Book Reviews

Fashionable Anarchy

THE GLASS OF FASHION: SOME SOCIAL REFLECTIONS BY A GENTLEMAN WITH A DUSTER. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. $2.50.

ALMOST before the excitement aroused by "Mirrors of Downing Street" has died away, its author launches a second anonymous satire upon persons of note. This time it is not politicians and men of business, but two leaders of society—two elegant triflers of the *beau monde*—who are forced to see themselves as at least one merciless critic sees them. The "Gentleman with a Duster," having dusted the mirrors of statesmen, has applied his skill to polishing the glass of fashion. He selects two victims, Colonel Repington and Mrs. H. H. Asquith. The Diaries of the former and the Autobiography of the latter are used as a text for some pungent social reflections.

For this critic takes "Fashion" very seriously indeed. Manners he regards as no trifle, but as standing in the closest possible association with morals. The Gentleman with a Duster has no democratic illusions about each individual conscience "privately judging" conduct for itself. He declares his belief that there must be in every community a privileged class, to which the multitude will look up and by whose example it will be guided. "Revolution can do nothing but displace one authority by another." Thus everything depends on the character of those by whom the pattern is set. "By the term 'Fashion' I mean all those noisy, ostentatious, and frivolous people . . . who have scrambled onto the summit of England's national life, and who, setting the worst possible examples in morals and manners, are never so happy as when they are making people talk about them." The writer wants to have these ostentatious people either brought to a sense of their duties or expelled from the heights. We need above all things "a valid aristocracy."

The aristocracy whose habits of mind are revealed in the recent books by Colonel Repington and Mrs. Asquith is, in his view, anything but a valid one. He grants that the gossipy Diaries published in "The First World War" show much military insight. But he asks whether we might not have expected that those bulky volumes, written while Europe was passing through her years of agony, and presumably containing the deeper thoughts of the diarist at such a time, would exhibit at least here and there a trace of feeling for the Cause that was at stake. "Nowhere will you find a period or a sentence of which you could say 'There! That is what we fought for.'" We get instead flippancy and persiflage, coarse and at times indecent jesting. What occupied Colonel Repington's mind, what he thought suitable for recording at great length and publishing to the world, was the series of his luncheons and dinners, where he met ladies who "looked a picture"—decked out "in the most attractive widow's weeds imaginable" by a Paris firm that "makes a specialty of mourning for war widows." Colonel Repington recounts in his own forecast in 1917 that the war would continue for a long time. There seemed to him to be no reason for stopping, since the nations had come to count money no more than pebbles on a beach, since all of them would probably repudiate their debts at the close, since so many persons were growing rich as profiteers, and since "the ladies liked being without their husbands." This sort of entry by the diarist rouses his critic to a moral fury.

Nor does Mrs. Asquith fare better at his hands. As he reads her character in her Autobiography, Margot typifies "that insurgent class of the commercial rich which broke into society soon after the second Reform Bill, and during the years of King Edward's reign completely overwhelmed it." She is not without good qualities—generosity, kindness, freedom from snobbishness. "She is a devoted wife, an exemplary mother, and she believes in God." But she is the sort of new woman who aims to be sensational, to get herself discussed, to be admired for her "social courage." In order to show this last trait she flings herself "against society's spiritual paling of modesty, self-effacement, restraint, and delicacy." Hence her extraordinary tale of how she shocked people in her girlhood, of her successive amorous adventures, of intimate things—now familiar to all readers of her memoirs—which a feminine tradition of reticence would have forbidden her to mention, but which it delights her as an anti-conventionalist to trumpet to the world. "She seems to me definitely in arms against all those graces which are the very sinew of good manners." Then, with the instinct of the satirist for effective contrasts, the writer brings before us other leaders of society who have kept the sinew of good manners intact and unstrained.

One can easily anticipate some criticism to which this book will be subjected. It will be said that the habits and opinions, the epigrams and mannerisms and tastes of Mrs. Asquith and Colonel Repington are their own concern, that this savage dissecting of them by an anonymous satirist is a piece of intrusiveness, that the ephemeral popularity of such "mirror writing" is like the vogue of scandalous gossip among the vulgar and calls for the same discountenancing by the refined. Some will object that it is hypercritical to blame an old soldier because he does not preach in his diaries, or a woman of fashion because she is obviously thinking much about the figure she cuts before the world. Is there not even a healthy tone of candor in these two straightforward people, who do not—like so many others—pretend a higher sentiment than they feel, but just reveal themselves unblushingly as they are? Not a few will contend that the Gentleman with a Duster makes far too much fuss about them both, and that nothing which either of them can say or do has the social and national consequence here attached to it. Let us grant, it will be said, that one of them has perpetrated a rather nasty and spiteful sort of memoir, betraying sometimes the mood of a disappointed woman and at other times an almost incredible degree of bad taste such as we regret to find in any woman writer at all. Let us grant that the other has exhibited himself as a purveyor of jokes often silly and sometimes a little unclean, on occasions which made the joker in a special degree unseemly, inflicting upon us a set of diaries to show how he preserved the tone of the *vieux garçon* throughout the most tragic period of the world. But, it will be asked, do such books on this account call for more than a passing exclamation of resentment and disgust?

Some of these censures upon the Gentleman with a Duster have been heard ever since the appearance of "Mirrors of Downing Street"; others are sure to be provoked by "The Glass of Fashion." To the present critic they appear very largely to miss the mark. Mrs. Asquith and Colonel Repington have challenged the world. They have drawn most elaborate pictures of themselves, on the obvious assumption that their personalities are of sufficient interest to justify these pretentious volumes. The observer is thus invited to say what he thinks of the two figures that masquerade before him, and he may give his judgment with just as much propriety under a pseudonym as with his signature. The Gentleman with a Duster refers us to the text of the books he criticises, and he judges the writers as they have written themselves down in volumes accessible to us all. He draws our attention to passages, and suggests a way of looking at them, but it is open to every reader to verify for himself. and to agree or disagree.

Nor is there real point in the protest that the whims and fancies of fashion are of no general or serious significance. It is perfectly true that the social conscience is formed by example, and that what psychologists call "prestige-suggestion" has a powerful influence upon morals. No doubt Mrs. Asquith and Colonel Repington are not more flippant, but just a little more outspoken, than many others of their class. The strange feature of their books is not that they should have thought in such a way, but that they should have called upon all the world to take notice of it. As Fashion "elevates her darkened eyebrow" in scorn of the higher enthusiasms, the scorn will be caught up all too easily by that multitude whose regard for enthusiasm is already far less keen than its regard for Fashion. There is indeed poignant and penetrating truth in this writer's counsel: "I suggest that we should take the measure of the leaders of mankind, those who set the fashion of

daily life, whose influence is the moral climate in which we breathe and form our opinions."

But, though the Gentleman with a Duster has been reproached for qualities that are in truth among his merits, there are other grounds upon which he can be fairly attacked, especially in certain exaggerations into which he has been betrayed and in his scornful allusions to "Darwinism." But these are no more than spots on the sun. "The Glass of Fashion" is at once one of the most brilliant and one of the healthiest books that this publishing season has given us, and it is with heartfelt gratitude that the present critic welcomes a crusader of such prowess in so fine a cause. It was time for some one to speak out upon the follies and dangers, the humiliating and not seldom disgusting freaks of behavior, the posing and posturing, and general humbug that are associated with what is called "Fashion." The mid-Victorian tradition of our grandmothers was not, indeed, quite so radiantly beautiful a thing as this writer suggests, and it had faults which he finds it convenient to his argument to forget. But he is on the right lines in arraigning those whose affected superiority to the mid-Victorian has its source, not in deeper insight, but in mere anarchic rebelliousness against the decorous and the decent. We live in an age of "escape from conventions," but what we have really evolved is a new form of the very thing we pretend to have superseded. Protest against "cant" has become one of the most canting hypocrisies; the heralds of revolt have imprisoned us under a new tyranny of their own; what may be called with justice "the convention of anti-conventionalism" has all the faults and few of the merits of the social usage it has displaced. All honor to this bold and gifted writer who has wielded the satiric pen with a trenchant effect that suggests a Tacitus, a Juvenal, or a Swift. His epigrams sparkle like diamonds, the shafts from his quiver strike home. What a world of suggestive meaning, for example, belongs to that heading from Vanbrugh which he has prefixed to the chapter on Mrs. Asquith's Autobiography! "Oh, my God, that you won't listen to a woman of quality when her heart is bursting!" Which of his readers will soon forget the description of the war-tortured world in which Colonel Repington's Diaries and other kindred phenomena were proceeding, like "a carnival in mid-Lent, . . . a brass band in Gethsemane?" The very resentment which the Gentleman with a Duster has provoked among those critics who have shed all the moral enthusiasms, and are irritated that anyone else should cherish these superstitions still, is sufficient proof that his apostolic office has not been exercised in vain. The enormous interest he is arousing in that public which ignores his futile depreciators is a reassuring proof that there is still something nobly responsive in the heart of the reading masses.

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