The Mannerings

WHEN "King's End" appeared several years ago the author was rated by some prophetic critics as a second Mary Wilkins; and her next novel, "Margaret Warrener," strengthened this impression. As a matter of fact the difference in the quality of their work is as marked as the difference in their points of view. Miss Wilkins's genius is autochthonous. She remains faithful in her art to certain elemental traits of New England character, while Miss Brown shows more and more interest in horticultural human nature, the artificially perfect. And in her latest novel, *The Mannerings,** this distinction is even more marked.

The men and women in this story belong no more to one hemisphere than they do to another. They are the products of the civilizing and refining forces in the Old and New World, gathered into a country place somewhere in New England for the dramatic purposes of the author. And while this fact cannot be urged as a literary shortcoming, since the tendency of culture is to produce cosmopolitan types, it does indicate the

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difference between the literary material of two authors who have one landscape in common. For Miss Brown is as tenacious of her lights and shadows upon New England ridges as ever Miss Wilkins was. And this is really the explanation of the popular impression that they have an artistic resemblance to one another. They both stretch up the same naked, wind shaken forests in winter scenes and wave the same green boughs upon summer occasions.

We recognize in *The Mannerings* the author's Olympian genius for creating women with "length of legs divine," so noticeable in her other novels. But in this volume she has chosen to demonstrate those tendencies and dispositions in women which are indelicate, abnormal, if they are not actually immoral. The result is what might be expected—suffering, fever and hysterics. Like Mr. Howells, she preys too much upon the nervous systems of her numerous heroines. It is, in fact, the peculiar literary fallacy of this class of writers that the "leading lady" invariably comes down with brain fever and talks beautifully "out of her head."

But having determined upon an analysis of abnormal degrees of sensibility in women, Miss Brown goes about her task with clinic cleverness, and proves herself one of the few profound and impartial students of her sex among female novelists. Altho five women figure in the story, the observing reader will readily perceive that only three types are represented. One is a gaunt, fierce Amazon vixen, so material, so simple that she lacks even the Pagan spirituality of passion. Another is a lovely refinement of this monstrosity, a selfish, charming, unspiritual, unmoral animal. Contrasted with these is a silent, faithful, earth-woman, large, capable and sacrificial. The other two are merely fragile feminine complements to the men they love, sweetened into accord with them by that pious self-abandonment known only to women who must mate or perish.

Now when we consider that all these women live in a common domestic relationship, with but three men introduced now and then to temper the feminine madness of their existence, the human impossibilities of the situation are apparent. There are not enough lovers, and the women suffer the pangs of unrequited love accordingly. But worst of all, they miss the distinction of being loved; for it is a fact that most women are able to do very well in the world without loving, but not one is ever able to adjust herself to the sorrow of not being loved. Thus, the reader hurries from page to page with fear and trembling lest the unblessed ladies in the tale actually effect the morbid disasters they threaten upon themselves and society in general. And when in the end the worst does not happen, he has the injured sense of one who has been deprived of a logical conclusion.