perfect adjustment of means to end—not in a mechanical pattern, but in a wholly organic artistic rendering. If the technical problem thus involved was actually apparent to Conrad (other than subjectively), it is no more obtruded in the completed work than is the probability that most great poets have agonized to find their "inevitable" rhyme-words. To postulate a preliminary problem of technique in prose fiction is as legitimate as to embark upon rhymed verse or fixed-verse forms —provided always that a reasonably intelligent reader who cannot talk literary "shop" is totally unaware that he has been anywhere near an experimental essay in craftsmanship.

In *Typhoon*, Conrad's purpose is to show this simply ordinary man—one of humanity's least spectacular products, one whom "the salt of the earth" would regard contemptuously—in a life-and-death conflict with the worst that the physical forces of wind and water can do in their most terrifying moods. And the stolid, simply ordinary man wins! Conrad has been said to take a pessimistic view of human life. Is it pessimism to say to external powers: "Bring up your big battalions, your heavy artillery; invoke your most cunning generalship; hurl forward your ten-thousand-ton wave-power! We, on the contrary, will produce no more than one of the least among our brethren—*and we will defeat you*"?

For Conrad, it is but the barest prologue to have acquainted the reader with the little that is told about

Captain MacWhirr in the opening sentence. There remains the imperative need to carry indubitable conviction to the reader's mind. To *tell* the reader is nothing—a mere excrescence. The thing that must be done is to make the reader deduce the facts additionally for himself. Therefore, every available ray of light must be cast upon MacWhirr, so that every plane and every angle on every side shall be seen—remembering that in this particular instance the planes and angles are comparatively few. Five main channels of evidence are drawn upon by Conrad in witness to MacWhirr's character:

(1) Direct external description—of physiognomy, etc.

(2) The man seen in action.

(3) The evidence of the shipbuilders.

(4) Evidence from MacWhirr himself—in letters to his parents and his wife.

(5) Evidence from Rout and Jukes, ship's officers.

Over against the completely-rounded presentation of MacWhirr, it is interesting to set the little but sufficient sketch-portrait of his wife, who is memorably characterized in two or three side-references scattered in the early pages of *Typhoon*. There may thus be viewed side by side, in the same story, examples of Conrad's brilliant lightning-sketches and his solidly-moulded figures.

Little can helpfully be added to the above enumeration of the fivefold presentation of MacWhirr except by quotation from *Typhoon*.

(1) *Direct external description*, in Conrad's hands, is made somehow revealing in regard to a man's inward character, also. It is not pretended that the

few sentences to be quoted will summon up a living portrait of MacWhirr to those who have not already met him in the author's pages, but when he is so known, it becomes evident that surprisingly much significant information has been embodied in few words:

"He was . . . so sturdy of limb that his clothes always looked a shade too tight for his arms and legs. As if unable to grasp what is due to the difference of latitudes, he wore a brown bowler hat, a complete suit of a brownish hue, and clumsy black boots." [In the tropics!]

(2) *The man in action.* The owners of MacWhirr's ship having judged it expedient to transfer the vessel from the British flag to the Siamese, Jukes, the first mate, expresses indignation at sailing under the White Elephant in succession to the Union Jack. The phraseology he uses to express his feelings is, however, colloquial rather than precise, and when Jukes remarks, "Queer flag for a man to sail under, sir," MacWhirr thinks it well to examine the coloured plates in the International Signal Code-book, "where the flags of all nations are correctly figured in gaudy rows."

"When next Jukes . . . happened on the bridge, his commander observed:

"'There's nothing amiss with that flag.'

"'Isn't there?' mumbled Jukes, falling on his knees before a deck-locker and jerking therefrom viciously a spare lead-line.

"'No. I looked up the book. Length twice the breadth and the elephant exactly in the middle. I thought the people ashore would know how to make the local flag. Stands to reason. You were wrong, Jukes. . . .'"

(3) *The evidence of the shipbuilders* (nephew and uncle) shows us that the younger man regarded MacWhirr with "faint contempt" because the captain was unmoved by any romantic visions as to life on the coast of China; but the elder is impressed by the fact that the unromantic creature had observed, at first glance, a defective lock on the cabin door:

"'You praised that fellow. . . . What is it you see in him?' asked the nephew with faint contempt.

"'I admit he has nothing of your fancy skipper about him, if that's what you mean,' said the elder man curtly. 'Is the foreman of the joiners on the *Nan-Shan* outside? . . .'"

MacWhirr's letters and those of Jukes and Rout, severally, are quoted by the author to show other facets of the skipper's character, so that in the result the man seems to have been actually bodied forth before our eyes. It is not only with the eye of faith, therefore, that we recognize the author's brief but most apt summing-up of this man who lived only in the immediate hour; who had no poetic imagination (a flag to him was a piece of bunting bearing an arbitrary design, it did not hang as a national symbol); whose honesty "had the heavy obviousness of a lump of clay"; and who was in all things imperturbable.

The waters rose and the winds roared; the whole fury of the sea, the whole might of the powers of the air, beat upon the *Nan-Shan*, ravened against her and did their worst to drive the vessel and her freightage of souls to swift perdition. A "better" man —in civilization's sense of what represents good, better, best—might have snapped under the strain, but this "simply ordinary, irresponsive and unruffled" man endured; and through the calm might of endurance, prevailed.

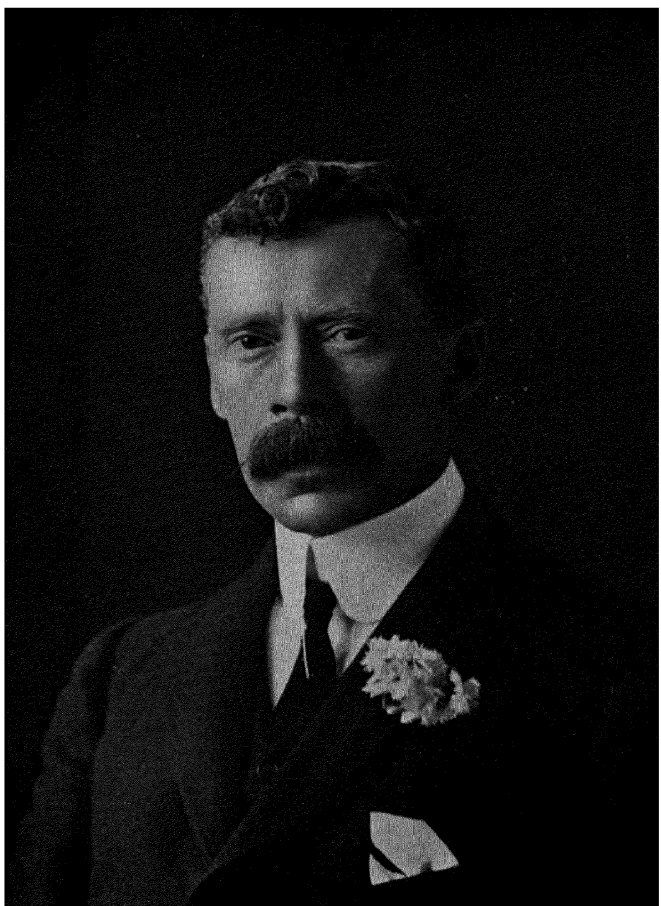
Chapter Twelve Arthur T. Quiller-Couch: "Selected Stories" [1]

LEGEND Land, and in particular that part of it which is the Delectable Duchy of Cornwall, has yielded a rich store of material to the ingenious pen of "Q"; and his short-story pages are full of treasure-trove for a generation which knows and in a measure reveres the Cambridge professor, but has (at least half-) forgotten the writer of ghost stories and fantasies and comedies.

As a short-story writer "Q" is a "comfortable body"; he writes pleasantly about pleasant people; he also writes pleasantly about unpleasant people; and, heretical though it be to admit it, there is a very roomy niche in the fane of literature for those writers who do not plough deep furrows upon readers' brows. Certain popular commodities are commended to the public as "grateful and comforting." Without looking askance down a highfalutin nose, one may wholeheartedly commend "Q" as a writer of "grateful and comforting" short stories.

His ghosts are grateful and comforting ghosts; they behave as ghosts are expected to behave—even to the dutiful wringing of hands. His mysteries, and they are not few, are grateful and comforting mysteries; as also are his surprises, and his sentimental excursuses. Sometimes "Q" is a little vague, and sometimes a little tedious, but never uncomfortably so; and after

[1] Kings Treasuries Series (*Dent*).



[*Photo by Elliott & Fry.*

ARTHUR T. QUILLER-COUCH.

all, one's dearest friends do not entirely avoid vagueness and tedium—nor do we love them less because of these occasional lapses!

I do not think there is any other short-story writer mentioned in this book who can induce in readers so genial and friendly a frame of mind as "Q" manages to do. Perhaps that is his secret. To him life is rather a "lark"; fiction, too, is rather a "lark"; and, of course, the criticism of literature—and especially lecturing to undergraduates—is the greatest "lark" of all.

And why not? Let at least one reader record gratitude to "Q" for the sly suggestion of Wisdom holding both her sides which pervades the pages of so many of his books. Nevertheless, "Q" is no buffoon; he can and does express pathos and pity, and he is not blind to life's tragedies; but all these things may be observed—even endured—without descending into the maelstrom of inspissated gloom. It is no paradox to say that some of "Q's" most hilarious stories have a suggestion of tragedy at their heart. Where could be found a merrier comedy for a sunshiny day than *Pipes in Arcady*; but is it *all* comedy? And so with "*Once Aboard the Lugger*"; is not the desperately comic stratagem of Nance Trewartha also desperately pathetic?

In that story is recounted how, in the year 1839, the Rev. Samuel Bax, aged twenty-one, visited Troy Town to preach his trial sermon (the subject was Original Sin) before the deacons of the Independent Chapel.

"They counted his thumps upon the desk, noted his

one reference to ' the Original Greek,' saw and remembered the flush on his young face . . . "

—and three weeks later the Rev. Samuel was " called." While the deacons were considering Samuel's theology, the maids in the congregation observed that his eyes were brown and that " his hair had a reddish tinge in certain lights " ; and one of the least among the maids, a fisherman's daughter, Nance Trewartha, made a resolve.

On the night of Samuel's settlement in Troy, Nance calls upon him, and summons the minister to visit a member of his congregation who is dying on the other side of the harbour. The ferry is closed and the only means of crossing is to be rowed by Nance. On a plausible pretext she pulls her boat and its passenger toward the harbour mouth and out to the open sea, when they begin to skirt the coast in the direction of Plymouth :

" They passed the small headland and still the boat held on its way.

" ' I had no idea you were going to take me this distance. Didn't you promise me the house lay just beyond the point we've just passed ? '

" To his amazement the girl drew herself up, looked him straight in the face and said—

" ' There's no such place.'

" ' *What ?* '

" ' There's no such place. There's nobody ill at all. I told you a lie. '

" ' You told me a lie—then why in the name of common-sense am I here ? "

" ' Because, young man—because, sir, I'm sick o' love for you, an' I want 'ee to marry me.'

" ' Great heaven ! ' the young minister muttered, recoiling. ' Is the girl mad ? '

" ' Oh, but look at me, sir ! ' She seemed to grow still taller as she stood there, resting one hand on the tiller and gazing at him with perfectly serious eyes. ' Look at me well before you take up with some other o' the girls. To-morrow they'll be all after 'ee, an' this'll be my only chance ; for my father's no better'n a plain fisherman, and they're all above me in money an' rank. I be but a Ruan girl, an' my family is naught. But look on me well ; there's none stronger nor comelier, nor that'll love thee so dear ! ' "

This was a disgraceful example of the primitive method of marriage by capture, of course ; but—says " Q "—perhaps Nance " wiped it out by fifty years of honest affection." At any rate, half a century afterward the Rev. Samuel and Mrs. Bax died within seven days of one another ; and the text of the funeral sermon was : " Lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided." Moreover, as the preacher added : " Such marriages as theirs were made in heaven " !

From Nance's point of view there was something other than comedy in the kidnapping episode ; but still, for our immediate purpose, the points to note here are the twinkle (as it were) in the author's eye ; his crisp and sparkling method of narration ; the neat and lifelike dialogue among the maids in Troy, as well as that in the boat ; the pleasant little pictures of the old Cornish town ; and the clever characteriza-

tion. The story may be written down as "impossible," but that does not prevent the author from making it seem entirely feasible to those who read.

Many stranger things than Nance's stratagem are told in this volume, and when the reader stays to wonder why he has found it so easy to move among "Q's" ghostly visitations, extraordinary legendary circumstances, fairies, magic shadows, and so forth, it becomes evident that much more technical skill than had at first been realized went to the making of these stories. That they are "grateful and comforting" is due to the fact that they move so easily from beginning to end; and they move easily because the fining hand of an accomplished craftsman has made rough places plain, and smoothed the reader's way. There is studied artifice of a highly polished kind, which prevents our being pulled up sharp by crude proffering of improbabilities.

The creation of atmosphere is rarely demanded in "Q's" stories, yet *A Pair of Hands* demonstrates that his competence embraces the ability to weave the appropriate atmosphere when something other than the light of common day is required. The story named is of a Cornish house which was (if the adjective be allowable) "beautifully" haunted by a "dear little Miss Margaret" who had died in the house twenty years earlier, and who returns every night to do the housework. All that the present tenant sees of the child is a pair of hands and wrists washing beneath the pantry tap. Margaret was a dainty, brave, and loving child, and the appropriate setting for her ghost is an atmosphere of peace and love—which the house-

keeper does her utmost to maintain. Miss Le Petyt, the tenant, said afterwards :

" Few women, I dare to say, were ever so completely wrapped around with love as we were during those three years. It ran through my waking life like a song : it smoothed my pillow, touched and made my table comely, in summer lifted the heads of the flowers as I passed, and in winter watched the fire with me and kept it bright."

A lavendered atmosphere of comeliness and enwrapping love pervades the story, and one thinks of how another poet and short-story writer has, with a somewhat similar intention, brought a subtler suggestion of breathing quietness into lines which murmur :

> Breathe not—trespass not ;
> Of this green and darkling spot,
> Latticed from the moon's beams,
> Perchance a distant dreamer dreams ;
> Perchance upon its darkening air,
> The unseen ghosts of children fare,
> Faintly swinging, sway and sweep,
> Like lovely sea-flowers in its deep.[1]

Both Quiller-Couch and de la Mare are much engaged with children in their writings, and it is interesting to see the unlikeness of interest which moves the two writers in this regard. " Q " is animated by motives of parental sentiment (see, for example, *The Conspiracy Aboard the " Midas "*);

[1] Walter de la Mare : *The Sunken Garden.*

and his ghost-child, Margaret, is thoroughly domesticated. Walter de la Mare is not above or apart from his children, on the parental plane or any otherwhere; he is among them, he is with—and even within—them; they are spirits roving free, not engaged with housework and domestication, not altogether kindly and sentimentally innocuous—but wildings, hovering above "gloomed and daisied swards."

In this connexion it is worth while to refer at more length to another of "Q's" stories, called *Old Æson*, which begins: "Judge between me and my guest, the stranger within my gates, the man whom in his extremity I clothed and fed." This person, who came no one knew whither, seemed very old—for he was bald and wrinkled and toothless; his eyes "blue and deep, and filled with the wisdom of years." This ancient of days lived on the best of his host's hospitality, the while he took, also, the love of the host's wife. A day came when the host noticed that the Stranger was growing younger, putting on a youthful loveliness, while the host grew ever older. He expostulates with his wife, who laughs at him, and encourages the Stranger to make open love to her. Then one day the interloper comes to the host across the flower-beds in the garden and demands his watch:

"'Why should I give you my watch?' I asked, while something worked in my throat.

"'Because I wish it; because it is gold; because you are too old, and won't want it much longer.'

" 'Take it,' I cried, pulling the watch out and thrusting it into his hand. 'Take it—you have taken all that is better! Strip me, spoil me——'

" A soft laugh sounded above, and I turned. My wife was looking down on us from the window, and her eyes were both moist and glad.

" 'Pardon me,' she said, 'it is you who are spoiling the child.' "

That story represents the use of a well-known technical device which is capable of interesting exploitation within certain limits, and for special classes of stories in which some effect is to be gained by keeping the reader in the dark (or at least in suspense) until the end of the story. It may not demand any markedly acute perception to guess midway in the narrative that Old Æson is the baby son of the host and his wife, but so far as the author is concerned, the secret is kept until the very last word has been written. A variant of this device is also used by " Q " in *The Two Householders*.

These remarks on " endings," naturally stir curiosity as to " Q's " beginnings; but on turning to examine these, we find that he does not appear to be, in any obvious way, closely concerned either with the technique or with the psychology of beginnings. Sometimes he starts with some fragment of conversation pitched in a minor key; sometimes with a paragraph of plain, almost prosy, narrative—or with a piece of natural description. If he has any favourite method of " jumping off," it is the oldest method—that of the fairy-tale, with its

familiar magic of "Once upon a time . . ." Rarely does he set out to provide a consciously effective, or intriguing, or spectacular opening. One of the few striking examples in "Selected Stories" is the beginning of *A Pair of Hands*:

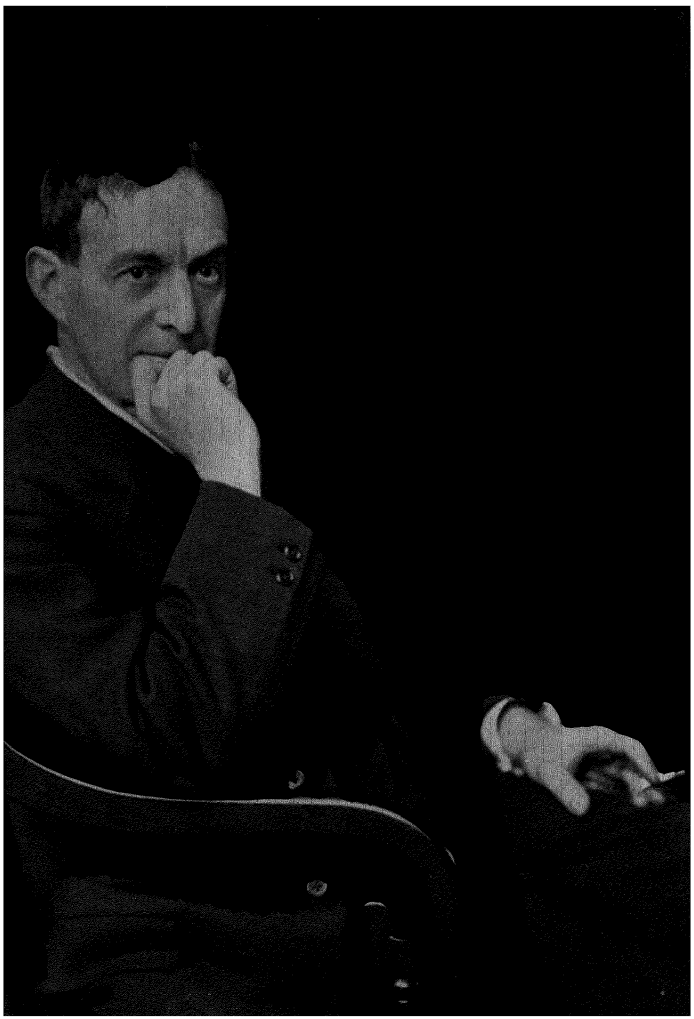
"'Yes,' said Miss Le Petyt, gazing into the deep fireplace and letting her hands and her knitting lie for a moment idle in her lap. 'Oh, yes, I have seen a ghost. In fact I have lived in a house with one for quite a long time.'"

Another effective beginning is this shorter sentence from *Pipes in Arcady:*

"'I hardly can bring myself to part with this story, it has been such a private joy to me.'"

On the whole, it is because "Q's" stories are a private joy to us that we find them occupying a specially warm corner in our hearts. Carried into the Forum, for public examination, they look a little shy and dithered by the fuss and noise.

"Q," let it be said again, is a "comfortable body"—a blessed word that can scarcely be spoken of those who carry the responsibilities of rarer genius. By many, the opportunity for a restful interlude will be welcomed.



[*Photo by E. O Hoppé.*

WALTER DE LA MARE

Chapter Thirteen

Walter de la Mare: "The Riddle"

"WHAT'S the *use* of a new-born baby?" was the response made by an eminent scientist to confound a sceptic who inquired as to "the use" of a certain scientific discovery.

To those who ask, "What is the *meaning* of Walter de la Mare's prose stories?" it is only possible to reply with the counter-questions: "What is the meaning of a spring morning? or of an autumn evening? or of a sun-jewelled shower in summer? or of a snowflake?" The stupidest as well as the wisest among the sons of men recognize that some of the loveliest of God's works cannot be analyzed by the human intelligence, or interpreted according to any formal code framed by the human mind. God has not so far found it either possible or desirable to limit His activities to a range within the compass of earthly philosophy.

Do men therefore impatiently dismiss the spring morning as less desirable than some barren philosophical proposition which, as they may say, "means" something? Only the very few who are qualified for citizenship in the Country of the Blind do so, probably. Nevertheless, among readers of books it is the majority, not a few only, who daily do things which are almost as incredibly silly. They reject a song by Shakespeare or a sonnet by Keats,

in favour of a ballad to some maid in Honolulu or of an ode to Felix the Cat! They ignore, let us say, stories by Katherine Mansfield, Walter de la Mare, and others among the moderns, and wallow delightedly in the sentimental molasses and iridescent passions of the *Rainbow Magazine*.

The difficulty urged by many readers in regard to Shakespeare and Keats and de la Mare, is that the sonnets of the one, the odes of the other, and the stories of the third, do not seem to *mean* anything; or perhaps, in more modest and self-abasing moments, they remark that these writers are "very deep"! Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi was one of those who have an itch to find the *meaning* of the world; yet he at least had enough gumption under his skin to see—and to say—that

> If you get simple beauty and nought else,
> You get about the best thing God invents,—
> That's somewhat. And you'll find the soul you have missed,
> Within yourself when you return Him thanks!

We are so hot for certainties in this our life, that we tend to depreciate everything born of the human mind which cannot be brought within the field of our own individual vision. Particularly in literature, we demand that everything shall be "crackable," so that, as from a nut, we may extract the kernel whole and swallow it—another morsel to cram the intellectual stomach. It is part of the intimate lovableness of an English lane that we may here and there pull a nut from the wayside hedge and munch it ruminantly: we assimilate, physically, something of the scene; we get it

inside ourselves. But we cannot—except in a metaphysical sense—swallow or munch the Andes, or the Victoria Falls, or the Grand Canyon, or the Lake District, or even Boxhill: we can only yield ourselves to the influence of the pervasive beauty in these places, and, as it were, soak in their beauty until we become saturate. There are pieces of literature that can be munched and swallowed and used as human nature's daily food, by such readers as find them assimilable and sustaining:

> Say not, the struggle naught availeth,
> The labour and the wounds are vain,
> The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
> And as things have been they remain.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
> Seem here no painful inch to gain,
> Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
> Comes silent, flooding in, the main.
>
> And not by eastern windows only,
> When daylight comes, comes in the light,
> In front, the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
> But westward, look, the land is bright! [1]

That is a kind of writing which yields its meaning, its moral, all that it holds, as easily as a hedge-nut yields its kernel. But where is the tangible kernel of "meaning" in writings of a different order?—in, say:

> Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
> Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
> Conspiring with him how to load and bless
> With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
>
> . . . . . .

[1] Arthur Hugh Clough.

Who hath not seen Thee oft amid thy store ?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind ;
Or on a half reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swathe and all its twinèd flowers. . . .[1]

Or what is the " meaning " of this other ?—

The clouds that gather round the setting sun
Do take a sober colouring from an eye
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality ;
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.[2]

Even school-children, of course, have paraphrased these passages, under provocation from grown-ups with a passion for *meanings* ; but neither they nor we have thereby got any nearer to the root of the matter. Unless we are satisfied to use some sixth sense, in order to interpret the meta-logical significance of autumn " sitting careless on a granary floor," and of the tiny flower giving thoughts that " lie too deep for tears," poetry has no power to speak to us.

The employment of that sixth sense is demanded by all Walter de la Mare's work—by his prose no less than by his verse. In fact, the key to appreciation of his non-metrical work lies in the recognition

[1] Keats : *Ode to Autumn.*
[2] Wordsworth : *Ode on Intimations of Immortality.*

that the subject-matter of his prose does not vary in kind from the subject-matter of his verse. Whether in verse or in prose, Walter de la Mare always writes poetry; for poetry is not a form, it is not a manner of presentation merely; it is an essence, a spirit. By age-long custom, the spirit which is poetry has become most intimately associated with the form which is verse; yet de la Mare is no innovator, of course, in using prose as a vehicle for poetry. Turn back to the fifteenth century:

"And thus it passed on from Candlemass until after Easter, that the month of May was come, when every lusty heart beginneth to blossom, and to bring forth fruit; for like as herbs and trees bring forth fruit and flourish in May, in likewise every lusty heart that is in any manner a lover, springeth and flourisheth in lusty deeds. For it giveth unto all lovers courage, that lusty month of May, in something to constrain him to some manner of thing more in that month than in any other month, for diverse causes. For then all herbs and trees renew a man and woman, and in likewise lovers call again to their mind old gentleness and old service, and many kind deeds that were forgotten by negligence. For like as winter rasure doth always arase and deface green summer, so fareth it by unstable love in man and woman. . . . Nowadays men can not love seven night but they must have all their desires: that love may not endure by reason; for where they be soon accorded, and hasty heat, soon it cooleth. Right so fareth

love nowadays, soon hot soon cold : this is no stability. . . . Wherefore I liken love nowadays unto summer and winter ; for like as the one is hot and the other cold, so fareth love nowadays ; therefore all ye that be lovers call unto your remembrance the month of May, like as did Queen Guenever, for whom I make here a little mention, that while she lived she was a true lover, and therefore she had a good end." [1]

In prose such as this did Sir Thomas Malory write his poetry. Conversely, and all unwittingly, Tennyson sometimes rose no higher than metrical prose in his Victorian rendering of the Arthurian legends.

Two preliminary demands are made upon the reader who honestly intends to give a patient hearing to Walter de la Mare's prose. *First*, he must recognize that there is a meaning which is beyond meaning, and to be apprehended only as in a glass darkly. *Second*, he should be prepared to concede that there is no definite line of demarcation between the subject-matter of verse and the subject-matter of prose. It is this transference, or restoration, of poetry-material to the non-metrical form of writing, that constitutes de la Mare's principal contribution to contemporary prose.

Perhaps it is necessary to make it clear, however, that his stories are not prose-poems, in the customary application of that term. The prose-poem is a discredited form, which usually consists in bad

[1] " Morte d'Arthur," book 18, chap. 25.

prose, meretriciously decorated, and unhappily wedded to dubious rhythms. It is like a peculiarly heavy and clammy cake thickly covered with cheap pink icing. In a word, prose-poem is usually a synonym for artificiality raised to the *n*th degree of pretentiousness.

Walter de la Mare's stories are beauty truly blent by Nature's sweet and cunning hand in all simplicity and grace: they will endure wind and weather; and they are full of exquisite music for those who are patient enough to stand and listen.

In "Peacock Pie" there is a poem called *The Truants*, in which de la Mare writes:

Ere my heart beats too coldly and faintly
To remember sad things, yet be gay,
I would sing a brief song of the world's little children
Magic hath stolen away.

The primroses scattered by April,
The stars of the wide Milky Way,
Cannot outnumber the hosts of the children
Magic hath stolen away.

. . . . . .

The waves tossing surf in the moonbeam,
The albatross lone on the spray,
Alone know the tears wept in vain for the children
Magic hath stolen away.

In vain: for at hush of the evening,
When the stars twinkle into the grey,
Seems to echo the far-away calling of children
Magic hath stolen away.

The story called *The Riddle* tells how seven children went to live with their grandmother in

an old Georgian house where, in the large spare bedroom, stood an antique oaken chest richly carved with fruit and flowers, lined with old-rose silk, and smelling of pot-pourri. The children are forbidden to play in that room; but one by one they are drawn to the old oak chest, into which, at intervals, they climb to hide: the lid closes down, and the children—Ann and Matilda, James, William and Henry, Harriet and Dorothea—are seen no more by the old grandmother:

"At evening she climbed the stair and stood in the doorway of the large spare bedroom. . . . Leaning her hand on the doorpost she peered in towards the glimmering square of window in the quiet gloom. But she could not see far, because her sight was dim and the light of day feeble. Nor could she detect the faint fragrance, as of autumnal leaves. But in her mind was a tangled skein of memories—laughter and tears, and little children now old-fashioned, and the advent of friends, and long farewells. And gossiping fitfully, inarticulately, with herself, the old lady went down again to her window-seat."

And that is all. . . . Are we to attempt a solution of *The Riddle*? And if so, is it to be from the angle of the lone old grandmother, or from the angle of disobedient James and Dorothea and the others? Or is it not enough to remember, in silence, the tears wept in vain for the world's little children "Magic hath stolen away"?

At least half the stories in de la Mare's volume

are closely concerned with children. This preoccupation with the child (which is even more marked in his poetry) is surely the most significant fact in the author's writings. It is not due to any amiable desire to patronize children; it is not because Walter de la Mare is the boy "who wouldn't grow up"; it is not because he writes "for children": it is because the child serves as a clear window between this world and that "otherworlde" with which de la Mare is in almost uninterrupted commerce. One hesitates to describe him as a mystic, because even that word now carries an almost hard-and-fast connotation. Nevertheless, the child is to him a means of mystical communication—the only means which is not overlaid with insulating accretions.

By reference to the story called *The Bowl*, it might not be too venturesome to seek to look through this window set between our "world hedged about with a superfluity of *Don'ts*" and that otherworld in which affairs are ordered upon a more assured basis than that of manifold prohibitions. A little boy named Nicholas, young enough to wear pinafores, is staying in the house of a much-loved friend, Mrs. Orchardson, whose "little baby [is] simply burning like a coal at death's door." Every grown-up in the house is certain that the infant will die, and a clergyman is called in for the baptism —the water for christening being poured into a silver bowl which had filled Nick with wonder as it stood—full of reflections—on Mrs. Orchardson's sideboard. In the atmosphere of despair consequent upon the baby's serious illness, Nick is the

only one who remains perfectly sure that it will not die. During these anxious hours, the boy is abused by the servants and neglected by his dear friend; yet he it is who has faith as a grain of mustard seed.

To Esther the parlour-maid he says, in the course of a quarrel, "It isn't *going* to die, and even if you hope it will, it won't." Recalling the incidents of this time, in later years, Nicholas remembers how, after he had run up to his bedroom to work off his temper, he fell into a drowse, from which he was stirred by the sound of footsteps below:

"... I remembered the baby. And suddenly a dark shivering horror turned me to ice, and there, as I lay, I prayed to be forgiven for having been myself, and implored God to let me take its sufferings or to die instead of it. So I lay; flat on my stomach, and prayed.

"The afternoon had now grown a little darker in the room, and in a while after this, I must have emptily fallen asleep. For the next thing I remember is finding a cold arm round me in the dregs of the dusk and lips close to my face softly whispering and murmuring, their soft warm breath on my cheek.

"'Guess, Nick! Guess!' said that soft, thrilling voice, when I stirred a little nearer. 'Guess!'

"I put back my head, and by staring close could just see the light from the window reflected in Mrs. Orchardson's eyes. A curious phosphorescence was there too; even her skin seemed very faintly to shine.

" ' Why,' I said, ' she's much better.'

" At which those eyes gazed through the narrow air between us as incredulously as if at an angel. ' You knew it; you *knew* it? You precious holy thing! And all this while you have been brooding up here by yourself. What can I say? How can I tell you? Oh, Nick, I shall die of happiness.'

" She squeezed herself closer to me in the vacant space in the bed, clasping me round—her shoulders shaking with what just for a moment I thought was laughing.

" ' I never *can* say how, Mrs. Orchardson;' I managed to murmur after a long pause. ' But I was quite sure, you know. I don't think grown-up people understand.' "

Childhood never can " say how," but it is quite sure about many secret things to which grown-ups have lost the key. Through the window of childhood, by effecting communion with the child-mind on its own profoundly simple level, Walter de la Mare re-establishes communion with the " other-worlde," where unseen things are more real than those seen in this world. " Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, shall in no wise enter therein."

For de la Mare perhaps it should be said that childhood is an open door rather than a window. He dwells continually in that strip of debatable land which runs between the quiet lagoon of consciousness and the dark sea beyond. In *Seaton's Aunt*, Seaton says to his friend Withers, " I know that what we see and hear is only the smallest

fraction of what is"; and his aunt, that half-terrifying yet wholly unforgettable figure, "lives quite out of this" world. "She *talks* to you; but . . . she's not really with you. . . . After all, how much do we really understand of anything?"

Probably the most illuminating comment applicable to Walter de la Mare's prose works, is contained in the following passage, written in a different connexion:[1]

"Many men must be suspicious at times that these clear, adequate minds of ours extend very little beyond their usefulness, that they are, essentially, reasonably successful devices of accommodation. A premium has been put upon a part of us: a certain kind of environment has made incessant demands upon us. But we have grown to this, and it may be that we shall grow beyond it. It is unreasonable to suppose that the whole of us is exhausted by what we have now to be. And it seems, now and then, that a man appears in whom our fast-slumbering faculties have been stirred to a little life. He has a little escaped from the bond of circumstance; he can see, very dimly, shapes lurking in our featureless blackness. He sees our world differently: the happenings of life are differently pregnant for him. If he be a writer, this vision will give a curious quality to his writing: he will be trying to say something language was not invented to say, and it will be only in so far as our world affords symbols for what he has to say that

[1] *Times Literary Supplement:* article on "Herman Melville," July 26, 1923.

he will be able to communicate with us. Even so, he may wait a long time for an audience. . . ."

Because of a deep conviction that Walter de la Mare is sincerely "trying to say something language was not invented to say" one may refrain from (and even deprecate) any attempt at what might purport to be an ordered exposition of his stories. If there are things in and round about human life which have not yet been intelligibly communicated from man to man, a writer who ventures into this unexplored region is an invaluable servant of mankind. We, of course, can jeer at him, or we can ignore him—or we can wait quietly but observantly, giving sympathy and interest. To those who suggest that it is futile and superfluous to try to say what language was not invented to say, it need only be remarked that language is a utilitarian instrument, continually in process of being reforged and reshaped by men, to do what men grow to require it to do.

The great ages in literature have been those periods when language has undergone marked enrichment. Science has added many words to our language in the past century; but science can never *make* a language—on the contrary, it may stifle it with fungoid growths of technical jargon. Poetry alone can breathe new life into a language; and Walter de la Mare may hereafter be regarded as among the outstanding "makers" of English.

If an author is trying to express things for which language has, as yet, no fixed symbols, how is a critic who is remote from the white-hot fire of

creation to make plain what the author is striving with such difficulty to communicate? Is there any way in which it can be done, except (a little) by honest confession of the difficulty and by suggestive pointing here and there to especially illuminating passages in the author's work? It would be a fruitless waste of time to set down the plots of the stories in "The Riddle," because, in the ordinary sense, they have no plot. It would be equally futile to explain that some of them are ghost-stories, because that might lead to solemn complaining against their wastage of "ghostliness."

In *The Creatures*, de la Mare writes of a certain strange land:

"*There* one is on the edge of life, of the unforeseen, whereas our cities—are not our desiccated jaded minds ever continually pressing and edging further and further away from freedom, the vast unknown, the infinite presence, picking a fool's journey from sensual fact to fact at the tail of that he-ass called Reason? I suggest that in that solitude the spirit within us realises that it treads the outskirts of a region long since called the Imagination. I assert we have strayed, and in our blindness abandoned——"

It is the persistent braying of the "he-ass called Reason" that leads men to abandon most things which are not immediately comprehensible—to abandon imagination, and to abandon faith.

The simplicity and beauty of Walter de la Mare's stories were spoken of earlier in this chapter, and

it is no contradiction to have suggested, also, that they are not immediately understandable. Curiously enough, it is the great simple verities that are beyond comprehension—life, love, death; while our finicking complications can be microscopically examined and analysed and reduced to a formula.

The poetic beauty of these stories calls for no emphasis. Almost every page is steeped in a flood of magical light, which changes from grey to silver; from crystal to "the first golden twilight of the moon," according to the particular story's mood. Walter de la Mare takes us, as willing slaves, into his own world, where we rejoice under a "deep canopy of sunny air, the haven of every wild bird of the morning"; where the sunshine "is sweet with the nutty and almond scents of bracken and gorse." In that world, rain comes with extraordinary beauty to a narrow garden, "its trees drenched, refreshed, and glittering at break of evening, its early flowers stooping pale above the darkened earth, the birds that haunted there singing as if out of a cool and happy cloister—the stormcock wildly jubilant." The raindrops "fall softly into unrippled water, making great circles and tapping upon motionless leaves." In that world, too, are wonderful old houses, and one "low stone barn or granary, its square door opening blackly into the sunlight upon a flight of, maybe, ten rough and weed-tousled stone steps. Beyond its roof stretched the green dreaming steeps of the valley." Among the villages is one where dwells Mr. Tanner, a chemist, in a shop, dusky and odorous, two steps below street level." "A little beyond the chemist's

is a forge. You then walk along a very narrow path, under a fairly high wall, nodding here and there with weeds and tufts of grass; and so you come to a pair of iron garden-gates, and see a high flat house behind a huge sycamore tree, and with a garden sloping gently to a sluggish and rushy pond-like stream." The "walls, once grey, are densely mantled with greenery—rose, jasmine, wistaria." In other parts of this lovely land, "gold and tawny beech leaves float down in the hazy" light; while even its public-houses bask in "limpid sunshine and peace, the sparrows chirping shrilly in the narrow lights and shadows of the lane." A certain "little clear morning town" is there, also; "busy with dogs and tradesmen and carriages." A town which wore "an almost child-like vivacity and brightness, as if overnight it had been swept and garnished for entranceable visitors from over the sea. And there—in the blowy sunshine, like some grotesque Staffordshire figure on a garret chimney-piece—there, at the street corner, sat so ludicrous an old man that one might almost have described him as mediæval." Lonely travellers alight on the frosty timbers of obscure little stations, as "a faint rosiness in the west foretells the decline of a still wintry day, and the firs that flank the dreary passenger-shed of the platform stand burdened with the blackness of coming night." We reach London, to find "the first April silver of dawn wanning the stark and empty chimney pots"; and, in our further journeying, come upon another farmyard, where "white and pied doves preened and cooed on the roof of an outbuilding as golden

with its lichens as if the western sun had scattered its dust for centuries upon the large slate slabs." Finally, when a reader has taken his leave of the de la Mare world, might he not afterwards say of his parting recollections: "All I remember is that it was early morning, that we were happy to be in one another's company, that there were bright green boughs overhead, amongst which the birds floated and sang, and that the early dews still burned in their crystal in the sun?"

There are fifteen stories in "The Riddle"; and (with a single exception) each of the fifteen has contributed a fragment of beauty to the foregoing composite picture of the world which Walter de la Mare creates about us. Apart from all else that may or may not be yielded by this book—

> If you get simple beauty and nought else,
> You get about the best thing God invents. . . .

On the positive side, then, there is a richness of poetic beauty in "The Riddle" such as probably could not be found in any other book of short stories written in our generation. Of its speculative and experimental side, we may say that it represents the work of one of those "adventurous spirits [who] are driven to peep over the edge of the world" as "man's consciousness develops . . . and the region of the possible becomes enlarged."[1]

When Columbus and his caravels were in mid-ocean, heading he scarcely knew whither, plagued by disease among his faithless crew, it might have

[1] *Times Literary Supplement:* "Herman Melville."

been said at any moment that his adventure was a foolish failure. Only his questing faith that somewhere across those dark and uncertain seas lay a new world, kept him from yielding to black necessity and the " he-ass Reason." And when at last the voyage was done—when the ships were seen to

> Slant to the shore and all their seamen land,—

the glory was not in the day of his success, but in the former days of travail and apparently vain endeavour.

Upon the uncharted seas of the human mind, men and women have adventured from the world's beginning ; and there are, still, suspected continents that none has yet so much as sighted. Walter de la Mare is such an adventurer. Fortunately, the temper of unknown readers matters comparatively little to those who set forth upon intellectual seas ; but it does matter something—and especially to ourselves does it matter—whether in this connexion we behave as sceptical scurvy knaves, or whether we extend the hand of faithful comradeship and " greet the unseen with a cheer."

Chapter Fourteen

O. Henry: "The Four Million"

MANY English readers in the present generation received their first introduction to the American language in O. Henry's pages. The American short story had lapsed into obscurity, so far as the rest of the world was concerned, after Bret Harte had run his course; and inasmuch as Ambrose Bierce was known to only a few on this side of the Atlantic, it was not until after O. Henry had settled down to write short stories—in the early years of the twentieth century—that the American scene again appeared in the world's eye through this form of fiction. There had been Henry James, of course, great as a literary figure, yet enamoured of Europe rather than of America.

While Bret Harte and Ambrose Bierce were writing, the United States was still using the English language for literary purposes; but when the works of O. Henry came eastward, with all the exuberance of a circus, there came the added attraction of a strange exoticism and a new and bewildering but very jolly and expressive tongue, which a glossary could only have helped to reduce to bald and respectable Kensington English. The character and reputation of words had hitherto been adjudged by the company they kept; but O. Henry democratized language at a rate beyond the dreams of

the wildest street-corner statesman proclaiming the divine right of the proletariat. Even Greek mythology underwent a sea-change at his hands: Minerva became presiding deity of "the art of scrapping," and Venus took charge of "the science of serious flirtation." Writers achieve immortality—so critics say—by virtue of exquisite verbal felicity; O. Henry achieved (at least temporary) fame by sheer audacity in verbal infelicity.

Coupled with utter irreverence for philological customs went an extraordinary dexterity in authorship. Stories poured out of him; within the range of his own vision he could turn everything into "copy" for the fiction market; and even when he was most irritatingly trifling, even when the feeblest of puns seemed irresistible to him,[1] he still somehow displayed a queer impish streak of genius that encouraged tolerance.

Good judges of what should properly be admitted into the category of Art have from time to time agreed to add to the roll the names even of a few music-hall artists, whose technique represented mastery in some particular form of expression. And the cinema is now being cautiously enrolled. O. Henry is the knockabout comedian and cinema star of fiction; and in his own particular branch he is supreme. This carefully-guarded labelling unfortunately suggests patronage; whereas, curiously enough, it is homage that O. Henry exacts. Most people would probably be a little cool in their social demeanour toward Maziotara, the world-

[1] *E.g.* in *Between Rounds:* "We would call no one a lobster without good and sufficient claws."

renowned comedy-juggler; but few would go so far as to despise or reject a gift of equal genius in the manipulation of eggs and Venetian glassware. The superior brain may assert that O. Henry ranks among the inconsiderable smaller fry of letters; yet there are some score or so among his stories that many authors (and critics) would be more than secretly satisfied to have written. His range is narrowly limited; his themes are few, and he is not innocent of repeating them[1]; his characters are frequently low-down vulgarians, more familiar with the police than with Parnassus. Nevertheless, so resourceful is his management, so fertile his humour, so humane his outlook, that he is able to transform things base and vile to shapes having form and dignity. When on the other hand he chooses to behave consistently as a knockabout comedian, he does observe the rules of the game and play it whole-heartedly. When Mr. and Mrs. McCaskey have a difference of opinion in their flat on the second floor of Mrs. Murphy's New York boarding-house, they do not enter upon armistice negotiations until the supply of domestic ammunition—a five-course dinner, kitchen utensils, china-ware, and flat irons—is exhausted!

"O. Henry" was the pen-name adopted by William Sydney Porter, who was born in 1862 at Greensboro', North Carolina. Before he took to authorship in 1902, he had been a rolling-stone—everything by turns and nothing long—and had managed to serve a term in a convict establishment, following a charge of embezzlement which put an

[1] Compare *The Gift of the Magi* and *A Service of Love.*

end to the bank-clerk phase in his career.[1] It was in New York that he commenced in the literary profession—only eight years before his death in 1910.

No volume is more generally typical of his particular talents than " The Four Million," which he introduced with these words :

" Not very long ago someone invented the assertion that there were only ' Four Hundred ' people in New York City who were really worth noticing. But a wiser man has arisen—the census-taker—and his larger estimate of human interest has been preferred in marking out the field of these little stories of the ' Four Million.' "

In O. Henry's larger estimate of human interest, he contrives to gather what is probably a more heterogeneous company than has ever been found between the covers of any other author's books. His net gathers-in the least considerable fish that swim (or sink) in the social sea ; and occasionally he lands a more presentable specimen. There are Irish-American labourers, office clerks, impresarios, boarding-house keepers, typists, authors, painters, musicians, box-makers, " men about town " ; " down-and-outs "—tramps, convicts, etc. ; waitresses, mongrel puppies, chemists' assistants, soap manufacturers, piano salesmen, cab drivers, shop girls, policemen, drug victims, burglars, newly-married brides (*Sisters of the Golden Circle*, O. Henry names them), stockbrokers, draughtsmen,

[1] Since he died, the suggestion has been made that Porter was the injured party in that transaction.

doctors, actresses, and others—all in the twenty-five stories which make up "The Four Million"; and there are eleven volumes in addition to this! Varied as these types and professions may at first glance seem to be, they can be grouped, roughly, as Drudges, Tramps, Criminals, and Swells; the last-named appear least frequently, and O. Henry's favourite ground is in Mean Street among the drudges.

When all that is possible has been urged in commendation of his stories, however, considerable reservations must follow. From O. Henry's dozen volumes one volume of good grain could be gathered; the rest is mainly chaff and stubble. Yet this is no particularly weighty deduction, since little more could be said of most short-story writers. A more serious criticism is that he is frequently very shallow; his humour is superficial—consisting almost wholly in the unexpected but laughter-provoking verbal infelicities already mentioned; his irony, also, seems to stop short of a true criticism of life or even of human behaviour; his pathos does not strike the note of tragic pity, it merely sweeps the heart-strings with the hand of sentiment.

His greatest merit is the command of such a dexterous technique that he is able to cajole (his own word would be "bulldoze"!) us into ready acceptance, or measured admiration, or even warm commendation, of his audacities and triflings.

An Adjustment of Nature offers a rich vein in which to seek for specimens of O. Henry's custom of putting words into harness with strange companions. A wild incongruity is the basis of all his

humour. Desiring to say that a New York restaurant-keeper named Cypher had an inexpressive countenance, he remarks : " Cypher had the power, in common with *Napoleon III and the goggle-eyed perch*, of throwing a film over his eyes, rendering opaque the windows of his soul." Milly, the waitress, is the " *Goddess of Grub* " ; and she is as harmoniously related to the restaurant as is " *a Haydn symphony to a pistache ice-cream.*" Blue-bottles are euphemistically disguised as " *swarms of the buzzing winged beasts bequeathed us by Pharaoh* " ; and in another story, Eros is described as " *a kind of a fat boy without any clothes on.*" These phrases represent what is perhaps the easiest of all forms of humour ; yet it is a form that has passed muster in pages of greater reputation than any by O. Henry. Dickens dealt very largely in humour of this kind—notably in Sam Weller's utterances—although, of course, Dickens is more resourceful as to humour in general than is the American writer.

Another example of humour based upon violent incongruity will serve to illustrate not only O. Henry's pursuit of ludicrous contrasts, but also his use of the American language. The story entitled *By Courier* opens with a young woman sitting on a bench in the park ; she is pensive, still, and melancholy. A tall young man hurries past, followed by a boy carrying his suitcase. Catching sight of the girl, he stops a few yards beyond the seat, and sends the boy back to her with a verbal message. It appears that the two young people had been engaged, but an estrangement ensued and the man was forbidden either to speak or to

write to the lady. To avoid any infringement of this command, the boy is employed as courier to carry the information that the man is about to join a hunting expedition to Alaska, and that he wishes to appeal against the injustice which has refused him any opportunity to learn the reason of her displeasure. The boy translates the dignified speech into his own more picturesque tongue, and is bidden to return this answer :

" ' Tell the gentleman that I need not repeat to him a description of my ideals. He knows what they have been and what they still are. So far as they touch on this case, absolute loyalty and truth are the ones paramount. Tell him that I have studied my own heart as well as one can, and I know its weakness as well as I do its needs. That is why I decline to hear his pleas, whatever they may be. I did not condemn him through hearsay or doubtful evidence, and that is why I make no charge. But, since he persists in hearing what he already well knows, you may convey the matter.

" ' Tell him that I entered the conservatory that evening from the rear, to cut a rose for my mother. Tell him I saw him and Miss Ashburton beneath the pink oleander. The tableau was pretty, but the pose and juxtaposition were too eloquent and evident to require explanation. I left the conservatory, and, at the same time, the rose and my ideal. . . .'

" ' I'm shy on one word, lady. Jux—jux—put me wise on dat, will yer ? '

" ' Juxtaposition—or you may call it propinquity

—or, if you like, being rather too near for one maintaining the position of an ideal.'

"The gravel spun from beneath the boy's feet. He stood by the other bench. The man's eyes interrogated him hungrily. The boy's were shining with the impersonal zeal of the translator.

"'De lady says dat she's on to de fact dat gals is dead easy when a feller comes speilin' ghost stories and tryin' to make up, and dat's why she won't listen to no soft-soap. She says she caught yer dead to rights, huggin' a bunch o' calico in de hot-house. She side-stepped in to pull some posies and yer was squeezin' the oder gal to beat the band. She says it looked cute, all right all right, but it made her sick. She says yer better git busy, and make a sneak for de train.'"

This courier does not get beyond the threshold of the American language, of course. There are more ambitious efforts than this in O. Henry's stories; but the best that he could do, twenty years or so ago, is moderate and even antiquated in comparison with the language importations that have since then been made by this country from the United States.

The Cop and the Anthem is a typical example of O. Henry's irony. In late autumn, Soapy, a down-and-out, begins to find his summer quarters on a Madison Square bench rather chilly. Philanthropic institutions do not appeal to him as a winter residence; he finds the prison colony on Blackwell's Island much more hospitable. His usual method of becoming installed there for the winter, is to

dine expensively at a restaurant and then, declaring himself without money to pay the bill, to get arrested. On a day of keen wind and falling leaves he starts once again on his annual quest—only to be immediately propelled out of the first restaurant he enters, owing to his shabby remnants of clothing; so he smashes a shop-window and waits to be arrested, but the policeman refuses to believe that he is guilty and rushes off to find the "real" culprit! Soapy then dines at a less pretentious eating-house, where he gets a thrashing instead of being handed over to the police. Next he tries to annoy a "young woman of modest and pleasing guise"—but she is far from annoyed! He then steals an umbrella, only to find that its owner had himself "acquired" it in a restaurant that very morning. Much discouraged, Soapy starts on his way back to the bench in Madison Square, and breaks his journey outside a church to listen to an anthem. The music revives memories of happy and more prosperous years, and Soapy determines to make an attempt to get back to honest and industrious paths:

"A fur importer had once offered him a place as driver. He would find him to-morrow and ask for the position. He would be somebody in the world. He would——

"Soapy felt a hand laid on his arm. He looked quickly around into the broad face of a policeman.

"'What are you doin' here?' asked the officer.

"'Nothin',' said Soapy.

"'Then come along,' said the policeman.

" ' Three months on the Island,' said the magistrate in the police-court the next morning."

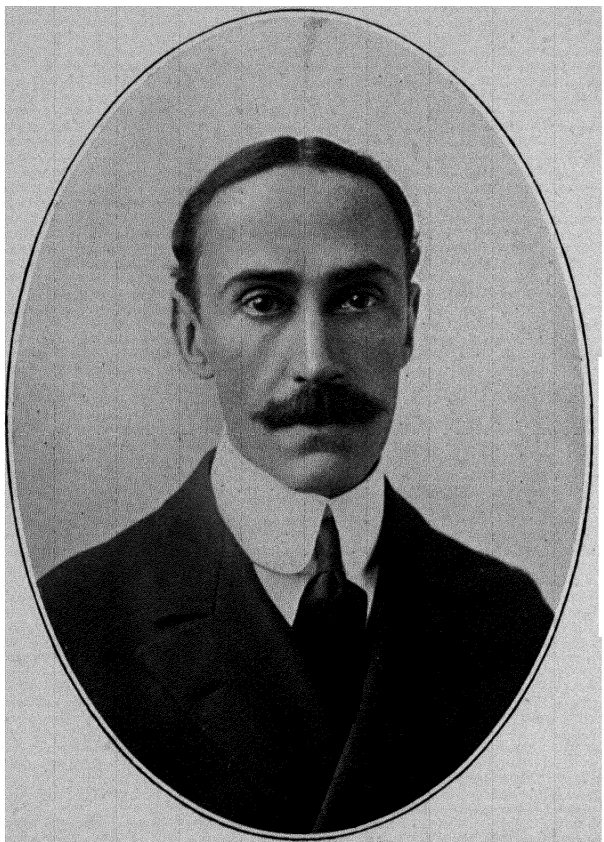
The depth, or the superficiality, of the irony in this story depends as much upon what is read into Soapy's soul as it does upon what the author has put there. Here is a no-good standing at the cross-roads where a revived moral sense is on the point of turning him into the path of rectitude and salvation. At that moment, a representative of the moral sense in the community gives the convert a violent push back into the way of crime and damnation. The irony here has an appearance of shallowness because it follows—as a surprise—upon a series of farcical scenes such as Charlie Chaplin might enact with a wealth of comic business. By adding something out of our own more ponderous minds, Soapy's case can be brought closer to the spirit of pity and tragedy; but as the story stands, the transition from roguery to righteous impulse is too rapid, too unmotived, for us to accept it as anything better than a piece of mechanics contrived to end the writer's task.

First and last, there is one story by O. Henry which overshadows all the rest—*The Gift of the Magi*. Della, Mrs. James Dillingham Young, had only one dollar and eighty-seven cents on Christmas-eve—and she wanted to buy Jim a platinum chain for his much-prized gold watch. Her single saleable possession was her beautiful head of hair—which Jim loved. But nothing else could help to buy Jim his watch-chain, so the tresses had to go to Madame Sofronie, who clipped them off and paid

Della twenty dollars, with which she procured the gift for her husband. Jim also made a sacrifice in order to buy Della a Christmas gift; but what that gift was, and what was his sacrifice, must be sought from O. Henry's own pages. The story is too good to be ruined in a paraphrase. Let it be sufficient to say that the author's craft ability in this story comes close to perfection. He cannot altogether avoid the temptation which always besets him, namely, to drop into facetiousness; and when he falls, it is to such comments as—" life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating." These, however, are insignificant blemishes upon *The Gift of the Magi.* In roughly two thousand words, the author clearly characterizes Della; describes her home; reviews her domestic experiences; narrates her visit to Madame Sofronie's establishment, and includes the conversation therein; recounts Della's emotions as she waits for Jim's homecoming (she is terrified as to what he may say on account of her bobbed hair); then is given in some detail the almost beautiful—from a certain standpoint, *wholly* beautiful—scene in which the young married lovers display their gifts and reveal their sacrifices. Possibly a hundred words might be cut without loss, yet, even with its few superfluities, *The Gift of the Magi* represents a power of achievement considerable enough to give O. Henry a place among the world's greatest short-story writers. If this had represented his common level, instead of his occasional height, he would have had few peers.

The key to his triumph in this story is that it is

a tale of " his own people," as it were. He had an affinity with the flat-dwelling James Dillingham Youngs of the modern metropolis. He knew their need of scraping to save even one dollar and eighty-seven cents; he knew of the great little sacrifices to which love impelled them. And Della and Jim, " who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house," are presented to us as the *magi*—the wisest among the children of this world.



LEONARD MERRICK

Chapter Fifteen Leonard Merrick: "The Man who understood Women"

ONCE upon a time when a certain poet died, his brothers in letters gathered about the grave and cast their pens upon his coffin, for he was one whom they had esteemed as master. His pen would write no more: therefore would they who mourned him cease to court the muses. We live in a period when even the artistic temperament is shy of gallant and picturesque gestures; yet the age of chivalry is not dead so far as the writing craft is concerned, and modern authors found perhaps a more excellent way when they sought to honour Leonard Merrick.

In 1918, a new and complete edition of Merrick's novels and stories was published at the instance of a company of his fellow-authors, a dozen of whom contributed affectionately appreciative introductions to the several volumes. Among those who thus paid tribute were J. M. Barrie, G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, Granville Barker, and Arthur Pinero; and in the course of his preface to "Conrad in Quest of his Youth," Barrie referred to Merrick as "the novelists' novelist," and testified to the novelists' desire to share with the public the good things provided by Leonard Merrick.

In another quarter the question has been asked: "Why is he especially admired by other writers,

and persistently unpopular with the public?"[1] Perhaps it is scarcely accurate to suggest that Merrick is persistently unpopular, but certainly the public has neglected him in a surprising way, although he has all the elements of popularity, it might be thought. If the foregoing question were to be asked in connexion with, say, George Meredith, it would be easy to answer by talking about the "fundamental brainstuff" which readers of "The Egoist" and other books are called upon to digest; and thereafter might follow a dissertation upon the reading public's congenital laziness and inability to recognize uncommon merit. There is fundamental brainstuff in Leonard Merrick, all right; but he has taken the precaution of offering it in a predigested form: that is to say, he is extraordinarily skilful in disguising his criticism of life—in assimilating this more serious element to the generally humorous character of his stories. As a fact, apart from his ineluctable irony and frequent epigrams, it might be possible to read Merrick's stories without observing that the writer is pronouncing any criticism of life. Why the public is (or was?) indifferent to a writer who is a fountain of humour, wisdom, pity, gaiety, sentiment, and wit—an author, too, who is "easy to read": this is a question which the public would itself find difficulty in answering.

"Leonard Merrick—novelist, short-story writer, dramatist. Born in London, 1864, as Leonard Miller. Later, adopted legally his stage-name. Intended for the Bar, but his father's financial reverses prevented. Worked in South Africa as

[1] Manly and Rickert: "Contemporary British Literature."

foreman in a diamond-mine and in a solicitor's office. Became an actor and actor-manager."[1] What, in a human view, lies behind this condensation of an evidently romantic career, might move Merrick himself to construct a novel of ironical enlargement representing a full and varied life. But bare though it is, this biographical digest does suggest that substratum of reality upon which Merrick has assembled his inventions.

This man who set out for the Bar, and reached the stage by way of a South African diamond-mine, has turned modern life into a fairy-story in which the characters are mostly drawn from among the battered crew of Bohemia. He writes as one who knows that pain and pity are everywhere abroad in the world; yet as one who feels, nevertheless, that life is rich in wonder and beauty and dazzlingly golden hours. If it were possible to draw from him a laconic statement as to the source of the world's beauty and wonder, he would assuredly say that these things are born of pain and pity, and carried on the cleansing flood of tears which flows therefrom. For Merrick is no blasphemer against sentiment; in common with Bret Harte and others, he has the courage to tread the razor-edge which poises an author between pathos . . . and the other thing. But his tread is sure, and he does not slip.

He sees human failure as the allotted portion in Bohemia; and for those who dread failure Leonard Merrick's stories are one long warning. Here, the stage-struck will see stage life not as a

[1] Manly and Rickert, *op. cit.*

giddy and exciting and glamorous round culminating in the sweet savour of fame, but as a succession of tawdry lodgings and drudgery and impecuniosity. A battered crew, truly: "they try, but they fail, and always will fail." That, however, is no more the last word for Merrick than it was the last word for Kate in Barrie's play.[1] Kate added: "It keeps us human." The true spirit of Bohemia, according to Leonard Merrick, is not the spirit of sordid poverty and dejection and misery. Such things are there, for a warning; but the true spirit beats down such unpleasantnesses and triumphs over them through high courage and gallant comradeship.

When Robert Blackstone[2] has become a man of means and a K.C., he nevertheless cannot withstand a luring summons from the old time when he strove unsuccessfully on the provincial stage. Fame and the law had made him "a dry old stick"; and when he stepped back into Bohemia for a few hours it was to play the fairy prince to two of its tired little people. Blackstone learned (as have many others) that precious human feelings may become stultified by glorious and dazzling success.

What criticism of life is consciously made by Merrick consists largely, therefore, in a challenge to the world's common standard of values. He expresses, at least by implication, the conviction that happiness and true wealth have no dependence whatever upon social rank or material possessions. They may go hand in hand with these things; but

[1] *The Twelve-Pound Look.*
[2] *The Call from the Past.*

happiness can as delightedly exist at the back of Bohemia—though that locality is certainly not shown as a perpetual fairyland.

It may be that Leonard Merrick's measure of popularity would have been greater if he had gone about his business more ponderously. Gaiety does not commend itself to the English mind; frivolity does. Merrick is rarely frivolous; but he is very often gay. The suggestion has been made, by earnest people, that although his technique is occasionally inspired, it lacks discipline. In the absence of specific statement of chapter and verse, it is difficult to examine such general statements; but that dark suggestion of a lack of technical discipline probably means that the author does not regard his Art with adequate solemnity. Hardly for a moment could it be maintained that he is not a sincere and careful craftsman. Perhaps the suggestion of indiscipline is based upon such a story as *Frankenstein II*, which, briefly, tells of how a man who had written a play found that his work became a financial monster which seemed bent upon destroying the very last thread of his pocket, and at the same time was the occasion of launching his adored one into a rival admirer's arms. Merrick tells the story as it was told to him by the dramatist in an interval between two acts of the play. The dramatist wants to tell the yarn in all its fullness of sentimental effect; whereas the friend wishes to hear only the bare anecdote, leaving him (as the professional story-teller) to provide the padding—in order that he may not miss any part of the next act in the theatre.

In addition to the humour of the dramatist's misadventures, there is, consequently, a secondary thread of humour—in the listener's impatience to get back into the auditorium ; and a tertiary thread —in the story-writer's allowing us to take some amusing peeps into the fiction workshop. Of course, by subtle use of (sacred phrase !) " the art that conceals art," a writer is supposed to hide the fact that such a thing as technical construction exists. When he shamelessly takes us into the workshop—and in a gaily irreverent mood, moreover—what can it imply but lack of technical discipline ?

Can it be possible that authors often approach the solemn act of creation in the gay spirit of an F. W. Thomas ? Can it be that even editors are game for the humorist ? At any rate, such possibilities are more than hinted at in *Frankenstein II* :

" ' There's nearly a quarter of an hour before the act,' I said. ' Give me a cigarette and the story—I want one badly ; an appreciative editor is eager to send a cheque.'

" ' Halves ? ' asked the author of the ' emphatic success.'

" ' Halves,' I agreed."

And so, having lightly bartered away one-half of the wages of authorship, the writer settles down to listen—not silently !—to the story. Orlando, the dramatist, telling how and when and where the idea for a play came into his head, starts to put in the appropriate local colour :

"'I wandered out of the Strand on to the Embankment. . . . The Embankment was deserted, and the river——'

"'Yes,' I said, 'Cut that kind of thing—I can put it in when I do the writing . . . .'"

And again, Orlando, describing the throes and the terrors and despairs and exaltations of dramatic authorship, remarks:

"'When you do the story you should stress the alternate ups and downs of the business: the nights when I wrote epigrams and felt like Pinero, and the mornings when I read 'em and felt like cutting my throat. Don't forget that. It's real.'"

The listening maker of fiction responds with heart-rending chilliness:

"'I'll remember,' I said. 'I'll have a paragraph on it.'"

Interpolations of that kind are not only very good fun; they also provide opportunity for differentiation of character. Ardent amateur as he is, Orlando would tear a passion to tatters and sentimentalize most eloquently; but the practised dispenser of romance has no fine illusions—for him, all grand emotional experiences come to no more than matters about which he must "have a paragraph."

These little sidelights into the literary workshop are, let it be repeated, good fun; but it may be that so far as Merrick himself is concerned, they are

symptomatic of something rather less gay. Do they not represent a mood of disillusion which is not infrequent in his work?

Looking in another direction, to *The Prince in the Fairy Tale*, cannot this mood of disillusion be detected as driving Merrick into revolt against the drabness and the hopelessness of Bohemia as these afflict many of its denizens? Here—we may imagine his saying—here are these two pitiful young Englishwomen, in Paris, trying to make a living by painting. What is to become of them? Their outlook is quite hopeless; they'll never come to anything; they'll just wither and wither until they die. What can be done for them? For pity's sake let us send them a Fairy Prince—if only in imagination.

A writer might have determined any one of several possible fates for Rosie and her friend. He might have conducted them down the path of poverty and despair, and, at the end, have encouraged them to jump into the Seine or out of the window of their tenement-room ninety-eight stairs up. That would have been "a convincing piece of grim realism displaying wonderful insight into feminine psychology"—we know precisely how the notices would have been framed! But the wise Greek knew better when he said that the function of the poet is to show "better men than are"—leaving the historian to deal with grim realism. Yet even grim realism can display the essential truth and beauty of life, of course; but is the impulse of Martin MacLeod to play the fairy prince any less true to the truth and beauty of life? Uncommonly generous impulses do stir in men's hearts—and

in women's, too; and, after all, it wasn't generosity that made Martin McLeod, the American millionaire art-student, a fairy prince—it was only love; and that happens to quite a lot of much less prepossessing people.

Leonard Merrick does not demand the Latin Quarter of Paris and young Americans rich beyond the dreams of avarice as necessary preliminaries for romance. That is a golden fleece which may be found much nearer home. Mr. Smith is a twenty-year-old clerk in the City, and he also writes poetry. While he is lunching one day at a Lyons' tea-shop, the spectacle of a girl at the same table reading his own poems provokes him to an explosive ejaculations:

"'I *beg* your pardon?' said the girl, surveying him with dignity.

"'I apologise,' stammered the poet; 'I was startled.' . . .

"'I see nothing startling in it,' said the lady, still frigid.

"He felt that she might have expressed herself more happily, but he was in no position to rebuke her. 'Of course in one sense it isn't startling at all,' he concurred; 'in fact, it's very feeble.' . . .

"'I like it very much.' She had grey eyes that challenged him scornfully; he sunned himself in her disdain.

"'Did you buy it?' he asked, a tremor in his tone.

"'Really——!' she began. But his air was so respectful that she added the next instant, 'Yes, for twopence, second-hand.' . . .

" ' To tell you the truth, I am glad you like the book.'

" ' Eh ? ' she said. ' Why ? '

" ' Because I wrote it.'

" It should have been a dramatic moment, but the girl bungled her part and disbelieved him.

" Fully five minutes were devoted to convincing her. However, the five minutes brought such a flutter of pink to her cheeks, so tender a glow into her eyes, that the time was by no means wasted.

" ' I couldn't expect to meet a poet in the City,' she pleaded."[1]

Perhaps it is a part of Leonard Merrick's care for essential truth in his romancing that he places his modern poet where modern poets may be found —in the region of the money-changers. But though a poet can be " found " in a City teashop, romance should hardly leave him there—as Merrick evidently feels, for he dismisses Bobbie Smith with this benediction :

" We may imagine him going back to the daffodils.

" It is not impossible that there will be orange blossoms.

" And in the meantime there is certainly the luncheon hour."

In contrast with this romance expressed through comedy, there is the tragic story of *The Laurels and*

[1] *The Lady of Lyons'.*

the Lady, which concerns another minor poet—an unpractical creature who was shipped out to the diamond-fields of South Africa. While there, he goes to see a famous French actress whose tour takes her to Kimberley for six weeks. Willy Childers is immediately fascinated; but shortly after his visit to the theatre, his sight, which had been failing for some time, goes altogether, and he is left helpless. A number of the worst spirits of the place set out to play a practical joke upon the blind and infatuated young man. A girl known among the diggers as "Poll Patchouli" (she calls herself "Olive Esmond") has a gift for mimicry, and is induced to impersonate the actress, in which character she is introduced to Willy. The blind poet's sincere and pathetic admiration affects Poll so deeply that she deplores the poor joke, and falls in love. She finds her first lie entangling her more and more. When his manuscript poems are returned once more by a London publishing house, she tells him they have been accepted. Before long it becomes necessary for her to buy half a dozen copies of some book, and to pretend they are his poems. Soon he becomes impatient for reviews of his book, so she visits the public library:

"'Please,' she said nervously to a gentleman who was standing behind the counter, 'I want a criticism of a book of poems. It doesn't matter who wrote them, but they must be fine poems, and the critic must say that the poet's a genius.'"

From a volume on Victorian poets she patches

up imaginary reviews, full of rich praise which sounds sweet in Willy's ears.—

" Some months later, on the border of Mowbray and Rondebosch, there lingered, in the last weeks of his life, a famous poet. . . . He had just published his second work, which had enhanced the reputation won by his first. The volumes were beloved belongings; from the shelf on which they were kept he often took them down and fondled them. To a stranger, parting the expensive covers, the contents might have been startling in view of so much pride; he might, indeed, have been pardoned the impression that he was looking at Mavor's Spelling Book, and a child's History of England; but the poet held them with rejoicing."

The obvious weakness in this moving story is an apparent lack of consistency in the character of Poll. A woman who had fallen to the level of a miners' camp follower would scarcely have the intellectual ability necessary for adjustment to the poet's mental plane. Conceding that she probably absorbed much from Childers, even during their first months together, is it within the bounds of what can be made to *seem* probable, that the girl should so quickly have become equal to the highly-skilled operation of compacting a credible book-review from that volume on Victorian poetry? And in its entirety, the long-drawn-out continuance of subterfuge would surely have made such demands upon mental ingenuity as to break down Poll's powers of improvisation.

Only rarely can Merrick's stories be thus assailed on psychological grounds, and even in *The Laurels and the Lady* the opportunity for criticism is probably occasioned by a little over-confidence upon the author's part in his great source of strength, *viz.* artistic courage and assurance. He can handle, without a false movement, situations presenting special difficulty owing to their full-charged emotional content. His emotionalism is restrained without being pinchbeck. The reader does not feel that any implication in the plot has been shirked—the author gives full quantity. Not many, if any at all, of Merrick's plots have inherent probability; yet it is seldom that he fails to impart the illusion of probability.

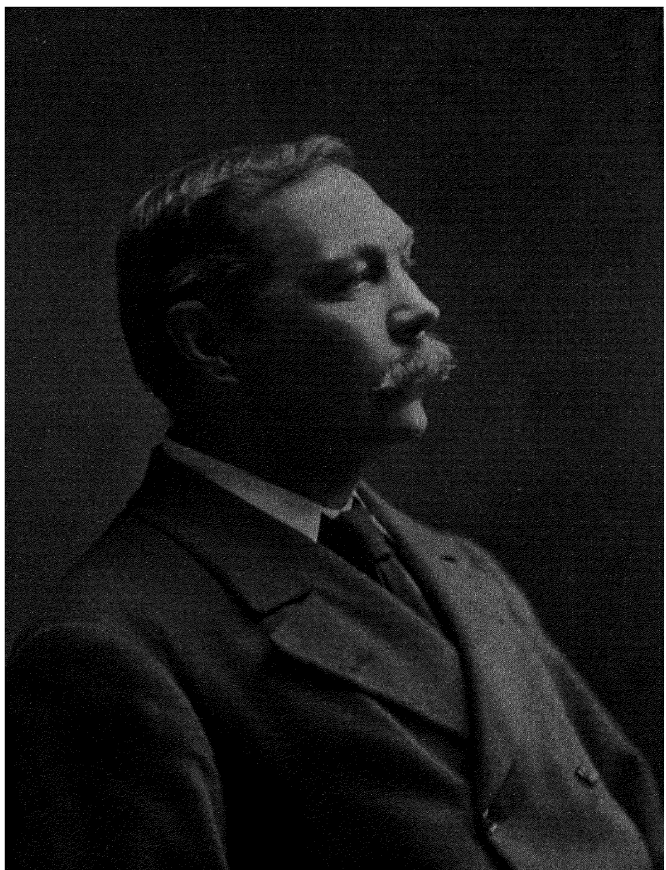
Few of his characters are universalized. He understands and loves the artistic temperament, even its follies and extravagances, and he confines himself closely to this type. When he is avowedly writing of typically "quaint" Bohemians his sense of comedy is given free play; and in this sphere Merrick is at his best in dealing with such characters as the poet Tricotrin[1] and the composer Pitou, who are invariably engaged in the financial operation known as "raising the wind," by ingenious devices.

Leonard Merrick's style is energetic and direct. Dialogue is predominant in his writings, and there is little introspection separable from the action of the story. His epigrams are lively, and free from esoteric taint (the suggestion that brilliance is

[1] See the volumes entitled "A Chair on the Boulevard" and "While Paris Laughed."

cavaire to the general) which commonly limits appreciation of keen sword-play in words.

Seldom does it happen in literature that an author gives so much and demands so little. The fact that Leonard Merrick is "good literature" may be a small matter; but because he is a fine entertainer and a humanist, an artist and a humorist, the larger community of readers will one day "discover" Leonard Merrick. . . .



[*Photo by London Stereoscopic Co*

CONAN DOYLE.

Chapter Sixteen

The Detective Story: Conan Doyle; Austin Freeman; H. C. Bailey

ERRAND-BOYS and philosophers have one taste (if no more) in common—a strong liking for detective stories. In the hierarchy of literary society, moreover, it now requires more moral courage to confess ignorance of the latest detective story than of the newest philosophical theory!

Upon some understanding of the causes for the widespread popularity of detective stories depends the proper adjustment of a commentator's angle of vision. At what should the detective-story writer aim, in his desire to be widely read?—

(1) At a baffling involuted mystery, or thrilling hairbreadth adventures?

(2) At morbid details of criminal procedure?

(3) At the revelation of terrifying mental states in the remorseful criminal?

(4) At the detailed exposition of individual omniscience in the detective? *or*

(5) At an ordered setting-forth of the logical and reasoned processes by which the knot is untied and the mystery solved?

There can be little doubt that it is for (1) and (2) that the errand-boy clamours; and equally little doubt that the philosopher would justify his interest in this form of writing by classifying it wholly and

altogether exclusively under (5). Readers with sadistic tendencies would probably find considerable satisfaction in (2) and (3); while no one, apparently, has any interest in (4).

The writer for errand-boys (a genus which embraces representatives of all ages and all social degrees) has the easier task, therefore. He may proceed to pile the Pelion of derring-do upon the Ossa of improbability, with only an occasional glance at the rules of the literary game. The writer who aims at the provision of a full body of facts, marshalled in accordance with the rules of evidence, has, however, a vastly different task and one which provides comparatively few opportunities for sensationalism. Indeed, there is perhaps no other branch of fiction which offers so numerous temptations to dullness as that type of detective story which depends upon deductive reasoning.

This, however, is the type which engages attention here; and although its practitioners are legion, its possibilities might be fairly exhaustively examined in a few typical cases which came within the experience of Sherlock Holmes, John Thorndyke,[1] and Reginald Fortune. In regard to the last named, H. C. Bailey has made a notable break with tradition, for Mr. Fortune has no satellite to play Boswell to his Johnson. Edgar Allan Poe provides a faithful friend and chronicler for Auguste Dupin; Sherlock Holmes, apparently, cannot begin to coruscate until his "dear Watson" arrives to lend an ear and give moral support; John Thorndyke requires Christopher Jervis as a persevering (even if somewhat

[1] In Austin Freeman's books.

obtuse) foil to his own lightning powers of perception.

Mr. Fortune is unique among criminal specialists in fiction because he does not regard himself with heavy solemnity; and his friend the Hon. Sidney Lomas, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard, is even less sacrosanct to him. Lomas is Fortune's "familiar" and his foil; but Mr. Fortune, who acts as scientific adviser to Scotland Yard, does not strike attitudes of conscious superiority before Lomas, as does Sherlock Holmes before Watson. Nor does Lomas serve as Fortune's chronicler. The author tells the stories in the third person, for the most part—with a good deal of help from Mr. Fortune himself. With his detective stories[1] H. C. Bailey has in more directions than one given a new turn to this form of fiction. Hitherto characterized by all seriousness and a somewhat ponderous note, the detective story at this author's hands becomes a vehicle for light-hearted humour and slangy badinage. The distance which H. C. Bailey has travelled can be estimated when one of Sherlock Holmes's dulcet utterances is compared with a few words by Reggie Fortune:

"'My dear fellow,' said Sherlock Holmes, as we sat on either side of the fire in his lodgings at Baker-street, 'life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly

[1] "Call Mr. Fortune" and "Mr. Fortune's Practice."

out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most *outré* results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable.' "[1]

That is what Bully Bottom would call "Ercles' vein," and it braces the reader for the high seriousness which is to follow. There is no such suggestion of regimen in this other example, which begins one of H. C. Bailey's stories :

"Mr. Reginald Fortune lay in a long chair. On his right hand a precipice fell to still black water. On his left the mountains rose into a tiara of snow. Far away in front, sunlight found the green floor of a glacier. But Mr. Fortune saw none of these things. He was eating strawberries and cream.

" The Hon. Sidney Lomas, Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department, disguised as a bloodthirsty fisherman, arrived stiffly but happy, and behind him a large Norwegian bore the corpses of two salmon into the farm-house. ' The lord high detective,' Reggie murmured. ' An allegorical picture, by the late Mr. Watts.' "

Not only are two authors of diverse character and outlook heard speaking in these passages, but two

[1] *The Adventure of a Case of Identity.*

[*Photo by E. O. Hoppé.*

H. C. BAILEY.

generations also. The pontifical note in the former is as typical of the decade which gave birth to Sherlock Holmes, as are the *insouciance* and persiflage of Reggie Fortune of his later day and generation. For some reason which is never explicable, Sherlock Holmes invariably introduces Watson in terms of high approbation; and although it is his custom to perform this ceremony in a sentence which impresses us ultimately as being decidedly stereotyped, his sincerity never appears questionable: "This gentleman . . . has been my partner and helper in many of my most successful cases, and I have no doubt that he will be of the utmost use to me in yours also." There is no sentence to be adduced as a parallel to this in the H. C. Bailey stories, but Fortune's quite different attitude towards his associates is evinced in the following typically airy and apparently inconsequent passage. Mr. Fortune and an official colleague, Superintendent Bell, had gone to inspect Carwell Hall, a much-restored country house where a murder had lately been committed:

"Reggie got out of his car and stood back to survey it.

"'Something of everything, isn't it, Bell? Like a Shakespeare play. Just the place to have a murder in one room with a children's party in the next, and a nice girl making love on the stairs, and father going mad in the attics.'

"'I rather like Shakespeare myself, sir,' said Superintendent Bell.

"'You're so tolerant,' said Reggie, and went in."

The welcome element of light relief thus incorporated by H. C. Bailey does not lessen the inherent seriousness of the problems which his crime specialist faces. It may be suggested as an essential condition for writing a good detective story that the author shall be in earnest *as to his plot*, and that he shall not attempt to hoax his readers. G. K. Chesterton too frequently appears to have his tongue in his cheek in the Father Brown stories; and for this reason they appear to many readers as the offspring of a "smart" writer rather than of one who is skilful and convincing.

The confidential friend and assistant customarily introduced in detective stories is obviously a useful (and on the whole, it would seem, an indispensable) device. If the story be told in the first person by the detective himself, an overwhelming amount of self-explanation is demanded—and, by implication, an equivalent proportion of self-approbation—since such a method would involve the detective's self-statement of his mental superiority and ability to outwit others. In the first place, then, the confidant is required to obviate any such appearance of monotonous egoism. As an alternative, the author can, of course, tell the stories in the third person without any intermediary character; yet this method has its patent limitations. The appearance of probability is much diminished by the presumptive presence of an invisible spectator (the author-narrator) at all times and in all places. Moreover, the detective can hardly play a lone hand on each and every occasion. He requires an assistant; and if, as with Sherlock Holmes and John Thorndyke, the

detective is usually working independently of the police, his assistant can hardly be other than one who is an intimate personal companion. For H. C. Bailey this problem scarcely arises. Mr. Fortune works in association with Scotland Yard; their men are at his disposal to employ as occasion requires and to abuse as opportunity arises. Lomas and Superintendent Bell are rivals to Mr. Fortune in a sense; but they are at the same time his colleagues and also (for the literary purposes of the story) in sufficient contrast to him to throw his acuter perceptions into the necessary high relief.

Conan Doyle's Watson is little more than a lay figure, although we have Sherlock Holmes's evidence that the good doctor occasionally embellishes the facts when recording a case! Christopher Jervis, who stands in similar relation to Dr. Thorndyke in Austin Freeman's stories, is much more definitely individualized, while, at the same time, he can be regarded as typical of the general body of attentive readers. That is to say, he has all the evidence before him, as the readers have, but he gets little farther with it than we do. Thereby, Thorndyke's clearer reading of the signs receives an imparted brilliance and a heightened sense of efficiency.

Given his detective, then, an author would seem to find it needful to provide his central character with a "familiar"; and it is here that a point of difficulty arises. This confidant must always seem something of a dullard, at the best; at the worst he may become mere stockfish. His function is only to exalt the principal figure. Comparatively speaking, Austin Freeman does well by Christopher

Jervis, who, though he may not shine with a dazzling light in the short stories, performs a distinct function in more than one of the novels.[1] Perhaps some day a writer will invent twin detectives of balanced capacity, who will solve one another's failures and record one another's successes, and thus dispose of the necessity for satellites of lesser magnitude!

The question as to what is the most desirable main aim in a detective story is raised in a controversial form by Austin Freeman in the preface to "John Thorndyke's Cases" and (even more definitely) in "The Singing Bone." What is it that the bulk of readers demands in detective fiction? Does the majority approximate to the errand-boy or to the philosopher? Are bafflement and mystery the primary sources of general pleasure? or are elucidation and logical unravelling? In theory, and very largely in practice, Austin Freeman definitely holds by the latter view. In a short preface to "John Thorndyke's Cases," he avers that his stories constitute a new experiment in detective fiction; and while admitting that the entertainment of the reader is still the first consideration, he expresses the view that "careful adherence to the probable, and a strict avoidance of physical impossibilities" serve to heighten the reader's interest, and therefore his entertainment also. These stories, he goes on to say, illustrate "the application to the detection of crime of the ordinary methods of scientific research." The main interest, therefore, is focussed by Austin Freeman

[1] See "A Silent Witness" and "No. 31 New Inn."

upon the methods by which Thorndyke interprets the clues and constructs from them a formulated body of clear-cut evidence. So strongly does he feel that this is the most interesting aspect, that in "The Singing Bone" Freeman writes several stories which, deliberately, hold no mystery or surprise. We are allowed to be present at the actual commission of the crime; we are acquainted with the criminal's motives; we see his actions, and we know of any attempt made to cover the tracks. Then come the discovery of the crime, the investigation of the clues by Thorndyke, and the piecing together of the scraps of evidence until the whole thing is clearly worked out to form a sure case against the accused. Before the detective comes upon the scene at all, the reader knows all about the affair, and the interest is entirely in watching Thorndyke assemble the jig-saw puzzle, fragment by fragment. To plan the story thus is, of course, to cater fully for the type of reader who professes to have a purely philosophical interest in detective fiction; but it is very doubtful whether there is any future for this method, or whether it does give even highbrow readers what in their heart of hearts they really want.

Normally, a detective story opens with the discovery of a mysterious crime (1—*Discovery*); next, certain vague and dissociated pieces of evidence are found (2—*Clues*); then, frequently, an arrest is made as a result of the misreading of circumstantial evidence (3—*False Accusation*); thereupon the expert mind is brought to bear upon the problem, and other clues are found (4—*Investigation*); the

expert argues back from his accumulated clues to a probable course of events (5—*Construction of a Hypothesis*); having put together a possible case, the expert tests its probability from all available standpoints (6—*The Hypothesis Examined*); by processes of deduction and induction, a substantial case is built up against the real criminal (7—*Solution*).

Still following the course of the average good detective story, it is necessary to hark back to consider the complications commonly introduced to provoke the maximum degree of excitement and thrill in the reader. These usually centre (*a*) around the falsely-accused person, about whom the threads of circumstantial evidence are drawn so tightly that the reader is kept in a state of sympathetic suspense; (*b*) around the detective, whose life is probably imperilled by the counter-activity of the actual criminal; (*c*) around the methods adopted by the criminal to evade arrest. Of course, there may not be any falsely-accused person; and then, usually, the reader's interest is stimulated by a series of blind-alley clues which point to various characters involved in the story. In this latter type, the author's success is in proportion to the skill with which he guards his secret until the concluding pages.

Austin Freeman's characteristic method simply lops off a number of these features, since his main aim is not to mystify or excite, but simply to present a view of practical logic working upon a definite problem—applied logic. He does not entirely abandon the more usual attractions, however,

except in a particular group of stories in "The Singing Bone." It is interesting and perhaps significant to note that only in the shorter stories does he keep at all closely to his own terms of reference: in the full-length novels, particularly in "The Silent Witness" and "The Eye of Osiris," he gives full play to his dramatic and inventive faculties, while at the same time continuing to apply to the "detection of crime the ordinary methods of scientific research." This fact raises a large question as to whether the short story is a suitable form for detective tales; or whether the larger canvas of the novel is not imperative. If it is necessary to keep the reader on tenterhooks in order that the full effect of a detective story may be produced, does the short-story form afford a sufficiently large "time-space" for the purpose of inducing suspense?

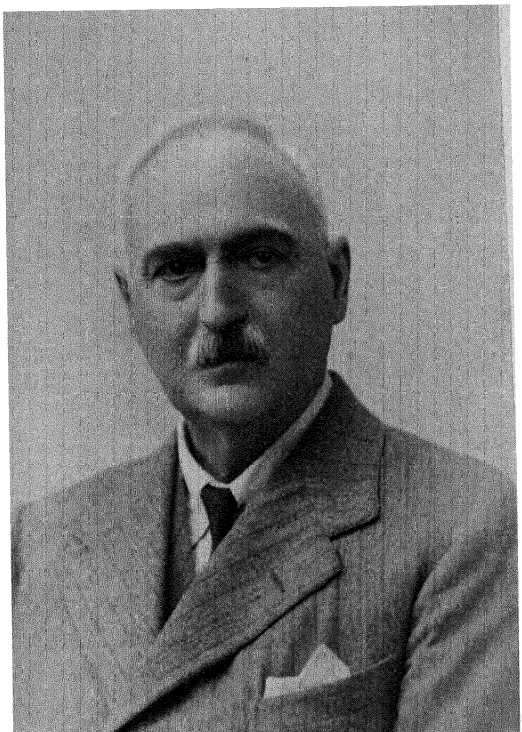
"A short story is over too quickly for the mystery to produce its effect," one oral critic has said. "I want to be kept in suspense for a longer time than is possible in a score or so of pages." This comment raises the further question as to whether continuity of suspense in the reader is entirely dependent upon clock time; or whether an exceptionally skilled author might not create such a powerful and protracted illusion of suspense that the short story could compete successfully with the novel in this particular. If a momentary dream can create the illusion of extended time, cannot literary skill produce in twenty minutes a degree of emotional experience so intense as to seem to stretch over hours? On a point of actual evidence it should be remarked that what detective fiction has so far

been produced does seem to support the view of those who maintain that the novel and not the short story is the appropriate medium for this kind of imaginative exercise.

Putting theories aside, and coming to models in which the practice of the modern detective story is demonstrated, the motive of deductive logic is found to be the main principle animating Conan Doyle, Austin Freeman, and H. C. Bailey, alike. Each would claim (as Freeman actually does claim) to display "a careful adherence to the probable." Their purpose is not to make intuitive leaps, but patiently to work from the known, progressing step by step until the hitherto unknown is reached.

Fortunately, the methods of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Thorndyke can be compared in detail from their deductive procedure in relation to similar objects. In both Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle* and Austin Freeman's *The Anthropologist at Large*, the cases under investigation concern robberies. The main clue in each instance is a man's rather shabby felt hat, and Holmes and Thorndyke both profess to confine their attention to facts which can be gathered indisputably from the object under examination.

Let Sherlock Holmes begin. The hat before him is thus described: "It was a very ordinary black hat of the usual round shape, hard and much the worse for wear. The lining had been of red silk, but was a good deal discoloured. . . . It was pierced in the brim for a hat-securer, but the elastic was missing. For the rest, it was cracked, exceedingly dusty, and spotted in several places, although there



[*Photo by Wm. A. Munns.*

AUSTIN FREEMAN

seemed to have been some attempt to hide the discoloured patches by smearing them with ink." From these details as to the condition of the hat, Sherlock Holmes makes the following deductions :

(1) *That the man is intellectual.* The hat is a large one and " a man with so large a brain must have something in it."

(2) *That he was once well-to-do, but is so no longer.* The hat is of a style which was in vogue three years earlier. It is of the best quality, but is now shabby. Therefore, Holmes argues, the owner must have been able to buy an expensive hat three years ago, but has since been unable to replace it.

(3) *That he was a man of foresight, but has suffered moral retrogression, probably due to drink.* Because he had had a safety guard fixed to his hat, but had failed to renew the missing elastic.

(4) *That he is middle-aged, has grizzled hair which had recently been cut, and that he used lime cream.* Deduced from examination of the lining.

(5) *That his wife has ceased to love him.* " This hat has not been brushed for weeks. When I see you, my dear Watson, with a week's accumulation of dust upon your hat, and when your wife allows you to go out in such a state, I shall fear that you also have been unfortunate enough to lose your wife's affection." (There is other satisfactory evidence that the owner of the hat is not a bachelor.)

(6) *That he probably has not gas laid on in his house.* Because there are several tallow stains upon the hat—evidently fallen from a guttering candle.

Before Thorndyke begins to examine the hat

which had come into his hands, he remarks, pertinently, that some misleading deductions as to the condition of the immediate owner may be made from a hat, unless very great care is exercised. In the first place, there is a considerable traffic in second-hand hats, and, consequently, the latest owner may not be identical with the original purchaser. (This explodes Sherlock Holmes's second deduction !) Among the observations and reasoned conclusions which Thorndyke then proceeds to make are :

(1) *That the man is a Japanese.* Because (*a*) his head (judged from the shape of the inside of the hat) is nearly as broad as it is long ; and (*b*) the small pieces of hair behind the head-lining are circular in section and of exceptionally large diameter (typical Japanese characteristics).

(2) *That he is employed in a mother-of-pearl factory.* Because the dust from the hat when microscopically examined shows a large proportion of particles of pearl shell. (This strengthens the view that he was a Japanese, since the pearl-shell industry is largely conducted by Eastern races.)

(3) *That he is a decent orderly man.* Because there is no accumulation of old dust on the outside of the hat.

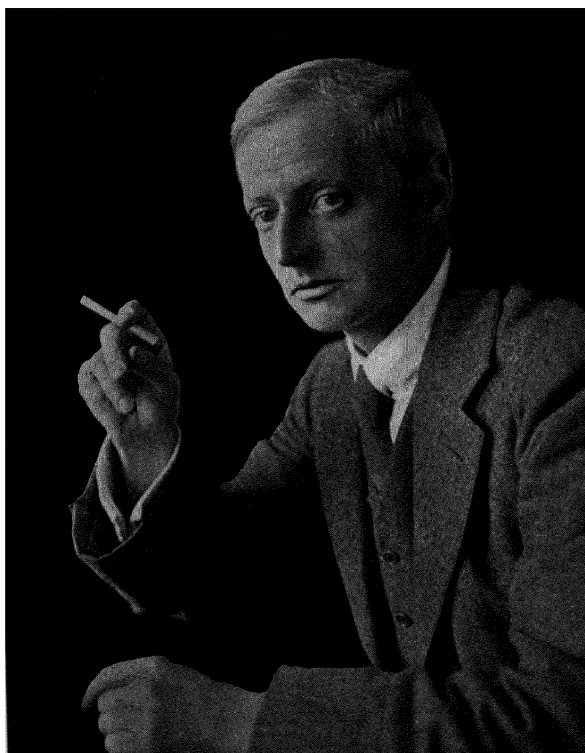
Thorndyke's main deductions are fewer than those of Sherlock Holmes, but they are sounder, less capricious, and more practical. From the evidence provided by the hat, Thorndyke does discover his man ; but all that Holmes sets forth goes for nothing, since he has to advertise in all the evening papers before he can get in touch with his wanted person.

Particularly typical of the weak irrelevances which emanate from Holmes, is the allegation that the unknown man's wife no longer loves him, because his headgear is particularly dusty! Certainly it must be conceded that Holmes had not experienced the ways of a loving wife, nor the advantage of reading Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*, which has some illuminating dialogue concerning loving but importunate wives and disreputable hats; but, in any event, the point was a purposeless superfluity—in which respect Sherlock Holmes is frequently guilty. A client bursts in upon the detective at his Baker Street chambers to announce some horrifying crime; and the detective, to display his quality, proceeds to record the number on the bus ticket which the visitor has dropped in the roadway below, and the date when this new client last saw the moon through a pane of glass! Thereupon the agitated visitor is struck all of a heap with abounding admiration, and forgets his murdered wife while he flatters Holmes by asking how such marvellous things are done! This instance, although hypothetical, is not wildly exaggerated.

The fact is, that Holmes was a *poseur* first and an amateur detective afterwards. His amazing success is rather a put-up job between him and his creator; and his occasional failures are a confidence trick, to suggest that there is really no deception in his triumphs. Thorndyke, on the other hand, is a straightforward scientific investigator, with very little nonsense about him. Perhaps he is a somewhat too-well-oiled piece of mechanism to be a satisfactory fictional character; and he has none

of those memorable personal mannerisms which have made Sherlock Holmes more real to the multitude than is the whole police force. Story for the sake of story is more generously given by Conan Doyle than by Austin Freeman—so far as the latter's short tales are concerned. In the novels the position is probably reversed.

In addition, it has to be kept in mind that Conan Doyle was the first in England to develop the few hints thrown out by Poe; and that most later writers are in some measure disciples—if unwilling and critical disciples—of Conan Doyle.



[*Photo by Miss Compton Collier*

W. W. JACOBS.

Chapter Seventeen

W. W. Jacobs: "Many Cargoes"

WILLIAM WYMARK JACOBS has been manifoldly blessed as a writer—not least because the arbiters of fame have never taken him seriously. His fellow-authors admire him unstintingly, as well they might, for perhaps none among them has found it possible to carry so much cargo in so small a vessel. Jacob's little craft has done the voyage from St. Katherine's Docks to Ipswich and thereabouts times without number, and he has been quite happy as its unpretentious master. No doubt if he had cared to shout from the masthead he could have founded a bargee school in literature, and had his disciples and imitators. But as it is, he has been content to do a small thing and to do it well. The probability is that his name will not long survive his own physical surcease; that there will be little attempt to claim a place for him among the immortals: yet it is worth noting that he has been compared with Aristophanes, the greatest of Greek comic writers—even as George Eliot was compared with Sophocles and Stephen Phillips with Shakespeare! There is no need to pursue the comparison as between Jacobs and the author of the *Frogs*, although a good many modest people might prefer to have written W. W. Jacobs's stories.

Among the contemporary creative writers who

have taken notice in print of the author of "Many Cargoes" is Arnold Bennett, who, after registering cordial appreciation of Jacobs's steadfast talent, proceeds to quarrel with him because he "discloses no signs of intellectual curiosity."[1] "Mr. Jacobs," we read, "seems to live apart from the movement of his age. Nothing, except the particular type of humanity and environment in which he specializes, seems to interest him. There is no hint of a general idea in his work." To take Arnold Bennett's last point first, surely there is *more* than "a hint" of a general idea in W. W. Jacobs's stories: an implicit statement, through and through, of the general idea that to provoke hearty laughter among a multitude of readers is sometimes as serviceable as to stimulate intellectual curiosity. Laughter can pall upon those who laugh continuously, perhaps; though as to that few can speak without reserve, because the gods seldom permit men to laugh without limit; but at least it can be averred that few things pall so swiftly as unmitigated intellectual curiosity. Those who concede Arnold Bennett's criticism that it is "impossible to gather from W. W. Jacobs's work that he cares for anything serious at all," might desire to add enviously: "Happy Mr. Jacobs!"

Americans have the advantage of Englishmen in being able to approach Jacobs's stories from the outside. Probably, however, there is no need to go so far as America for that experience; perhaps Scotland would be far enough—or even Manchester. Those who read "Many Cargoes" from the cockney

[1] "Books and Persons."

standpoint, are unable to know to what degree its humour is a kind of private conspiracy among those who know the cockney lingo and understand what passes for humour among those who are familiar with the street gamin.

W. W. Jacobs operates in a strictly limited field of operations: the Thames waterside—Wapping and Rotherhithe. Upon occasion he steps a little distance outside, but only for a week-end, as it were; and, usually, London's riverside is only the starting-place, since his characters almost invariably embark forthwith upon some short coastal voyage on a barge or a small schooner. Yet still we remain in the company of Londoners, who mainly constitute the scanty crews of these vessels. Where Jacobs differs from other "regional" writers is in his—shall it be called laziness? or living apart from "the movement of his age"? He makes no attempt whatever to universalize his characters. Dan and Harry and Sam and the boy are like no one else than Dan and Harry and Sam and the boy. Perhaps they exist nowhere at all outside Jacobs's stories; or, at any rate, if they *are* to be met in the flesh, it is only on Thames-side or on the little ships that ply therefrom. They represent the apotheosis of the cockney: ready of tongue, resourceful of vocabulary, strong in repartee, ever prepared to turn a penny (honestly if need be) and fertile in practical jokes. They are simple souls; and in at least one respect they resemble their author—they are utterly and sublimely devoid of intellectual curiosity!

A painstaking and ingenious professor has gone to the trouble of setting down the thirty-six (or

is it thirty-seven ?) plots which exhaust all the possibilities open to the fiction writer. There are no new plots ; no one can invent a new plot, it is said ; writers can harp only upon the strings which have already been plucked a hundred thousand times. For many, this may be a most galling limitation ; for Jacobs, however, it represents a range of freedom which is far beyond his most ambitious longings. Without pretending to statistical exactness, the estimate may be ventured that all Jacobs's many stories would fall well within the compass of half a dozen plot-situations. And in regard to very many of his stories, he might aptly be called a virtuoso upon a one-string fiddle.

There is an activity familiar to cockneys as " besting " : it consists in striking an unfair bargain with a neighbour or stranger, or in taking what is known (also idiomatically) as " a mean advantage." In a considerable measure W. W. Jacobs's stories are studies in the art of " besting," and an example of the art is to be found in the story called *In Borrowed Plumes*. Captain Bross, skipper of the *Sarah Jane*, had already been warned twice by the owners for not being aboard at the time the vessel was due to sail. They threatened that a third defection would lose him his berth. That third time came, and the mate of the *Sarah Jane*, anxious to get the skipper's job, was keen to start at the very moment appointed. Shortly before sailing-time, the ship's boy, who was also the skipper's nephew, received a note to say that his uncle had lost all his clothes. Tommy was implored to take a suit to the stated address, but he could find nothing save a few

garments left aboard by his aunt. The captain was consequently compelled to rush back to the *Sarah Jane* in female attire, and the ensuing voyage became a battle of wits between the Captain and the mate: the one frantically endeavouring to borrow or make some clothes; the other maintaining a careful guard over the crew's wardrobe, after he had caused every needle to be thrown overboard.

The disturbing fact is evident, then, that Jacobs does not show human nature in its nobler or more amiable moods; he does not purvey moral uplift; if one of his characters can do a bad turn to another he will; and very few of his people need to be warned that hell is paved with good intentions—of such intentions they are mostly innocent. Nevertheless, it is improbable that even the most ingenious first offender would inform even the most ingenuous magistrate that he had been seduced from the paths of rectitude by reading W. W. Jacobs! These night-watchmen and longshoremen and bargees take little account of fine distinctions between *mine* and *thine*, but their roguery is of the venial kind familiar to all who have experienced the mutual process of "finding" and "losing" in army life. Withal, the atmosphere of Jacobs's stories is clean and sunny, and he is ever distant from risky situations.

In a rough-and-ready division, it may be said that literary criticism directs attention to five elements in prose fiction: (1) Plot; (2) Characterization; (3) Dialogue; (4) Description; (5) Style.

Reviewing W. W. Jacobs's stories, it is immediately

evident that their interest is not evenly distributed under these heads. The careful husbanding of plot-material has already been remarked; but notwithstanding this, there remains the surprising fact that in the plots lies a considerable part of the attraction exercised by "Many Cargoes" and its companion volumes. Experience of W. W. Jacobs's methods speedily assures the reader that nothing of an extraordinarily exciting character is at all likely to happen; yet this in no way diminishes attention, inasmuch as the author has the faculty of sustaining interest throughout his story. In a word, the plot is diffused rather than drawn up to a climax; nearly every paragraph has its inherent story-interest, so that the reader is not fobbed-off with incidental matter which he feels compelled to endure in order not to miss something essential in the plot. There is climax of a kind in most of Jacobs's stories, but the culminating point does not tower above the body of the narrative. It is conceivable that an irresistibly curious reader might wish to turn to the last page, illegitimately, in order to see what happens; but he does so with the assurance that it will be fully worth while afterwards to double back in order to savour the characteristic quality of the author's sentences—a quality which is independent of and additional to any stylistic merit.

This characteristic quality could be illustrated almost at random in any story; here, an excerpt from *The Cook of the "Gannet"* will serve. Ships' cooks and their tantrums are a favourite theme with Jacobs; and this particular cook was a widow, Mrs.

Blossom, who had been shipped aboard the *Gannet* by her cousin's husband, the skipper, who (as he himself expressed it) was "trying a new experiment." The lady became a mutineer almost as soon as the voyage began, defied the officers and inveigled the crew:

"The only thing which ventured to interfere with her was a stiff Atlantic roll, which they encountered upon rounding the Land's End.

"The first intimation Mrs. Blossom had of it was the falling of small utensils in the galley. After she had picked them up and replaced them several times, she went out to investigate, and discovered that the schooner was dipping her bows to big green waves, and rolling, with much straining and creaking, from side to side. A fine spray, which broke over the bows and flew over the vessel, drove her back into the galley, which had suddenly developed an unaccountable stuffiness; but though the crew to a man advised her to lie down and have a cup of tea, she repelled them with scorn, and with pale face and compressed lips stuck to her post."

That is a passage which might be withdrawn completely from the narrative without diminishing the intrinsic interest of the story. Yet it is not superfluous: it does add something material, helping to complete the picture; and in a suitably limited way it has its own independent interest. When the source of that interest is sought, a process of elimination indicates that the interest is not mainly attached to characterization, nor to description,

nor to prose style, and certainly not to dialogue. The passage is, therefore, related to the plot (or as it might more explicitly be termed, the *situation*); it is a something added which demonstrates the author's fertility and resource within the bounds which he sets himself.

A more elaborate plot-situation marks *In Mid-Atlantic*, which recounts how a skipper insisted on changing the direction of his ship because a dream led him to believe he was to rescue "some poor shipwrecked fellow-creatures in distress." Against the mate's urgent protestations, Captain Brown decided to obey the dream-voices, and for the best part of a day they steered wide from their proper course. Just when the mate's sarcasm was persuading the skipper to abandon his apparently fruitless quest, an open boat was sighted, "with one pore man lying in the bottom of her," and the solitary occupant was "rescued" in a state of insensibility and taken on board the *Swallow*. Even in the sceptical mate's eyes the captain and his voices were now fully vindicated; but when the rescued man "came to" he behaved in a remarkable fashion, and tried to jump back into his boat. Restraint was placed upon him, until he explained:

"'My name's Cap'n Naskett, and I'm doing a record trip from New York to Liverpool in the smallest boat that has ever crossed the Atlantic, an' you go an' bust everything with your cussed officiousness. . . . A feller sneaks up alongside o' me with a boat-load of street-sweepings dressed as sailors, and snaps me up while I'm asleep. . . .'"

This delightfully absurd situation receives a wealth of incidental amplification at W. W. Jacobs's hands; and not a little of the story's crisp humour is dependent upon the fact that it is orally recorded by the famous night-watchman.

Mention of this night-watchman brings up the second point in the critical sequence—characterization. If the term characterization suggests serious psychological examination, or any endeavour to portray solemn consistency in behaviour, then Jacobs recks naught of such. But if to have created a human type which is inseparably associated with an author's name is to have achieved success in characterization, then W. W. Jacobs is thus distinguished. He is one of the very few writers who have been well served by an artist illustrator, for in Will Owen he found a coadjutor who has rendered as good service to him as Phiz rendered to Dickens. But is any illustrator moved to create memorable figures on the visual plane, unless the author has first powerfully created memorable figures on the imaginative plane? Perhaps Ginger Dick and Peter Russet and old Sam Small might interchange names without the most assiduous reader's recognizing any strangeness in the characters so designated; because it is not so much by their individual features and qualities that they are to be recognized, as by the tricks they play upon one another. The fame of the night-watchman has spread far and wide; but is he always the same night-watchman, or does the author apply the name indifferently to any one of a dozen night-watchmen? And do we keep him in remembrance by reason of

some specially striking quality with which he is endowed by his creator, or is it only because one of his profession had not previously been prominent in fiction? He is W. W. Jacobs's substitute for the chorus which the Greeks found indispensable: like that chorus, the night-watchman fills the rôle of ideal spectator, but he doubles it with the rôle of ideal raconteur—an office appropriated to the messenger in Greek drama. We know very little about the night-watchman; little more than that he had an inexhaustible stock of yarns, that he was accustomed to stow huge pieces of tobacco in his cheek, and that he frequently had a far-away look! However much his ready tongue may be admired, it is difficult to suppress a very slight inclination to doubt his strict veracity: as, for instance, when he tells the story (in *The Rival Beauties*) of the sea-serpent which followed a ship for days on end, like a hungry kitten! But sea-serpent or no sea-serpent, nothing but homage and gratitude is adequate return to the night-watchman for recording the name of that ship—the *George Washington*! . . . Most likely, W. W. Jacobs has full confidence and implicit faith in his night-watchman, but he does not extend equal credence to all informants. At the beginning of *An Elaborate Elopement* he writes:

"I have always had a slight suspicion that the following narrative is not quite true. It was related to me by an old seaman who, among other incidents of a somewhat adventurous career, claimed to have received Napoleon's sword at the battle of Trafalgar, and a wound in the back at Waterloo."

A discipline which careful writers impose upon their pens is most stern economy in the employment of qualifying adjectives and adverbs; but the effect which can be produced for purposes of humour by judicious understatement is shown by the use of the words *slight* and *somewhat* in the foregoing passage. Note, also, that wound "in the back"!

The dialogue in Jacobs's books is their great merit. He is unexcelled in the reproduction of cockney speech; not that he does actually reproduce it—no writer could do that without intolerable prolixity and muddled repetition. He is, however, one of the few writers who are able to suggest faithful reproduction by selecting a few salient features and carefully avoiding exaggeration. Moreover, he does preserve that quite unappreciated mordant wit and ironical humour which remain with the one-time London street-arab throughout life. While fuddled Captain Bing is being rowed out to the *Smiling Jane*, he addresses the boatman severely in these words:

"'When I was a young man, I'd ha' pulled this boat across and back afore now.'

"'When you was a young man,' said the man at the oars, who had a local reputation as a wit, 'there wasn't no boats; they was all Noah's arks then.'"[1]

Anyone who has heard a cockney humorist in his persevering moods, will recognize the fitness of

[1] *The Captain's Exploit.*

this piece of repartee in this particular situation; and even in those few words from the boatman, the authentic voice of the cockney is heard, albeit his "native wood-notes wild" are necessarily denuded of the chromatic colouring which no true cockney would deny himself.

As in his dialogue, so in his descriptions, Jacobs is a veritable Londoner. While the barge *Sir Edmund Lyons* runs under sail down the Thames estuary on a beautiful morning:

"The miniature river-waves broke against the blunt bows of the barge, and passed by her sides rippling musically. Over the flat Essex marshes a white mist was slowly dispersing before the rays of the sun, and the trees on the Kentish hills were black and drenched with moisture." [1]

A pleasant morning scene, which your true cockney would see with his eye, but hardly take to his heart; that organ would be stimulating another physical sense—as W. W. Jacobs knows well, for he goes on at once to add:

"A little later, smoke issued from the tiny cowl over the fo'c'sle and rolled in a little pungent cloud to the Kentish shore. Then a delicious odour of frying steak rose from below, and fell like healing balm upon the susceptible nostrils of the skipper as he stood at the helm."

Enough has been said as to Jacobs's plot-material, characterization, dialogue, and description to suggest

[1] *Mrs. Bunker's Chaperon.*

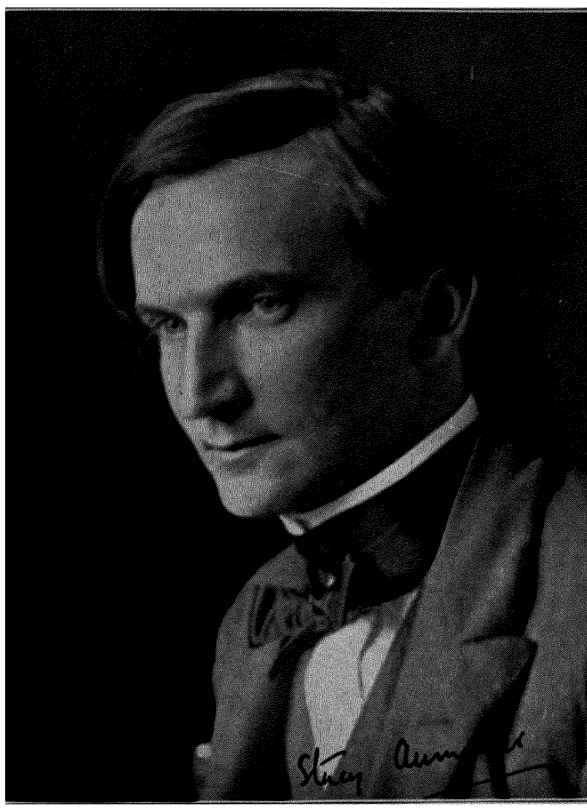
that these serve as a media for humour which rarely flags. Jacobs has, quite naturally, sown wild oats of the kind for which all humorists have a powerful affection—the terrible and uncanny. *The Monkey's Paw* is an effort in this kind, and a successful effort; but although the most horrible and uncanny fate that can befall any writer is, probably, to be compelled to be funny in season and out, W. W. Jacobs performs his assigned task with an air of such hearty enjoyment that there is surely little occasion for regret if his few "shockers" are regarded with a cold and unfraternal eye.

Chapter Eighteen

Stacy Aumonier: "The Love-a-Duck"

THE invention of a new mythology (or the resuscitation of an old), and an enactment that writers of poetry and imaginative prose should for a term of years work within the compass of that mythology, might redound to the great good of contemporary literature in English. The disease which afflicts present-day readers—and through them, writers also—is the fevered search for something new, something more highly seasoned, something that will produce violent reactions upon literary palates which have already withstood incredible moral temperatures.

Not even the greatest among the Greek poet-dramatists had any new story wherewith to excite the populace; they had only to play variations on old themes; and in that "only" has lain their glory and wonder for scores of generations. It was circumstance that imposed those hard-and-fast limits upon writers in the Periclean age; but no such external compulsion worked upon Shakespeare. Yet what are Shakespeare's plays other than transcendent variations upon other men's themes—or upon themes which are the common possession of mankind? Look where we will, it is to find that frenzied pursuit of the new and the strange has not engaged the outstanding figures in world-literature.



[*Photo by Peter Lely*

STACY AUMONIER

Stacy Aumonier may or may not have other characteristics in common with Shakespeare and the Greeks, but at least he is with them (as well as with W. W. Jacobs and others) in troubling least about the invention of plots. At best, the endeavour to invent in this particular is a wild-goose chase; and Aumonier himself proclaims that his stories "are just the same old seven stories told in the bazaars of Ispahan three thousand years ago." Let it be at once assumed, then, that originality of plot need not be looked for in "The Love-a-Duck." The important matter is not that Stacy Aumonier can and does take familiar situations, but that before we have read above a page in any of his stories a glow of anticipation spreads over us, and we feel that *here* is something radically different—the old, but the old infused by the ever new.

Proceeding to read further in these re-presentations of familiar material, we find ourselves establishing contact with other intimately recognizable things: the permanencies and universalities of life—the great and grand realities—the love of a mother for her son; the divine illogical prompting of an utterly unheroic and unromantic man toward altruistic actions; the splendour of patient human endurance.

Stacy Aumonier is an artist as well as a tale-teller. He knows the uses of fine workmanship; he is fully aware of the necessity for patent-marks of the individual hand if any work is to rise from the common rut and to qualify for permanence. It is with his handiwork even as he reminds us that it

was with old-time craftsmen in other materials: "You could never mistake a Sheraton chair for a Chippendale, or a Chippendale for a Hepplewhite." No doubt Stacy Aumonier could write like Gertrude Considine Travers-Berkeley if he chose; but happily he does not choose to write in her manner, nor does his work bear a family likeness to that of any contemporary. A story by Stacy Aumonier would be recognizable without the signature—unless the author were determined to make it otherwise. He is a short-story writer with whom construction and craft technique are especially significant; but Stacy Aumonier's sufficiency in this respect may be conceded without illustration, in order to consider another side of his work which is of interest to hundreds, as compared with the units who alone are conscious of merit or attraction in questions of form.

Sentiment is an excellent servant but a tyrannous master. Once a writer knuckles under to sentiment, he is in peril of becoming hag-ridden by sentiment for the rest of time. It is possible that in the past the difference between good books and bad books (in the literary sense alone) was that the good books were well written, as to style and so on, whereas the bad books were badly written. That may possibly have constituted the difference—though not probably. In the present generation, even Augustine Birrell's Miss Gabblegoose writes well, so far at least as reasonably good English is concerned. But that accomplishment does not make Miss Gabblegoose a writer of good books, even though she write as conscientiously and

meticulously as Arnold Bennett. Without delving into intricacies, it is probably true in a general way to-day that the distinction between a piece of good imaginative writing and a piece of bad imaginative writing is to be looked for in the realm of sentiment rather than in that of style.

The lady Sentiment passes as a respectable and admirable person: Sentimentality is her raddled and blear-eyed illegitimate half-sister. One tragic fact is that so few readers are able to see any difference whatever between the two; a second and still more tragic fact is that numerous readers actually prefer the company of the maudlin and tear-sodden lady. Even the most "complex" of critics is usually susceptible to reasonable indulgence in tears. The present writer—a simple soul, it is true—is ready to confess that many of the greatest things in literature cause him to gulp, sometimes on account of strong emotional appeal, sometimes because of sheer beauty of utterance.[1]

Milton, who asserted that poetry should be "simple, sensuous and impassioned," also conceived the austerities of *Samson Agonistes*, with its magnificent restrained close:

> Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
> Or knock the breast; no weakness, no contempt,
> Dispraise, or blame; nothing but well and fair,
> And what may quiet us in a death so noble—

so that the "Highest Wisdom" is able to dismiss

[1] *E.g. Twelfth Night*, Act 1, Scene 5, ll. 287–93.

the witnesses of Samson's triumphant downfall with a new endowment of experience,

> With peace and consolation . . .
> And calm of mind, all passion spent.

Writing which is sensuous and impassioned will assuredly embody material for the play of sentiment, and probably for the utterance of tears. And in *Samson Agonistes* itself, it is only at the very end that the spectator is assumed to have reached complete quietude of mind, with all passion *spent.* There has been, earlier, a demand for the expenditure of passion; if there *is* nothing for tears, it is because the occasion for wailing and knocking the breast has been, but is now overpast. From the practice of one who was so austere and unsentimental (in his writings) as Milton, we may see, therefore, that a measure of tears does not necessarily bring the stigma of sentimentality.

So much by way of prefatory apologetic in relation to a story in Stacy Aumonier's "The Love-a-Duck"—*Them Others.* Strong silent men could no doubt read that story unmoved; as might also tender modern maidens reared upon the strong meat of ravishing orientals. For the majority, however, *Them Others* will be deeply affecting. Among interesting questions that may be worth consideration here are: Is the emotional appeal in *Them Others* any more permissible than the emotional appeal made by the books of the Gabblegoose family? And if so, why? These questions are certainly well worth answering, if it be true that the difference between sentiment and sentimentality represents

the major difference between good books and bad books, between literary art and mere pot-boiling.

First, as to material and environment. *Them Others* has for heroine an elderly woman, Mrs. Ward, who lives in a shabby district of north-east London and is the wife of a characterless gas-worker :

" I can see her old face now, lined and seamed with years of anxious toil and struggle ; her long bony arms, slightly withered, but moving restlessly in the direction of snails and slugs " [in her garden].

The bare story is simple and plain enough. Mrs. Ward's son Ernie joins the army, goes out to France, is posted as missing, but finally returns unannounced after having escaped from German hands. Mrs. Ward's former neighbours were a German family—Mr. and Mrs. Stelling, and two sons near to the age of Ernie Ward. Mrs. Ward liked the Stellings ; and when the German woman and her boys were about to go back to their own country after Stelling's death (previous to the outbreak of war), " Mrs. Ward went in and wept with her, and in their dumb way they forged the chains of some desperate understanding."

All that need be considered now are Mrs. Ward and her inward experiences—for it is she who is the entire source of emotional stimulus. The chief difference between this Stacy Aumonier character, and characters drawn by the sentimentalists (as for purposes of convenience they may be called), is not that the latter provoke greater emotional

stress than is occasioned by Mrs. Ward, but that they employ quite other channels of emotional appeal.

> The grief that does not speak
> Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.

In those lines Shakespeare leaps unerringly, as he could, to an irrefutable psychological truth. The grief that is most heart-rending to the person concerned, and also to observers who can do nothing to heal the wound, is inarticulate grief. The moment emotion becomes vocal in prose, the instructed human mind begins to discount its truth. Lovers who protest too much are suspect (of course a sustained "attitude"—either the languishing, or the strong, silent, patient, and bovine—may be as extravagantly eloquent as words); widowers who proclaim themselves, far and wide, as utterly and for ever bereft, frequently marry again within a year; communities who compile elaborate and fulsome epitaphs for their illustrious dead usually have regrettably short memories. And the novelist who prefers impassioned asseverations and swarms of wild and whirling words, is as undesirable at the moment (and as negligible for posterity) as the mob-orator who sweeps a multitude onward to burn and destroy.

To enforce the suggestion that in the character of Mrs. Ward Stacy Aumonier has portrayed a monumental figure of pity, a parallel instance may be cited. Winnie Verloc (in "The Secret Agent") is among the most pitiful creations of Joseph Conrad, and the almost unbearable stirring of emotion pro-

duced by the author through this character is due not at all to her words, but wholly to the fact that grief has made her incapable of speech. As she sits impassive in the back parlour of that grubby little shop after the death of her brother, Winnie Verloc becomes an almost terrifying figure. She cannot utter any word against the husband she loathes and who is responsible for Stevie's death. There she sits, frozen of tongue, immobile as an idol: and by this petrified exterior we measure the raging hell that must be torturing her only half-benumbed brain. Mrs. Ward is not so highly keyed by Stacy Aumonier as is Mrs. Verloc by Conrad; but they are similar in kind if not equal in degree. As she flits like an uneasy spirit about that patchy garden in Dalston, the stunned mother ceases to be merely one weary and pained old woman; she becomes a shining symbol of all bereaved mothers—not of England only, but of all the warring nations, friends and enemies made one in grief.

It is not only *after* Ernie's disappearance that Mrs. Ward evokes pity. When letters arrive from the boy, her procedure is most affecting: she reads them always with moving lips, her eyes sparkling—*but no one knows how much or how little she really is able to read.* And the war to her is not a world-catastrophe, in that aspect it could not reach her consciousness; it is merely something, somewhere, vague, uncertain, drifting—"this old war," she calls it. It has no existence for her, except as a miserable business that swallowed up her Ernie—no further existence than that; until—

"I found her one night in a peculiarly preoccupied mood. She was out in the garden, and she kept staring abstractedly over the fence into the unoccupied ground next door. It appeared that it had dawned upon her that the war was to do with 'these Germans,' that in fact we were fighting the Germans, and then she thought of the Stellings. Those boys would now be about eighteen and nineteen. They would be fighting too. They would be fighting against Ernie. This seemed very peculiar. . . .

"'They went out to a music-hall one night, together,' she explained. . . ."

From the time that Ernie is posted as missing, we watch the slow (yet not morbidly depicted) break-up of Mrs. Ward—a heroic and epic figure standing against the world like a pinnacle of rock suffering gradual erosion by the implacable sea. The rock crumbles by scarcely perceptible degrees, but it is never made to look other than a monument of grand, unyielding, and patient resistance. Ernie comes back suddenly and everyone laughs with joy—"with the exception of Mrs. Ward." She goes out, later, into her now neglected garden, and thinks wistfully of "them others," the Germans who used to live next door. To a friend who comes out to her:

"'She used to make a very good puddin',' Mrs. Ward said suddenly, at random. 'Dried fruit inside, and that. My Ernie liked it very much. . . .'

"On either side of her cheek a tear had trickled. She was trembling a little, worn out by the emotions of the evening. . . .

"'It's all very . . . perplexin' and that,' she said quietly. . . .

"And so I left her standing there, and I went my way, for I knew that she was wiser than I."

Such tears as may be shed for Mrs. Ward will be tears of cleansing pity, not tears of sentimental self-indulgence. In relation to her, Stacy Aumonier has made *permissible* use of a strong emotional appeal: *first*, because he always has sentiment under control—he is never mastered by it; and consequently (*second*) his appeal remains always within the compass of reticence, dignity, and restraint (every reader of fiction knows that a bereaved mother might be drawn with a degree of extravagance that would be humiliating); *third*, the emotional appeal grows of itself from within the portrayed character—the reader is not incited to emotional rousings either through self-pity in Mrs. Ward, or through any proclamations in her behalf. The author quietly shows the woman as being such and such in certain chosen circumstances—the rest is left to the reader's spirit of interpretation.

Lastly, of *Them Others* it must be emphasized (for the encouragement of readers who shrink from "painful" subject-matter in fiction) that Mrs. Ward is not a depressing character. If she were, the story would be negligible. Anyone was able to get depressed during the war; but only the

choicer spirits were able to bear blows as Mrs. Ward bore them. She is a fine and noble figure because she took arms courageously against circumstance (in ways that have not been touched upon in the foregoing commentary); because she endured magnificently in her own puzzled and inarticulate way; and because, in the depth of her trouble and in the height of her joy, she thought of "them others."

The bakers' dozen of tales in "The Love-a-Duck" bear witness to their author's versatility and wide range. The title-story is an excellent piece of light comedy with a surprise at its close; and *A Good Action* is (with deliberation and assurance let it be said) without a peer among farcical short stories in the last decade. Stacy Aumonier found his figure of tragic dignity in a back street of Dalston; he finds his most richly humorous character in a Waterloo Road fried-fish shop, the proprietor of which, Mr. Edwin Pothecary, was inspired by the influence of an April morning to endeavour to "perform one good, kind, unselfish, unadvertised action." That impulse produced a day of delectable misadventures, recounted in a manner which stirs continual laughter. In his farcical moods, Stacy Aumonier is a living rebuke to writers who purvey their fun in niggardly fashion. Mr. Pothecary's frustrated endeavours toward altruism would in themselves provide a rich harvest of fun, but, as if in sheer exuberance, the author tosses off this pleasant sketch of Dolling, the manager of "Pothecary's Pride-of-the-Ocean Popular Plaice to eat":

"Dolling was Edwin's manager and he cannot be overlooked. In the first place, he was remarkably like a fish himself. He had the same dull expressionless eyes and the drooping mouth, and drooping moustache. Everything about him drooped and dripped. He was always wet. He wore a grey flannel shirt and no collar or tie. His braces, trousers and hair all seemed the same colour. He hovered in the background with a knife, and did the cutting up and dressing. He had, moreover, all the taciturnity of a fish, and its peculiar ability for getting out of a difficulty. He never spoke. He simply looked lugubrious and pointed at things with his knife. And yet Edward knew that he was an excellent manager. For it must be observed that in spite of the gold-lettered board outside with its fanfare of cod, brill, halibut, plaice and pilchards, whatever the customer asked for, by the time it had passed through Dolling's hands it was just *fish*. No nonsense about it at all. Just plain fish levelled with a uniform brown crust. If you asked for cod you got *fish*. If you asked for halibut you also got *fish*. Dolling was something of an artist."

This does not exhaust the subject of Dolling. He is a joy to those Londoners who are familiar with fried-fish shop procedure, but here again, as often with W. W. Jacobs, it would be interesting to know how much of the fun of Dolling does depend upon first-hand knowledge of his environment. What does Park Lane make of Dolling? and what does New York?

To analyse humour and to track down laughter to its sources is a difficult undertaking. Why is the description of Dolling intensely funny (to numbers of readers) ? For the most part, reasons for laughter elude the mind. A fish is not in itself a humorous object : why should anyone be amused when a man is likened unto a fish ? And would it seem equally funny if *any* man were thus compared ? [1] or does it enhance the humour because the man who was like a live fish had been much in the company of deceased fish ? Of course, Dolling's ability to turn any fish— even a " mysterious and evil-smelling monster "—into dainty parcels of halibut, cod, brill, plaice, and pilchards, is a priceless artistic gift that Neptune himself might envy.

Only a brief word can be said of what is incomparably the finest story in this volume—*The Great Unimpressionable*. Here, in twenty pages of prose, Stacy Aumonier has written an English epic of the Great War. The salient fact about the British soldier from 1914 to 1918 was not his courage, but his national and traditional imperturbability. When the waters of great deeds and the shocks of world-shaking cataclysms roared about the English Tommy's ears, he shook himself as if he were a lion worried by a wasp—and " carried on." Three months of Gallipoli, with never a day or a night free from shell fire ; seven infantry attacks ; a mine explosion ; a sniper's bullet through his back ; delirium ; several weeks in hospital ; and after all these things, Private Ned Picklekin wrote home :

[1] *Cf.* Katherine Mansfield's *Honeymoon* (" The Dove's Nest ").

" Dear mother,

" Everything all right. I had a scratch but nothing. I hope you enjoyed the flower show. How funny meeting Mrs. Perks. We have a fine time here. The grub is fine . . . The weather is mild and pleasant. . . . We had a fine concert on Friday. A chap played the flute lovely. Hope you are now all right again.

" Your loving son NED."

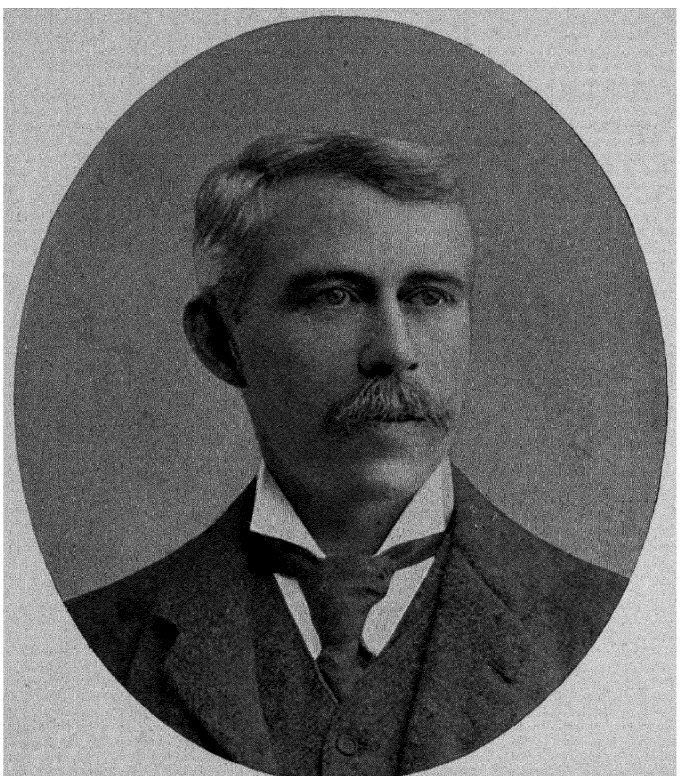
Thus spake the Great Unimpressionable throughout the war. Ned took part in tremendous events in various fields of operations, and suffered tremendously ; but the burden of his letters to his mother was, " Everything all right. . . . The grub is fine."

On the evidence of four stories in " The Love-a-Duck " (*A Source of Irritation*, *Old Iron*, *Them Others*, and *The Great Unimpressionable*) Stacy Aumonier might be termed the Prose Laureate of the Inarticulate Ones. His versatility and virtuosity insure against the exclusive working of any one particular vein. He has made himself acceptable to the magazine public without writing down to any presumed " magazine standard." His gifts are catholic and he is among the very best equipped short-story writers of the younger generation. If he has not the special powers which belong to a few of his contemporaries, he has, conversely, the advantage of not being a writer for an exclusive coterie.

The strange and the rare and the precious have a place in literature, but it should not be forgotten that Shakespeare found it possible to write pro-

foundly and brilliantly and beautifully at the same time as he tickled the ears of the groundlings.

Stacy Aumonier should take a high place in a period which marks the renascence of the short story. As it is, he has written two stories worthy to rank among the dozen best pieces of prose about the Great War; and almost every other story that has come from his pen has qualities which command attention and admiration on account of some specially meritable feature.



[*Photo by Warwick Brooke.*

C. E MONTAGUE.

Chapter Nineteen

C. E. Montague: "Fiery Particles"

SHAKESPEARE'S plays contain notable passages in contribution to the literature of righteous indignation, but since his day first-rate English authors have not dealt largely in this kind. Defoe is among the few who have made literature out of indignation; and Swift much more voluminously. In the nineteenth century, Ruskin and (doubtfully) Carlyle infused their writings with something of this spirit, although it was customarily subordinated to some special pleading personal to the particular author. Swift was a master of satire, but a slave of invective, and his protests against civilized behaviour as he found it were not delivered with ironical and intellectual aloofness, but with a hot and blasting vehemence that spoke of swelling veins and incipient apoplexy. Since the Armistice, however, C. E. Montague has worthily enlarged the literature of indignation.

Before 1914, C. E. Montague was known as one of the stars in the *Manchester Guardian's* brilliant galaxy. He wrote dramatic criticism for that paper; and among other books he had published (1910) a novel on journalistic life, "A Hind Let Loose," which one eminent critic thought so good that he declined to commend it to the general public.[1] In that novel the author showed so

[1] Arnold Bennett: "Books and Persons."

keen a sense of humour (deeply tinged with irony) that superficial reading would suggest a considerable element of farce.

Then came the war, to be followed in undue time by the peace; and in 1922 C. E. Montague spoke again in the volume entitled "Disenchantment." Between 1910 and 1922 much had happened to Montague, even as much had happened to most other creatures in the world: the war had happened to him. He was approaching fifty years of age when hostilities began, but he joined the army on that wave of first fine careless rapture of enthusiasm which swept through the country immediately after August, 1914; and the rest of his war service was a long process of tragic disillusionment subsequently to be registered in his books. If "Disenchantment" does not take a permanent place in English literature there will be no cause for surprise—for it may be that no nation can afford to have the truth told about itself! Other blistering indictments of the conduct of numbers of British subjects during the war have been written; but most of these were comparatively ineffective, for divers reasons which cannot be rehearsed here.

Montague's picture of the British army and its appendages engaged in the world-war is the best book of its type, because his blazing indignation is tempered by the recognition that, given the beastly circumstances of war, abuses and super-abuses will always flourish as the green bay tree, and at the expense of the righteous. One reviewer testified that nothing is set down in malice in "Disenchantment." If malice is mere spite, then the remark

is certainly true; but if malice be a determination to castigate, it is fortunately only half true, inasmuch as the book is alive with verbal slings and arrows; to wit, "War hath no fury like a non-combatant," and "From any English training-camp [about the middle of 1915] you almost seemed to see a light steam rising, as it does from a damp horse. This was illusion beginning to evaporate." One reason why, in the course of justice, "Disenchantment" should prevail over other books about the war (and it is the chief reason) is that the grace of its literary style is almost wholly unimpaired by obtruded ethical purpose. Its theme is not that someone blundered, but that a whole host of someones went on blundering—and much worse—for four solid years: a theme which seems almost inevitably doomed to peter out into wearisome and rabid fulminations. Yet it is all kept under almost perfect control by the author, who never forgets that the first and immediate purpose of literature is to show forth beauty. Montague fulfils this function in his crystalline phrases; he summons up memories of great and enduring things by his happy wealth of allusion; on occasion, his pages become studded as it were with patines of bright gold—as when he tells of—

"An ancient garden hung on the slope of the hill [of Cassel], where a great many pears were yellowing on the wall, and sunflowers gazing fixedly into the sun that was now failing them. All the corn of French Flanders lay cut on the brown plain under your eyes, from Dunkirk, with its shimmering

dunes and the glare on the sea, to the forested hills north of Arras. Everywhere lustre, reverie, stillness; the sinking hum of old bees, successful in life and now rather tired; the many windmills fallen motionless, the aureate light moving over the aureate harvest . . . ";

above all, " Disenchantment " qualifies for endurance because of the great love and the great pity which Montague displays from first to last.

So much as this required to be written concerning " Disenchantment," since there can be no full understanding and little real appreciation of his next volume, " Fiery Particles," until it is recognized that this later collection of short stories is the overflow of (and an appendage to) the earlier book. Among its nine pieces, five deal with or grow out of the war; and one or two might indeed have been incorporated with " Disenchantment "—so near are they to it in spirit.

Referring back to the aspect of these two volumes as contributions to the literature of indignation, it may be instructive to consider the spirit which informs them in its relation to the British temperament. In " Fiery Particles " the author's feelings seem occasionally to become loosed from that controlling vein which governs them in " Disenchantment ": indignation flames into a realism which is too detailed[1] for the unclouded serenity of vision which is Montague's strong faculty; and in *Honours Easy*, irony and satire are so overworked that they fall at last into burlesque. But if it be admitted

[1] See *The First Blood Sweep* (at p. 129, " Fiery Particles ").

that the spirit which in England has added to the literature of indignation, launched two other combatant nations into revolution, and caused a serious mutiny on the battlefield in the army of a third, it may well seem to be unduly straining at a gnat if somewhat vitriolic phrasing and a little obtrusion of blood and mutilation be declaimed against by those who read our war books.

Apart from the pieces dealing with the war, "Fiery Particles" contains stories about an illicit whiskey still in an Irish bog (*Another Temple Gone*); the possibilities of Shakespeare for the sweet uses of advertisement (*My Friend the Swan*); a travelling wax-work show in Australia (*A propos des Bottes*); mountain-climbing in Wales (*In Hanging Garden Gully*); and one about an adventure in journalism (*Two or Three Witnesses*).

A notable declension in "Fiery Particles," as compared with "Disenchantment," is represented by its laboured and less natural style. "Disenchantment" seems to come from the pen in a lucent stream of words; so naturally does it flow that, even as a clear brook may occasionally break and eddy upon a stone, Montague sometimes admits such a sentence as "That was the paradise that the bottom fell out of." Without going to the rash extreme of asserting that there are no *in*elegancies in "Fiery Particles," it may be said with an adequate margin of safety that the book contains more than enough stylistic elegancies. It suggests the studied endeavour of a writer who has gained a reputation as a stylist, but who has lost grip upon the earlier impulse which carried him safely through

the shallows of mannered writing. Moreover, Montague's allusiveness—the gift of a well-stored mind, of a "full man"—is driven a little hard in "Fiery Particles." So much so, in fact, that it has one story all to itself (*My Friend the Swan*)—in which the author ingeniously demonstrates the commercial hundred-per-cent. efficiency value of a good stock of Shakespeare tags.

If it now be said that the foregoing paragraph of criticism consists in pointing to the presence of one or two inconsiderable flies in the amber, the metaphor will be an apt one, particularly when something more is said of *Another Temple Gone*, which seems to be flooded in exquisite amber light. If this sense of atmospheric coloration is the direct product of the author's subtle craft, then the story is an exceptionally fine piece of work. Vivid coloration and an abnormal or exotic atmosphere may perhaps be conveyed in writing with comparative readiness. In *Another Temple Gone*, however, there is no extraordinary or strange outstanding natural feature to exploit. On a warm June morning Sergeant Maguire and his army of two constables march off "on a front of one mile" across a bog in Gartumna, County Clare, in search of Tom Farrell and his illicit still. They reach their objective, but Tom blarneys the police force so successfully that his operations are encouraged rather than disturbed; and since Tom thinks it below the nobility of his profession to charge for his liqueur, the later weeks of that summer find him in low water. Accordingly, the sergeant and his constables decide to raise among themselves a pension of £1 a week, so that

Tom may carry on the good work of " transformin' the body of anny slushy old drink you'd get in a town into the soul of all kindness an' joy that our blessed Lord put into the water the good people had at the wedding." These summer weeks of bliss out on the " fawn-coloured wilderness of the bog " form the substance of the story, and the beauty of long hours of mellow sunshine is simulated in words which carry the drowsiness of hot days :

" The air over the bog had tuned up for the day to its loudest and most multitudinous hum and hot click of grasshoppers and bees ; . . . noon came blazingly on—its savage vertical pressure seemed to quell and mute with an excess of heat the tropical buzz of all the basking bog life that the morning's sunshine had inspirited ; another hour and the bog was swooning, as old poets say, under the embraces of the sun her friend. . . . "

At intervals throughout the story, changing aspects of the landscape are summoned up about the reader, and the effect is as of a recurrent tune with variations. There is a human and a humorous interest in *Another Temple Gone*, but it is all observed in the clear amber light which filled " that summer's glowing pomp of lustrous months."

Honours Easy has this definite text : " I've worked it out that on the average the number of ribbons a British officer gets in this war, varies in direct proportion to the square of his distance from the front." Montague takes nearly fifty pages to illustrate this theme, and what might have been

a scintillating piece of satire is damaged by mere length. The two Staff officers, Colin March and Claude Barbason, wearing what Colin candidly calls " the Red Badge of Funk " (Staff tabs), discover a quite exciting game to while away the years during which the troops are getting on with the war—the game of collecting decorations, orders, medals, and what not, from foreign potentates who visit the Western Front, as well as M.C.s and D.S.O.s from the War Office. This theme provides almost unlimited opportunity for C. E. Montague's stinging irony and scornful indignation. His air is less judicial here than in " Disenchantment " ; he is as tremulous with suppressed disgust as was Hotspur when the finicking scented courtier encountered him on the hard-fought battlefield. He can laugh at the lust for ribbons and pretty decorations ; but when Claude Barbason, safe at the Base, insults the New Army's junior officers (who do at least fight) by calling them " Bill Sikeses in Sam Brownes," the author expresses his true feelings in unambiguous terms through the lips of Colin March :

" ' Claude is . . . like one of the little guinea-pigs that they give to the snakes at the Zoo. A plain shirker like me is almost decent beside him. I only deny Christ right out—I frankly skulk by the fire while He's getting crucified. Claude would sneer at the cut of the clothes that Christ wore on the Cross. We're the two thieves, but Claude is the one that sniggered.' "

And in a culminating malediction upon all the Claudes who thrived in the war, comes the sentence :

" Imagine the lice on one of our Tommies finding fault with the Tommy's pedigree ! "

From safety at G.H.Q. the reader is taken to the trenches to see and compare the perils that dwelt therein during the years when Death walked abroad unabashed. *The First Blood Sweep* is a title with sinister significance : a particular infantry unit organized a sweepstake every time it returned to the front-line trenches ; the winner was the one who drew the name of the first man to be killed. That is war ! . . . Montague utilizes the gruesome incident for offering some fine character-sketches of a group of men in the company : Sergeant Gort, the quiet, heroic, efficient soldier who is killed while on guard in a dangerous position in the stead of a recruit who, as Gort knows, is not properly seasoned ; Hanney, the recruit himself, all nerves and eagerness ; Ince, the man from Wigan, to whom newspapers and their sporting news are indispensable, even in the trenches ; Tommy Tween, the excitable cockney ; and others who, between their spells of sentry-duty, live in a hole in the bowels of the earth—a lovely refuge from the inferno outside. With the exception of Sergeant Gort, there is little heroism among them. Heroes they would become, no doubt, in the hour of need ; but in their dug-out, Montague shows them to us as having their natural meanness and blasphemy intensified by war and its dehumanizing degradations. The author of " Disenchantment " is a realist. He is conscious that there is a good deal of nobility in conglomerate human nature, even when men are living as worse than beasts ; but he declines to keep up the abomin-

able pretence that war makes heroes of us all. War as he sees it (and as most other honest people saw it) is an affair which intensifies a man's entire moral and spiritual make-up. If he is naturally courageous and impetuous he will find opportunities to be doubly so; if he is by instinct a liar and a thief, war will do little other than confirm him in these habits; if he has a dirty soul, his homesickness for the gutter will receive more ample satisfaction. But *The First Blood Sweep* is a good story, full of action and providing a small gallery of lifelike portraits; only in a secondary aspect need it be interpreted as a sermon against war in general.

A species of disenchantment operating among civilians in peace time, is the motive in *Two or Three Witnesses*. Fane, the young reporter, a "raw hand," was the only one of four Press representatives who stayed on the scene to attend a funeral they had all been sent to describe; the others took the ceremony for granted, wrote their descriptive reports beforehand and telegraphed them. It was in Ireland, and the officiating Archbishop collapsed near the beginning of the service, which had to be postponed until next day. The older journalists were congratulated upon their exceedingly good reports; Fane, the one man who got in with the truth, was snubbed by his editor for transmitting a cock-and-bull story—and the editor printed the Press agency's report, compiled by one of the men who didn't stay! For, as Pellat of *The Day* said, if England's most important paper announced that the man was buried yesterday, "for all the serious

purposes of history" he was buried yesterday! No historian would dream of checking the statements of *The Day* with the obscure *Skibbereen Eagle*. In such manner was Fane initiated into the disenchanting truth about his three seniors, who, on the previous night, had inspired him with many noble utterances as to the dignity of the journalistic profession and the necessity for absolute loyalty to one's paper. . . .

C. E. Montague's future as a short-story writer might be forecasted, with moderate assurance, as promising no great developments. He is an observer rather than an inventor; he requires a basis of actuality upon which to build—war and its bypaths; or his own profession—journalism; or his own hobby—mountaineering. Without some powerful impulse spurring him to the fictional form, he would probably prefer to follow the path of the essayist. There is one piece in "Fiery Particles"—*A propos des Bottes*—as to which there is no direct evidence regarding the degree in which fact vies with fiction. It is the one section in the book which suggests a fictional foundation, for the idea of renaming a group of molten waxworks as "The End of the World" is surely too priceless for actuality. Whether it is founded on truth or invention, this story of the Australian wax-works impresario who turned up in France during the war with a huge pair of fantastically-cut top boots as his only footgear (the sole item salvaged from the wreck of the wax-works entertainment) is an excellent yarn—and for sheer entertainment is the best thing in the book.

What has been said with an air of intelligent anticipation as to C. E. Montague's future writings,

is authoritatively buttressed by the fact that, since "Fiery Particles," he has issued a volume of essays and travel-sketches. "The Right Place" is good enough to satisfy most readers that little occasion will arise to lament the writer of fiction if he becomes merged entirely with the essayist. In both capacities, Montague is a lover of life and of the things that matter in life—men and women, mountains and maps, roads and country-houses and cities and books.

Were it possible to avoid rank blasphemy and yet at the same time to suggest that war is not entirely wanton waste, some measure of such satisfaction might be felt in regard to "Disenchantment" and its pendant, "Fiery Particles." John Masefield's "Gallipoli" has celebrated in prose of rare quality the imperishable deeds that British men did in these latter times close by the ancient fields of Troy. Stacy Aumonier has provided a few glimpses of the reactions of war upon the English soldier, and upon a phlegmatic English farm-labourer (in a story[1] which is true to human fundamentals, however fantastic it may be in its choice of events). But it has fallen to C. E. Montague to open up the soul and the inmost heart of some million and more embittered men, who will not in this life fully recover whatever ideals they may once have held as to human nature in the mass. In this respect, the two books considered here are probably unique in literature. They are a portent and a sign indicating the presence of a volcano which is seething rather too near the surface for general comfort;

[1] *A Source of Irritation* (in "The Love-a-Duck").

they constitute one more sign that there are men abroad, and women too, who desire to "put it beyond any doubt that they don't think all is well with the world."

Literary merit or the absence of literary merit is apt to look somewhat ludicrously unimportant in relation to the *content* of certain books. The Bible is full of marvellously beautiful prose; but that, comparatively, is a minor matter. Shakespeare wrote exquisite poetry—but his poetry had a significance which is not confined to appreciation of beauty in verse form. C. E. Montague's two war books are true literature; but literature has other connotations than are embraced in the critical jargon which speaks of technique and matter and form and style and characterization and plot. With dutiful attention and suitable surprise it has been remarked in these pages that our author may sink so low as to end a sentence with a preposition! Secure, therefore, in the sense of his major duties fulfilled in that direction, a critic might go on to suggest tentatively, in a closing word, that misplaced prepositions may, after all, weigh light in the balance as against the travail of a man's soul.

Chapter Twenty Anton Tchehov—a Digression

RAPID developments in science and mechanical invention, and the hard facts of economic pressure, have done much to foster a cosmopolitan spirit in English breasts; and in the third decade of the twentieth century, old unneighbourly pride in our sea-girt isolation is dying a lingering but certain death. Politicians and merchants are only now learning, in the primary school of experience, what poets in particular and imaginative artists in general have known as a commonplace during hundreds of years past: that no nation, no people, can live unto itself alone. Variously from Italy, from France, from Arabia, from Germany, from Scandinavia, from India, Russia, Czecho-Slovakia, there has come to us an intermittent flow of ideas which poets and musicians and novelists and painters and dramatists have readily assimilated, with consequences important in their own works, and in the development of English art. Out from England, concurrently, ideas have gone with power to other nations, building up a world-wide intellectual commonalty which may yet become powerful enough to withstand political wreckers.

Putting aside other foreign influences upon English literature of the past and present, it is *l'affaire Tchehov* that demands attention so far as the contemporary short story is concerned. Who-

ever first said in public that Katherine Mansfield was a disciple of Tchehov, bears a heavy responsibility, since almost everyone has come to assume that without the Russian dramatist and story-writer there would have been no Katherine Mansfield. To discuss the justice, or the inaccuracy, or the partiality, of that view can lead only to unproductive controversy. Assertions have been made from the several view-points, and in each there is at least a modicum of truth. And as there is assumed to have been strong Tchehovian influence not only upon Katherine Mansfield but upon several other writers also, it should be serviceable to distinguish some typical characteristics in the Russian writer's stories—leaving the following chapter to suggest the extent or limitation of their influence upon the author of " Bliss."

As a preliminary, it is necessary to define what connotation the word *influence* should be made to bear, in its literary application. John Galsworthy has testified that he was profoundly influenced in his early work by Turgeniev and Tolstoy ; while it is felt by many readers that certain germinal ideas subsequently cultivated by H. G. Wells can also be found in Tolstoy ; but in regard to both Galsworthy and Wells it would be rashly speculative to isolate particular passages as representing specific instances of Russian influence. On the other hand, it might sometimes be easy to point to passages which do definitely suggest such influence. For example, it is almost impossible to read Tchehov without halting frequently to ponder upon some speech which reads like " pure H. G. Wells "—our

instinctive assumption being, of course, really the opposite : namely, that a good deal in H. G. Wells is " pure Tchehov " ! How many readers of modern fiction would be prepared to say, with any degree of inward assurance, whether the following passage is Tchehov or Wells ?—

" To be one of the chosen, to serve eternal truth, to stand in the ranks of those who could make mankind worthy of the kingdom of God some thousands of years sooner—that is, to free men from some thousands of years of unnecessary struggle, sin, and suffering ; to sacrifice to the idea everything—youth, strength, health ; to be ready to die for the common weal—what an exalted, what a happy lot !

When seemingly parallel passages may be gathered from the works of writers in different countries, it appears a little too naïve to assume at once the operation of direct and conscious influence. May it not be said with an equal show of plausibility (and no doubt with a fuller measure of truth) that such parallelisms belong to the general flux of ideas which marks particular generations, even though a whole continent or an ocean intervenes between the places in which those ideas are expressed ? Most people circumstanced as the majority are circumstanced to-day—with few opportunities for activity or wide personal experience—represent the conglomerate product of all the books they have ever read. It is a great pity that we cannot be entirely ourselves, that our minds must

be a patchwork of a thousand and one other minds. But were men and women ever entirely themselves? How much of, say, Euripides' mind consisted in a patchwork of mythology, though carried on a groundwork of imperishable fabric woven by himself? Shakespeare knew men who had been to a feast of languages and stolen the scraps; and though we travel the world over, we inevitably become composite creatures, intellectual mosaics made up of pieces gathered here, gathered there. What we can perhaps determine is the individual pattern; the material is often imposed upon us, willy-nilly.

In our present concern as to literary influences, then, it is no matter of determining whether Galsworthy is Turgeniev-possessed, or Wells Tolstoy-possessed, or Katherine Mansfield Tchehov-possessed. Influence of the kind in question is usually exercised in a pervasive or distributive manner, not in an obsessive: some direction of thought, some colouring of outlook, some shading of expression, some moulding of form. To pursue an unsatisfactory and inexact metaphor—yet one that comes usefully to hand—if the mosaic which is Tchehov could be laid side by side with the mosaic which is Katherine Mansfield, it is highly improbable that the completed designs would be seen as identical. A segment here and a segment there might stand out as similar in colour or in texture; and, conceivably, that would be as far as likeness extends.

The reader's approach to Tchehov may be made by one of three main avenues: (1) that chosen by Tchehov himself; (2) that processionally instituted

by his enthusiastic admirers; (3) that painfully followed by the majority of English readers.

Tchehov's approach to his own work and to the work of some Russian contemporaries, is suggested by a passage in a letter written in 1892:

"Let me remind you that the writers who we say are for all time or are simply good, and who intoxicate us, have one common and very important characteristic: they are going towards something and are summoning you towards it, too, and you feel, not with your mind but with your whole being, that they have some object, just like the ghost of Hamlet's father, who did not come and disturb the imagination for nothing. . . . And we? We! *We paint life as it is, but beyond that—nothing at all. . . . We have neither immediate nor remote aims, and in our soul there is a great empty space. We have no politics, we do not believe in revolution, we have no God, we are not afraid of ghosts, and I personally am not afraid even of death and blindness. One who wants nothing, hopes for nothing, and fears nothing, cannot be an artist.*

"*. . . You think I am clever. Yes, I am at least so far clever as not to conceal from myself my disease and not to deceive myself, and not to cover up my own emptiness with other people's rags. . . .*"

Before Tchehov could reproduce life as it was, he had to dissect it, and to understand its anatomy. In dissecting and anatomizing, he found that Russian life in his day was an organism afflicted with the disease of which he speaks. Therefore, to paint

the life necessitated portraying the disease—the disease to which William Gerhardi has applied the inevitable word "futility."[1] Without question, Tchehov was greater than those with "neither immediate nor remote aims"; greater than those in whose souls there was a "great empty space," although he voluntarily identified himself with them.

Recognizing this, however, it still seems doubtful whether Tchehov would have cared to go all the way with those who have acclaimed his genius in terms bespeaking generous and unmeasured enthusiasm. It is among the younger generation that he has aroused greatest interest in England, and his fame has been published most eloquently by Middleton Murry and William Gerhardi. The former quotes (in *Some Thoughts on Tchehov*[2]) the letter from which the passage above has been reproduced, but the burden of Murry's comments is that this Russian "is the only great modern artist in prose"—the stress being definitely placed upon the adjective "modern." Later, the critic suggests that Tchehov's unremitting aim was to "squeeze the slave out of himself" and to wage "a war of extermination against the lie in the soul of himself, and by necessary implication in others, also." The position for Middleton Murry is this: that Tchehov belongs to the new generation, our generation, even the generation that will be to-morrow; that these generations offer to the literary artist "the infinitely complex material of the modern mind

[1] "Futility: a Novel on Russian Themes."
[2] "Aspects of Literature."

and soul" ; and that Tchehov handles this material with the sublimated skill of a perfect artist :

"He had been saturated in all the disillusions which we regard as peculiarly our own, and every quality which is distinctive of the epoch of consciousness in which we are living now is reflected in him—and yet, miracle of miracles, he was a great artist."

Middleton Murry represents the second way (characterized above) of approach to Tchehov. He regards Tchehov as "*the* hero of our time," presumably upon the ground that the Russian is the physician-artist aiming to cure the disease of modern society by the preventive measure of describing it in precise terms. Some doubt here creeps into our minds, as to whether modern critics are not themselves aggravating the disease which Tchehov so brilliantly diagnosed : aggravating it by persistent reiteration of the statement that the contemporary mind and soul are "infinitely complex." Is not the cultured human mind as complex or as simple as it chooses to believe itself to be ? And would not some recent appreciative criticism have created, in the master himself, a fear that the prevailing Tchehov cult may be making epidemic throughout the Western world the disease of futility which, in his life-time, was more or less peculiar to Russia ?

Those innumerable English readers who have been referred to as approaching Tchehov by a painful path, are troubled by two main and deep-reaching difficulties. Having read one or more stories or plays by this writer, they inquire per-

plexedly, "But what is it all about? What does it all mean?" As the plays are even more fluid in outline than the stories, these latter may present less difficulty if the questions, as put, are first replied to as touching the plays. Allan Monkhouse once wrote in reference to Tchehov's plays: "They are all expositions of that Russian futility, of society in a state of disintegration, which came to an end in tragic revolution." The characters in a Tchehov play wander in and out upon the stage, and give utterance to words which often do not seem to embody any tangible or coherent idea. Time and again, the spectator is almost in despair because he can find nothing to grip. What *is* it all about? The conviction is slowly borne in upon the reader or the spectator, that perhaps a sense of meaninglessness is exactly what Tchehov intended to suggest. If it had been protested to the author, "My good man, but this doesn't mean anything," most probably he would have answered: "That's just the very soul of the tragi-comedy I am putting before you. Here is a picture of my people, leading lives which did *not* mean anything. Here is modern Russian society in a state of disintegration—dropping into shapelessness, as a block of ice in sunshine." Or, again, Tchehov might have replied: "No, it doesn't mean anything. I am simply giving you an authentic representation of a slice of human life; and, on the whole, most lives don't mean anything that can be nicely rounded-off and completed in the record of a few days or a few weeks."

That suggestion of incompleteness approximates to a universal truth. A day, a month, a year, a

decade of any individual life, if presented through a literary medium, would rarely yield any semblance of consistent meaning. And if the puzzled student should insist upon deducing some stated moral from Tchehov, he might consider the words used by Ann Leete in Granville Barker's play[1] (a Tchehovian piece, surely!): "We've all been in too great a hurry getting civilized. False dawn. I mean to go back." Tchehov's people, for the greater part, are too futile even to see the need of retracing their steps; they drift on—bemused, asking not whither nor why.

Although Tchehov is a supreme realist, his realism is quite unlike the representations of reality found in earlier writers. Realism had been taken to mean something essentially hard, with grim and sombre formal outlines. The difficulty which had faced the realists was that "literature must have form" whereas "life has none."[2] "Life, because it has aspects innumerable, seems blurred and devoid of all form." Until Tchehov broke with tradition, literature could not, presumptively, be content with blurred outlines, nor could it dispense with form. It had to present at least a semblance of beginning, middle, and end, with some endeavour after the proportionate adjustment of parts in this tripartite construction. Tchehov proceeded to carry realism to its final and logical expression, so that there is in his work no attempt to "begin" in the technical sense, and no undertaking to end. Upon the reader's consciousness Tchehov projects

[1] *The Marrying of Ann Leete.*

[2] William Gerhardi, "Anton Chehov," p. 108.

certain appearances—a strip torn from a living-picture film. It is what it is; nothing more.

We resist innovations so strongly, that, following centuries of literature written in the *beginning—middle—end* tradition, we demand that all writers shall conform to that tradition; and we are impatient at any demand that we shall test for ourselves the validity and implied immutability of traditional methods in relation to modern needs.

What we instinctively *expect* in a story, as contrasted with what Tchehov actually gives us, is exemplified by *A Doctor's Visit.* When, after a journey, the doctor arrives at the country house to which he has been summoned in haste, and finds the whispering women crowded in the passage, we expect something extraordinary, perhaps something thrilling, perhaps even a murder! But the patient is only a slightly neurotic and hysterical girl. Disappointed in our expectations thus far, there is some revival of sentimental interest when, discussing her symptoms with the doctor, Liza says: "I hear sympathy in your voice; it seemed to me as soon as I saw you that I could tell you all about it." At least, we may think, the doctor will propose to Liza before he goes back to town. Yet no! the morning comes and the doctor's visit ends by his driving to the station and thoroughly enjoying the sunny morning. Whatever we may care to term it, the *plot*, or *situation*, or *episode* can be completely set forth in one brief sentence: "A doctor visits a hysterical girl-patient." All that Tchehov purposes to do, is to represent one day in the life of that girl—a purpose which postulates

the representation, also, of the environment in which the girl lives. That environment embraces a number of other human beings, of course; and realism demands that the author shall provide character-sketches—psychologically true—of these others. One among them is Liza's mother (the family belongs to the wealthy manufacturing class), and she is portrayed in all her futility in this paragraph:

"She, her mother, had reared her and brought her up, spared nothing, and devoted her whole life to having her daughter taught French, dancing, music; had engaged a dozen teachers for her; had consulted the best doctors, kept a governess. And now she could not make out the reason of these tears, why there was all this misery, she could not understand, and was bewildered; and she had a guilty, agitated, despairing expression, as though she had omitted something very important, had left something undone, had neglected to call in somebody—and whom, she did not know. . . ."

French, dancing, music; but no human companionship: the trimmings with which life can be embroidered, but no basic life to carry the adornment!

Tchehov proposed to himself, as essential in any balanced human life, the studied cultivation of indifferentism; and, indeed, he seems to have realised it in an attitude of pitiless aloofness toward numbers of his fictional characters. Not always does he wholly maintain the attitude, however—pity

will keep breaking-in upon him; and although he frequently creates the illusion of absolute indifference, on the other hand he often contrives to put into a story some element which moves the reader to pity. It might be said, with an appearance of truth, that Tchehov is entirely indifferent as to Liza in *A Doctor's Visit*; yet he makes us aware of the girl as a pitiably desolate and isolated figure. Is it probable that the author was able powerfully to convey to the reader what he himself did not feel? Nevertheless, in the greater number of the stories, he certainly suggests his own emotional divorcement from the incidents recorded.

When pity does break-in, however, one begins to see how closely Tchehov actually allies himself with his characters. In *The Darling* he creates a woman who, mentally, is nothing more than a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. She has no thoughts of her own; she must take on the mental vesture of the person with whom she is most intimate at the moment. An impossible, maddening creature, we are inclined to think—for about three-quarters of the story; but when, after being twice widowed and subsequently deserted, she devotes all she has to Sasha, her deserter's schoolboy son, pity wells up in Tchehov like a flood as he gives his closing glimpses of this foolish but most pitiable figure:

"She would begin talking about the teachers, the lessons and the school books, saying just what Sasha said.

"At three o'clock they had dinner together: in

the evening they learned their lessons together and cried. When she put him to bed, she would stay a long time making the cross over him and murmuring a prayer; then she would go to bed and dream of that far-away misty future when Sasha would finish his studies and become a doctor or an engineer, would have a big house of his own with horses and a carriage, would get married and have children. . . . She would fall asleep still thinking of the same thing, and tears would run down her cheeks from her closed eyes, while the black cat lay purring beside her: 'Mrr, mrr, mrr.' . . ."

Whatever pity is vouchsafed to Olenka, the darling, is as nothing compared with that showered upon Anyuta, the "thin little brunette of five-and-twenty" who shares a filthy furnished room with a medical student; working with her needle to get money, sitting half-clothed in the freezing room while serving as an anatomical model, shivering and turning blue with cold; being lent as an artists' model to the medical student's penniless friends—

"Anyuta had come back from the artist's, worn out and exhausted. Standing so long as a model had made her face look thin and sunken, and her chin sharper than ever."

And when the student says that he is tired of her:

"Anyuta put on her coat again, in silence wrapped up her embroidery in paper, gathered together her needles and thread: she found the screw of paper

with the four lumps of sugar in the window, and laid it on the table by the books.

" ' That's . . . your sugar . . . ' she said softly, and turned away to conceal her tears.

" ' Why are you crying ? ' asked Klotchkov."

The force of pity in *Anyuta* is, after all, no more than a corollary of the ameliorative service which Tchehov endeavoured to render in many directions in his own personal actions. He worked for the benefit of others, deprecating publicity, refusing reward, and all the time caring for those dependent upon him in his own family.

Humour enters largely into his stories[1]; but farcical though it sometimes becomes, it is rarely light-hearted humour—there is usually a sardonic tang in it. In this respect he may be compared with J. M. Synge, the Irish dramatist—and, indeed, *The Playboy of the Western World* is in other ways reminiscent of Tchehov.

The difficulties appertaining to Tchehov's method have been made much less baffling for the general reader since William Gerhardi wrote " Futility." In that novel, the English reader finds himself realizing (probably for the first time) that books dealing with Russian life cannot be considered by Western standards of criticism, because there is no analogy between Russian life and Western life. For the Russian : Life is. He does not care to add anything to that primal fact. We, however, are insistent to qualify or amplify the mere statement of fact, and to pronounce : Life—is *good* ; is *bad* ;

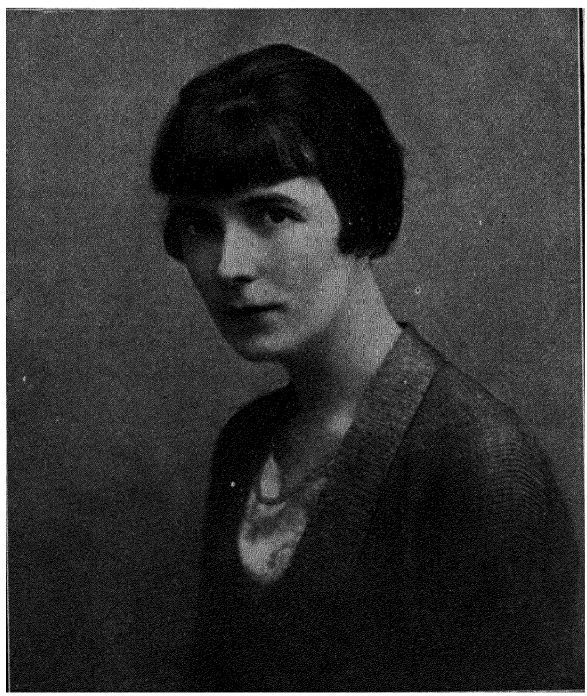
[1] See *Ariadne* and *The Black Monk.*

is *duty*; is *cruel*; is *beautiful*; and so on. Just as we insist upon codifying life, so we insist upon endowing literature with "meaning," and so we clamour for completion and a full-orbed rendering of life. That is what we shall never discover in Tchehov. "One of the chief delights of reading Chehov," says Gerhardi,[1] "is the discovery that our vaguely apprehended, half suspected thoughts concerning the fluidness, complexity, and elusiveness of life have been confirmed articulately and in print. It is as if all along we had suspected that the private and unnoticed little things in life were the important ones; but had thought it necessary to present ourselves to our fellows in a stiff intellectual shirt-front. . . . There is in Chehov's[2] works that fluid undercurrent by which we recognize existence, because we see that he at least did not simplify life in order to round off his picture of it (the loose-end nature of it being just the picture he has set out to portray). . . ."

The loose-end school of fiction is unlikely to control the English genius; but its curriculum is susceptible of interesting adaptation, and it is in this connexion that Katherine Mansfield is illuminating.

[1] "Anton Chehov," p. 14.

[2] There is no general agreement as to the transliteration of Russian names into English. Constance Garnett's usage (Tchehov) has been followed in the body of this chapter, but in quoting from Gerhardi his modification (Chehov) is preserved.



KATHERINE MANSFIELD.

Chapter Twenty-one

Katherine Mansfield

"LORD, make me crystal clear for Thy light to shine through." When Katherine Mansfield wrote those poignant words in her journal in November, 1921, she was labouring under one of her "bad spells," as she called them, when nothing seemed to go right with her art. Little more than one year was thereafter to pass before her death, at only thirty-four years of age; and during the intervening months she had suffered repeated bad spells. At times she threatened to give up writing altogether; while at other times she admitted that in the future she would want more than anything else to write books—adding, significantly, that they would be *different* books. On that word *different* it will be enlightening to dwell awhile.

Katherine Mansfield's first book of short stories, "Bliss," came out in 1920. At once she was acclaimed as a new master in the short-story art; and the critics labelled her as the finest practitioner in English of the peculiar expository manner which Tchehov invented. Her book reached comparative popularity, running into several editions, but there is little doubt that readers in general were puzzled and disappointed—in so far as they had sufficient individuality to breast the current of trained critical opinion. In the second year after "Bliss," "The

Garden Party" was published; and soon after that the author died—being lamented as one who had given very great promise in the literature of our generation.

Between "Bliss" and "The Garden Party," Katherine Mansfield had already become "different." She had been at grips with her material, and had learned the way to make it perfectly responsive to her art of presentation. She brought her material under so perfect control that often it seems as if she is herself no longer attached to it, in the way of exercising any directive influence. It has been said in the preceding chapter that Tchehov's stories are like a torn fragment of cinematograph film projected upon the white screen of the reader's mind. The figure presupposes the active existence of a projective agency—the author himself, as the operator of the lantern. The very important difference between this method and that which Katherine Mansfield employed in "The Garden Party" volume, must be sought in another figure, to be placed over against the simile already used. Katherine Mansfield's later stories have the effect as of a plummet dropped into the pool of human consciousness: she opens her hand to let the plummet fall into the still depths of some ideal reader's consciousness. The story starts at that moment; and its purpose is to represent the eddies which thereafter spread upon the pool—before the waters lapse again into stillness.

The difference between Tchehov and Katherine Mansfield is that the Russian acts as an operative and directive agency, while the Englishwoman acts

as a propulsive agency. All that Katherine Mansfield seems to do is to make her plummet out of some human situation and then to allow it to drop. Tchehov, on the contrary, is always obviously working at the lantern, for it would cease to project its pictures if he were separated from it. The separation in Katherine Mansfield's case is purely illusory, of course. Nevertheless it is the illusion of a fine and sensitively wrought art.

With the aim of objectifying her method and making it more lucidly evident, let a typical " human situation " be selected, altogether outside her books. (The remark might suitably be made, in passing, that one effect which Katherine Mansfield's stories have upon readers' minds is that the world is suddenly seen to be teeming with situations which she could have utilized.)

Sitting alone on a seat on the upper deck of a closed tramcar is a shabby and untidy man who smells strongly of fried fish. At the next halt, when the car fills up, a rather stiff and angular woman takes the vacant place beside the odoriferous passenger. She is well seated before becoming aware of her fellow-traveller, but then immediately she becomes stiffer, and bristles like a disturbed cat. She cranes her neck in several directions, hoping to see an unoccupied seat in another part of the car—without result. Obviously, as the journey continues, her each particular hair is preparing to stand on end : yet, equally obviously, she is very careful to avoid attracting the man's attention to her discomfort. She tries to forget the reactions of her sense-organs by concentrating upon the

morning paper; a poor attempt, however, for the observer can almost see her mind seething with irritation. A little distance further, and the man gets down. The car goes on; but the woman remains perched on the outside edge of the seat—she does not move to the more comfortable inner berth which is now vacant.

Here, then, is suppository material for a Katherine Mansfield story. In the old meaning of such terms, it has neither *beginning* nor *end*. It has no sort of completeness. It starts with something falling *plop* into the observer's consciousness; he becomes aware of the woman's bristling uneasiness, and then, eddy after eddy spreads abroad upon his mind as the little comedy is played out; afterwards the eddies become less and less evident, until either the mind becomes still once more, or some other impact gives rise to a further series of eddies, obliterating the first.

A Katherine Mansfield story—in her later style—begins (as it were) with a *plop*, as the human situation drops into the reader's consciousness. Then, it seems, the author withdraws herself entirely. We are not in any way aware of her as standing upon the brink of our consciousness. She may not have received the answer to her prayer: "Lord, make me crystal clear for Thy light to shine through," but she had been endowed with a gift which, for her self-appointed purpose, was equally valuable—the gift to efface herself so that her own personality cast no intrusive shadow.

Any emphasis here laid upon the conviction of a distinct difference between the two volumes,

"Bliss" and "The Garden Party," marks the desire to stress the development which had occurred in Katherine Mansfield in two years or less. Much evidence might be adduced from the earlier volume for the purpose of proving Tchehovian influence; but in "The Garden Party" she had grown beyond Tchehov.

The story called *Bliss* out-Tchehov's Tchehov; so much so that the characters are themselves aware of their Tchehovian descent: futility *in excelsis*—and expensive futility at that. Commenting upon Russian affairs, Professor Phelps says: "One is appalled at the prodigious amount of nonsense that Russian wives and daughters are forced to bear from their talkative and ineffective heads of houses." Tchehov's husbands are indescribably fatuous in that regard, and so also are Katherine Mansfield's. Not only is there that pestiferous egoist, Stanley Burnell in *Prelude* and *At the Bay*—the cave-man *par excellence*; but, in *Bliss*, there is Harry Young, who specializes in smart and pithy remarks which seem to be born of a *liaison* between an Oscar Wilde epigram and the backchat of a guttersnipe.

Bliss is the history of an evening in the life of Bertha Young, a leisured woman who is feeling extraordinarily happy because the spring has got into her blood. She gives a small dinner-party that evening, one of her guests being a woman friend, Pearl Fulton. The hostess feels sure that her husband dislikes Miss Fulton, and as Bertha feels unusually ardent love for her husband that evening, she makes up her mind to tell him, after the guests are gone, how intimate is the friendship and affinity

of soul between herself and Pearl—to plead with him to try to like the woman better. When Miss Fulton goes into the hall to put on her coat, Bertha's husband follows to help her; Bertha remains in the drawing-room with another guest, but she happens to look through the open doorway into the hall:

"And she saw . . . Harry with Miss Fulton's coat in his arms and Miss Fulton with her back turned to him and her head bent. He tossed the coat away, put his hands on her shoulders and turned her violently to him. His lips said: 'I adore you,' and Miss Fulton laid her moonbeam fingers on her cheeks and smiled her sleepy smile. Harry's nostrils quivered, his lips curled back in a hideous grin while he whispered: 'To-morrow,' and with her eyelids Miss Fulton said: 'Yes.'"

Tchehovian, even super-Tchehovian, the earlier part of this story certainly is; but the end is neither Tchehov nor Katherine Mansfield: it is sheer cynicism and a negation of the subtle art that she was later to develop. It might conceivably be true to actual fact in some known individual instance, but that is no justification for its appearance in the form of literature. The author has carefully built up a background of beautiful things:

"The windows of the drawing-room opened on to a balcony overlooking the garden. At the far end, against the wall, there was a tall, slender pear tree in fullest, richest bloom; it stood perfect, as though becalmed against the jade-green sky. . . .

Down below, in the garden beds, the red and yellow tulips, heavy with flowers, seemed to lean upon the dusk."

And in order to show what a sun-drowsed luxuriating hedonist was Bertha Young, we are told of the extravagance to which her decorative sense ran, inside the house :

" There were tangerines and apples stained with strawberry pink. Some yellow pears, smooth as silk, some white grapes covered with a silver bloom and a big cluster of purple ones. These last she had bought to tone in with the new dining-room carpet. Yes, that did sound rather far-fetched and absurd, but it was really why she had bought them. She had thought in the shop : ' I must have some purple ones to bring the carpet up to the table.' "

Having lulled this purring woman into a sense of ecstatic physical well-being, having surrounded her with perfectly futile people whose conversation only makes her purr and pad with greater ecstasy, Katherine Mansfield shatters the poor creature and her world of illusion with one brutal smashing blow.

Again, in *Pictures*, some justification is given to those critics who allege that Katherine Mansfield's attitude is cruel and pitiless. Her bearing toward Miss Ada Moss is in no way malignant ; it is probable that her human feeling was the very antithesis of callousness ; but her literary atti-

tude is marked by positive indifference, which will of course seem to many to be akin to pitilessness.

Here it is that the "modern" writer joins issue with captious critics and readers—by deliberately asserting that it is no part of an artist's function to demonstrate emotional bias either for or against the characters portrayed. Without prejudice to the one view or the other, it is interesting to find that instances of perfect and persistent aloofness are very rare in literature. Tchehov and Katherine Mansfield may have set out to preserve a completely disinterested spirit in relation to their *dramatis personæ*; but Tchehov became intrigued emotionally with "the darling" and more definitely so with Anyuta. Katherine Mansfield *appears* as indifferent to Bertha Young as a slaughterman to an ox, and to Ada Moss as a *roué* to his plaything; but the woman herself—instinct with pity, as sensitive to pain as an exposed nerve—has entirely sloughed the literary veneer of indifference by the time she comes to *Life of Ma Parker*, *Miss Brill*, and *The Doll's House*.

To what is this change in Katherine Mansfield to be credited? Probably to her growing recognition that English Tchehovianism was a barren blind-alley; that however great Tchehov may have been in evolving a form of art precisely adjusted to his own diagnostic examination of Russian life, his method required to undergo a sea-change if it were to be utilized profitably and productively in English literature. Even in "Bliss" there are signs of doubt—if this passage of dialogue from

Psychology may be interpreted as embodying a personal utterance :

" ' I have been wondering very much lately whether the novel of the future will be a psychological novel or not. How sure are you that psychology *qua* psychology has got anything to do with literature at all ? '

" ' Do you mean you feel there's quite a chance that the mysterious non-existent creatures—the young writers of to-day—are simply trying to jump the psycho-analyst's claim ? '

" ' Yes, I do. And I think it's because this generation is just wise enough to know that it is sick, and to realize that its only chance of recovery is by going into its symptoms—making an exhaustive study of them—tracking them down—trying to get at the root of the trouble.'

" ' But, oh,' she wailed, ' what a dreadfully dismal outlook ! ' "

Was it not in the normal course of healthy reaction from this dreadfully dismal outlook that Katherine Mansfield should turn from Bertha Young to Ma Parker ; from Ada Moss to Miss Brill ? The exhaustive study of symptoms of social disintegration cannot represent in literature anything more than a species of wild oats ; or, at the best, a phase in decadent exquisiteness. It might be urged in defence of the method, that, on the whole, *Bliss* is a thing of beauty. There can be little validity in such an argument, however, for many fungoid and parasitic growths in a forest

are beautiful, but their surface beauty does not diminish their devilish power to poison and strangle. How many of those early Katherine Mansfield women are parasitic! And how many of the men are fungoid and poisonous! There is Beryl in *Prelude*, with her frustrate emotions; and Bertha, in *Bliss*, who buys grapes of a particular colour to live up to her new dining-room carpet! There is the stout gentleman in *Pictures* who "likes 'em firm and well-covered"; and Eddie Warren, the young poet (*Bliss*), always in a state of acute distress:

"'I have had such a *dreadful* experience with a taxi-man; he was *most* sinister. I couldn't get him to *stop*. The *more* I knocked and called the *faster* he went. And *in* the moonlight this *bizarre* figure with the *flattened* head *crouching* over the *lit-tle* wheel. . . . I saw myself *driving* through Eternity in a *timeless* taxi.'"

Is it any wonder if Katherine Mansfield felt that sanity demanded that she should get among real people—even though real people may have to suffer abominably?

Ma Parker, the charwoman who cleans the literary gentleman's flat once a week, is at one and the same time a human derelict and an angel of pain with an aureole of glory. Every ugly thing about her, every indignity she has to endure, does but seem to add another gem to the crown that befits her and can alone recompense her suffering. She is a "poor old bird" and "a hag" to the literary

gentleman; to Lennie, her stricken grandchild, she is love and refuge.

Katherine Mansfield's power to efface herself from the reader's vision serves her in excellent stead for the presentation of character. We do not feel that we are being given a "version" of Ma Parker, but that here *is* Ma Parker—this she was and none other. We see through her eyes; think through her poor perplexed mind; speak through her mouth; suffer through her spirit. Nor is it with Ma Parker alone that we are enabled to do this. Katherine Mansfield places her readers in an equally favoured position for understanding Miss Brill, and the two outcast children in *The Doll's House*; while other instances might be specified.

Ma Parker has just buried Lennie, thus suffering the latest and heaviest among the many heavy blows she had received from life. The literary gentleman wishes to be sympathetic, but he fails most lamentably, because he cannot establish contact; there is no plane upon which he and Ma Parker can stand together as upon common ground. She might say, with Hermione: "You speak a language that I understand not." The literary gentleman gropes painfully toward a common language. He has heard that the poor enjoy funerals; so "I hope the funeral was a—a—success," he ventured to say. But Ma Parker was not that sort:

"[She] gave no answer. She bent her head and hobbled off to the kitchen, clasping the old

fish-bag that held her cleaning things and an apron and a pair of felt shoes."

For Katherine Mansfield, in the last years, one mainspring of human tragedy lay in this inability to establish contact between individual and individual, between class and class. People somehow fail to get at one another, even when they try. Usually they do not begin to try; on the contrary, they shut themselves up in their own exclusive social cages—and thus the *genus* snob has evolved and grown prolific. The snob is a devastating creature at any time or age, in any place. It is not the grown-up snobs who are most appalling in these stories, however, but the snobs in the making (for example, the children in *The Doll's House*—with the shining exception of Kezia). Cultivation of snobbery means the perpetuation of barriers which goodwill finds it almost impossible to demolish. So the literary gentleman is compelled to return to his books, while Ma Parker hugs her sorrow:

"Ma Parker threw the counterpane over the bed. No, she simply couldn't think about it. It was too much—she'd had too much in her life to bear. She'd borne it up till now, she'd kept herself to herself, and never once had she been seen to cry. Never by a living soul. Not even her own children had seen Ma break down. She'd kept a proud face always. But now! Lennie gone—what had she? She had nothing. He was all she'd got from life, and now he was took too. . . . 'What have I done?' said old Ma Parker. 'What

have I done?' . . . Her misery was so terrible that she pinned on her hat, put on her jacket and walked out of the flat like a person in a dream. . . .

"Oh, wasn't there anywhere where she could hide and keep herself to herself and stay as long as she liked, not disturbing anybody, and nobody worrying her? Wasn't there anywhere in the world where she could have her cry out—at last?

"Ma Parker stood, looking up and down. The icy wind blew out her apron into a balloon. And now it began to rain. There was nowhere."

A unique *intensity* was what Katherine Mansfield had won through to at the end. Whatever she was aiming to do came to be done with naked power and amazing concentration. Intensity—of pity; intensity of physical vision ("The icy wind blew out her apron into a balloon"); intensity of beauty (*At the Bay*—especially sections i, vii, and the final paragraph); intensity of understanding; intensity of indignation (*e.g.* against snobbery in *The Doll's House*); intensity of artistic rendering (note the exquisite technical structure of *At the Bay*, embracing the round of a whole day from "very early morning" to late night; mark also the suggestive division of the story into twelve sections); intensity of verbal expression—style (observe the last sentence in *Ma Parker*, "There was nowhere," and consider the pregnant emotional content of those three words).

Katherine Mansfield's best work makes it scarcely an extravagance to express the opinion that she

spoke with overwhelming force in fewer and simpler words than any other writer belonging to the younger generation; and that if she had lived, she would have taken a high place among the most tragic writers of our time.

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