PRIMORDIALISM AND SOME RECENT BOOKS

IT has become the fashion of late to make a cult of the primitive and elemental. The Call of the Wild is the keynote of much of our recent fiction, and the Simple Life and the Return to Nature are treated as terms synonymous with *La Bête Humaine*. Now, of course, there are always at least two ways of looking at anything, and human life is no exception. You can regard mankind as a little lower than the angels or a little higher than the apes,—and your point of view cannot alter the rather important fact that man is neither ape nor angel, but somewhere midway between them; that you cannot picture or explain intelligently any of the fundamental human emotions, love or hate, hope or fear without taking into account the flesh as well as the spirit, the hereditary animal instincts and impulses as well as the highest intellectual processes of modern culture. It is also quite true that in refined men and women of to-day the primitive savage is not nearly so far beneath the surface as it pleases us to think he is. The veneer of civilisation which a few thousands of years have spread over our ancestors of the stone age scales off with astonishing ease when some unusual combination of circumstances suddenly renews primordial conditions. The blood-lust that comes in battle, the primitive vengeance of the unwritten law, are simply re-enactments of prehistoric tragedy, hereditary memories of feuds fought out in the gloom of ancient cave.

But these are not new ideas, nor is there any great profit to be derived from disproportionately dwelling upon them. It is, of course, a healthful antidote to the overworked brain and the overworked soul to remember that we have red blood and strong supple muscles; a good thing to find joy in deep breaths of pure mountain air, in clean, swift strokes through blue, sparkling water. It is a healthful antidote to asceticism and pedantry, to live for a time in the heart of ancient woods. But there is a vast difference between thinking of man as a healthy human animal and thinking of him as an unhealthy human beast,—and the Call-of-the-Wild school of fiction is tending toward precisely this exaggerated and mistaken point of view. The chief trouble with all the so-called Back-to-Nature books is that they suggest an abnormal self-consciousness, a constant preoccupation regarding the measure of our animalism. Now, it is a sort of axiom that so long as we are healthy and normal, we do not give much thought to our physical machinery; so long as our breath comes easily and our pulse is even and our appetite is good, we do not remember that we have a heart and lungs and digestive organs. So long as we are physically and mentally sound, we do not pause in the midst of a wrestling match or a cross-country run to calculate the precise distance that separates us from our anthropoid progenitors. But this, in a certain way, is precisely what the characters in the average Call-of-the-Wild novel seem to be doing, or at least what the authors are constantly doing for them. They seem, so to speak, to keep their fingers insistently upon the pulse of their baser animal emotions,—and this is precisely what the primitive, healthy savage is furthest removed from doing.

Secondly, this modern primordialism is reprehensible because it distorts the truth. It ignores the fact that if modern man listens with one ear to the Call of the Wild, he listens with the other to the Call of the City, the call of civilisation and of progress. It is a bad thing for man to think of himself simply as a soul in bondage, a prisoner of the flesh which must be persistently mortified by fasting and prayer and cloistral seclusion. But it is, if anything, a degree worse to ignore the soul altogether; to glorify the animal instincts as man's

proudest heritage,—because while each of these attitudes toward life represents only half the truth, the former is the nobler, more progressive half, while the latter represents a retrogression.

Of course, the only sane and honest way to look at life is to admit that in the simplest of our daily actions and impulses it is impossible to separate the physical from the psychic; in our loves and our hates, we can never tell how much is a matter of logical reason and how much of blind instinct. The novelist who looks upon love as a sort of vague, intangible spirit worship is as hopelessly far from reality as the novelist who insists on debasing it to a mere matter of nature's economy, a factor in the law of the survival of the fittest. There is, of course, a type of man who reverts very nearly to the level of the jungle folk; but he is not to be found in the healthy human animal of modern civilisation or modern savagery. Zola understood the type, and he pictured it with repulsive frankness in the purely pathological character of Jacques Lantier, the homicidal maniac of *La Bête Humaine*.