Book Reviews

Studies of Women

MRS. THOMPSON. By W. B. Maxwell. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

INTRUSION. By Beatrice Kean Seymour. New York: Thomas Seltzer.

SACRIFICE. By Stephen French Whitman. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

ADRIENNE TONER. By Anne Douglas Sedgwick. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

"MRS. THOMPSON" was first published in 1911. For anything we find in it, the date might be twenty years earlier. The central figure is, to be sure, a business woman. But she is not the cold and confident type recently portrayed in American fiction, the she who habitually holds her own, "and then some," in a circumambient world of males. Mrs. Thompson is a marvel precisely because on the surface, and in deep strata beneath the surface, she is the Victorian female purely. As a "sport" of this type, she possesses the genius for affairs which enables her to wrest success out of most unpromising conditions. She has all the sensibility, the respect for maleness, the shrinking from open conflict, of the "nice" woman of her period. But she has also an unerring business sense, as well as a sound strain of character or, if you like, common sense, to fall back on at need. Twice romance and marriage make a fool of her, but not quite a consumed fool. Her triumph over the insufferable Marsden is beautifully timed and carried through. Never has American story-teller excelled the carefully hoarded surprise of the denouement. It is a good tale skilfully told. Some of us may be guiltily conscious of an especial pleasure in it as a story of another clime and time. It frees us for the moment from our anguished preoccupation with the inconclusive amours of young and slightly gallicized Britain, and of still younger and considerably hyphenated America. It takes me back to the friendly, homelike England of twenty years ago, when snobbery was a safe if not unchallenged institution, and a woman was a woman, for a' that. Mrs. Thompson, as a woman of property and master of a successful business, wallows rightfully in adulation; obsequiousness is her due. We grieve when she seems to have lost the right to it, and rejoice when she gloriously reëstablishes that right in the eyes of all men. Delightful and satisfying also is the thorough paying off of the unmitigated cad Marsden. It takes an English story-teller to give a villain all that is coming to him. Now we love Trollope's habit of laying in wait for his Proudies and his Crosbies, and when the hour is ripe doing unto them all that we should like to do. Trollope's disciple Maxwell, a scribe so gentle otherwise, has the same priceless talent. Terrible fate, to be a pushing curate in Archibald's parish!

"Intrusion" is a story which has received the most flattering notices from

a race of English reviewers not less generous than our own in the use of cant phrases and superlatives. I don't quite see what the excitement is about in this instance. "Intrusion" appears to be a well-built, well-written example of a very usual kind of thing: the intimate study of a group of modern young English people who wonder what the dickens life is all about and are much at the mercy of "sex." In this case the mysteries of life and sex are especially embodied in the girl Roberta. And there is an effective central thread of motive in the idea of her fatal influence as an intruder, on all the persons who legitimately belong in the Suffield family connection. "Isn't it a *hell* of a day?" says Roberta, by way of opening speech. The query is in sufficiently good form, according to the usage of well-bred Suffields of the after-war period. Her essential vulgarity reveals itself in other ways than to the eye and ear. For her voice is charming, and her beauty a miracle. The reader must believe in the miracle or the story is flat. This is something of a feat, since he cannot hear the golden voice or behold the golden beauty; and Roberta's reported speech is harmlessly trivial and her conduct depressingly underbred. She is a rose without sweetness, a star without warmth. Sex is her coolly wielded weapon; she vamps without a thrill. Yet sex betrays her in the end, snuffs out her beauty and her life together, greatly to the advantage of surviving Suffields. . . . Well, either you feel a story like this, or you don't. I cannot quite make myself feel that Roberta is "good enough," real and meaning enough, apart from her type, to justify all the pother. So it is with much of our loudly lauded, ephemeral fiction; like "Main Street," "If Winter Comes," or "The Beautiful and Damned," for instance.

"Sacrifice" is a fiction of more rarefied "literary" quality. Its matter and manner are remote from the chatty and competent style of the current journalistic novel. It is as consciously atmospheric and stylistic as the work of the by no means unrecognized minority, Conrad and Cabell, Hergesheimer and Hewlett. It makes no attempt to disguise its solicitude for the right word and the desired effect, its concern with the just processes of art. It has a story to tell, and wishes to give that story every possible advantage in economy of structure and beauty of surface. It doesn't care to be a transcript of fact or a commentary on fact. If it is anything other than a story, it is a study of the modern neurasthenic woman, the hyper-civilized, painfully sensitive product of heredity and environment. Lilla's parents are a rich, pampered, neurotic pair of New Yorkers, the father a valetudinarian aesthete, the mother a fastidious dreamer. Theirs is "a house always rather dim, its shadows aglimmer with richness, and here and there a beam of light illuminating some flawless, precious object. It was a house of silent servants, of faces imprinted with

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a gracious weariness, of beautifully modulated low voices, of noble reticence. Yet all the while the place quivered from secret transports of anguish."

The rough fate of a railway collision releases them from their ingenious torments. The child Lilla is left to the care of an aunt, a "chastely fervent" maiden aunt, a puritan surrounded with rich treasures of pagan and mediaeval art, who "implanted in that little charge still more complexities of impulse—a greater sensitiveness to the lures of mortal beauty, together with her own recoil from all the ultimate consequences of that sensitiveness." So Lilla becomes a woman of vibrating and often warring sensibilities, a creature of abnormal and hardly definable beauty, with "the exceptional, agitating look—that softly fatal aspect—which is seen in those who are destined to extraordinary lives." Beside her has grown up a potential mate of her own sort, a youth as responsive as she to delicate impressions, as sophisticated and as unsatisfied. A union like her mother's seems in store for her. But there is another strain in her, a secret devotion to an ideal of robust manhood, embodied in Lawrence Teck, an explorer whom she does not see till years after she has fallen in love with his picture. So, it chances (and our story-teller does not blench before the word coincidence, as any realist properly must) he has been in love with hers. They meet, they wed; Teck is forced to return at once to his work in the African jungle. News comes presently of his death, and the world is empty for Lilla till, much later, the opportunity comes for her to serve the world as a handmaid of genius. Just as her sacrifice has brought her a sort of happiness and a half-oblivion of her old pain, Teck returns. She has gone through the form of marriage with her half-alive young composer. The truth will kill him: Teck can only disappear again into the jungle. But a third man is under Lilla's "fatal" spell. Through him comes her release from what is now a slavery, and with him she sets forth, the frail, coddled woman of the North, to find Teck in his festering jungle. What she finds there and how she finds it, the reader will wish to discover for himself. The tale as a tale is carefully welded and balanced, an eloquent romance of the conflict between the primitive and the effete in modern life.

The writer, like Mr. Hergesheimer, gets his effect of atmosphere largely through the piling up of minutiæ. These pages are full of *things*, and chiefly of exotic things. America—the America of Lilla and Cornelius Rysbroek, of Fifth Avenue and Westchester—is a place heavily decorated with the loot of distance and past time. Even the country house of healthy, golfing Fanny Brassfield is a museum: "Here and there, between chairs and sofas the arms of which seemed composed of half-melted ingots, appeared a baroque cabinet filled with small, precious objects.

Or from a creamy pedestal the marble features of some ancient sybarite regarded without surprise this modern richness based upon the past." There is frank artifice here, a cumulation of detail ministering, as in Poe or Hawthorne, to a single mood or impression, under the spell of which we are to accept a purely romantic action.

In "Adrienne Toner," we move upon an even higher plane of creative craftsmanship. Mrs. de Sélincourt, also, belongs to the distinguished minority of modern novelists who are first of all artists. The journalistic method has no more interest for her than the naturalistic method has. She doesn't want to lecture, with or without "slides." Nor is she satisfied to throw off impressions, scraps of ideas, theories, and incidents under the name of the novel. If she has a master, it is Henry James rather than H. G. Wells. Her American birth has given her something of James's sympathetic appreciation of the American abroad. This is what we used to call an "international" novel, before nations went out of fashion and internationals sought each other in marriage (more or less) as a matter of course. Adrienne and Mrs. Aldesey, the other woman of importance in the book, are both Americans. Mrs. Aldesey is a contented expatriate, escaped without scandal from an uncomfortable American marriage—or rather from an uncongenial American husband, and living alone, in quiet elegance and with devoted friends, in London. She is frail, faded, exquisite, complete in her kind—quite recognizably akin to the women who people the world of Henry James. Her best friend is Roger Oldmeadow, a London bachelor of taste, who lives in Chelsea on the Embankment, but cares neither for Whistler nor the Thames: "After Plato and Bach, Oldmeadow's passions were the rivers of France." He is, in short, the sort who may be so easily disposed of, by impassioned admirers of Mutt, Jeff, Babe Ruth, and the Bronx, as a "sissy."

To him, in the opening scene, comes "Barney" Chadwick, a good-humored, sensitive boy of twenty-nine, simple of mind and heart. The Chadwicks are country people. Barney wants Oldmeadow to put in the week-end at "Coldbrooks," more particularly to meet a new girl: "an interesting girl: American; very original and charming." Oldmeadow accepts, without enthusiasm, dislikes the girl at sight, finds her doubtfully original and not at all charming. She is well-bred, well-informed, but deals habitually in a sort of high flown moral patter which he resents actively, as he resents her instant dominance over the Chadwicks. They, in truth, are nice, opinionless, ineffective Britons, without very positive faith in anything, and secretly touched with the unease of the years before the war. Adrienne Toner is an egoist and a mystic. Immensely rich, perfectly self-contained, she is incapable of understanding doubt or fear in others, and goes about declaring a glad evangel which denies the reality of sin and pain. What Oldmeadow does not

grasp for a long time is a power in her which is independent of her sentimentality and sententiousness and all the fabric of self-deception upon which her smug philosophy is based. Her power of self-devotion and self-sacrifice, of fidelity to a single person, not her vague humanitarianism or her concrete tyranny, is what shapes her character and determines her conduct in the end.

I wish to give no more than this hint at the meaning of this extraordinary figure, out of whose repellent self-righteousness and egoism the artist creates, so moving and human a fellow-traveler along the hard road. The value of the story lies in the balance and blending of its central conception, its structure, and its style. It is a living and solid object, from which all traces of experiment and effort have been left behind in the workshop. Step by step, we are led to the sympathetic acceptance of an action which in less subtle handling would have seemed strained and inconclusive. If the final scene of Adrienne's physical parting with Oldmeadow is upon a plane of sheer mysticism, it is a mysticism free, at least, from taint of egotism or mere sentimentality. We believe enough in them both to believe that, in absence, "the thought of her would be strength to him always; as the thought of him and of his love would be strength to her."

H. W. BOYNTON