MISS SINCLAIR AGAIN

LIFE AND DEATH OF HARRIETT FREAN. *By May Sinclair. 12mo. 133 pages. The Macmillan Company. $1.25.*

LIKE Mr Waddington of Wyck, Miss Sinclair's new book is a study of the psycho-pathology of Peter Pan. Neither Mr Waddington nor Miss Frean ever grew up. In the earlier book this infantilism took the form of conceited selfishness. In the latter it takes the form of conceited unselfishness. And since we live in a post-Butler world, it is of course the unselfishness which causes the most unhappiness.

The book is about the same length as Flaubert's Un Coeur Simple. It is the skeleton of a novel. It would be a pity to boil down the bones. Here are the most important ones.

The blue egg stood on the cabinet, and Harriett felt a real loving love for her doll, Ida. She believed that her father's house was nicer than other people's.

Ugly. Being naughty was just that. Doing ugly things. Being good felt delicious. When she was naughty, *their* unhappiness was the punishment. It hurt more than anything. *They*, of course, were her parents.

Lectures. Concerts. Longfellow. Mrs Browning.

Connie Hancock was vulgar and told her things.

Prissie was her best friend. She was engaged to Robin. Robin and Harriett then fell in love. Harriett sacrificed herself—and him; against his will. "I'm not good. It's only there are some things you can't do. We couldn't." *They*, of course, agreed.

So Robin married Prissie, who soon developed paralysis. Poor little Prissie! How terrible. Harriett's pity was sad and beautiful, and at the same time it appeased her pain.

When she was thirty, her father failed in business, and died of it. She couldn't get over the sense of his parenthood, his authority. "My father was Hilton Frean of The Spectator."

Her mother died. Harriett took the blue egg out of the drawing-

room and stuck it in the spare-room. Her mind ran back to her father and mother longing like a child for their shelter and support and the blessed assurance of herself.

Prissie died. Robin married again. Harriett found he was now a monster of selfishness. He had used up all his moral capital.

Her servant Maggie had a baby. The beautiful thing would be to let her have the baby with her. But Maggie nursed it. Harriett couldn't bear that. She decided Maggie must go. The baby died of it. She wasn't going to be morbid. All the same the episode left her with a feeling of insecurity.

Robin's niece learned the story of her giving up Robin, and attacked her for it. "She had thought of herself, her own moral beauty. She was a selfish fool. Prissie had developed illness so that she might have a hold on Robin. I don't say she could help it. She couldn't."

Was it true that she had sacrificed them all (Robin and Prissie and Robin's second wife) to her parents' sense of moral duty? The feeling of insecurity had grown on her. She learnt her father had ruined others as well as himself. It showed her father as he was. Not wise. Not wise all the time.

New people had come to the house next door. They had a cat. Harriett said "I don't like cats." Cats were a compromise, a substitute, a subterfuge. Her pride couldn't stoop.

Her sixty-second year. Harriett had her first bad illness. Above all she loved the comfort and protection of Maggie. She found shelter in Maggie as she had found it in her mother.

She said "The Spectator is not what it used to be in my father's time." Harriett Frean was not what she used to be.

She was happy in the surrender of her responsibility, of the grown-up self she had maintained with so much effort. She took the blue egg out of the spare-room and set it back in its place on the marble-topped table.

She had an operation, and was delirious. "It's sad—sad to go through so much pain and then have a dead baby."

She died.

You see what a well-conceived study it is, how carefully planned, how modern and how thoughtful in its psychology. And Miss Sinclair is right in the title of her book. For Harriett's death, though it

only occupies a couple of pages, is given with a fine intensity which makes the book worth reading for it alone.

The book sets out to portray the whole life of an educated woman, sixty-eight years, in about a quarter of the length of an ordinary novel. The English Press has greeted the book with a general shout of "Wonderful Economy." Economy is fashionable just now. But is this true economy? Or is it parsimony?

Miss Sinclair has not succeeded in overcoming the first difficulty of her enterprise. She has not given the sense of the slow inexorable passage of time. Her Harriett is a child, then suddenly a girl, and then an aging elderly woman. There are important incidents during her middle years, but we have no clear vision of her at this period.

Miss Sinclair has added to her difficulties by adopting the Jamesian device of telling the story, not indeed in the first person, but only as seen by the eyes and as reflected in the mind of one character. This is a neat method, and may have rich results, but it is surely inappropriate to a story like this, the interest of which largely depends upon the reactions of cause and effect between that one character's subconsciousness and its surroundings. The result of its use must be obscurity. We cannot tell how much is conscious, and how much unconscious in the mind of Harriett Frean. Such a story needs to be told from the point of view of an exceptionally intelligent third party, or else in the old way by the omniscient author.

Whenever a new book by Miss Sinclair appears, we wonder what it will be like this time; or rather whom. For she is exceedingly alive to new developments both in psychology and the technique of writing. Indeed when a new author, or still more a new authoress wins our admiration by an innovation in method, Miss Sinclair always wants to show us that she can do it herself just as well. In Mary Olivier she did a Dorothy Richardson. This time it is a Katharine Mansfield.

But with a difference. In her admirable stories Miss Mansfield gives us usually one, or at most a couple of incidents, and enriches them with carefully chosen detail which may seem irrelevant but is never superfluous. From these brilliantly spot-lit points the whole life of the characters before and after spreads in the reader's imagination like ink on blotting-paper. That is the art of the short story.

But Miss Sinclair does not set out, she may protest, to write a short story. Her enterprise is a novel stripped of all irrelevance. But

there is a sense in which flesh and blood are irrelevant to a skeleton. And why not carry the process a little further, strip a little more? Why not be content with the five hundred or so words (they are almost all hers) of the story as given above?

How we miss the sudden subtleties of insight that flicker through Miss Mansfield's work, the momentary glimpses of sharp beauty! Between the work of these two excellent artists there is a difference, the difference between condensation and intensity, between a slighter and a greater intuitiveness, between great talent and something rather more. Hoffmann's Poupée had all the movements of life: Petrouchka in the ballet had life itself, a soul.

The old army of psychological novelists, with Henry James at their head, left no act of their characters without a clear and conscious cause for it, and thereby justly deserved to be called academic. For life isn't like that. The new army, with Miss Sinclair determined not to be far from the van, are apt to leave no act without a clear cause for it in the subconsciousness. This novel in consequence resembles an X-ray photograph—the facts are there but not the likeness.

Miss Sinclair's skill is astonishing, her brilliance never failing, but she writes *a priori*. She is an academic artist in the truest and least insulting sense.

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