VI John Cave. VII Barbara Gwynne*

Upon the appearance, simultaneously, of two novels by an unknown, we are likely to jump to the conclusion that he is a foreigner. If the name be British, we class him with Messrs. Bennett, Merrick and Company, because we are reminded of the American expression of their vogue across the sea. Mr. Trites, however, is an Englishman only by force of circumstances, the necessity of finding a market for his work; by priority of publication and acclaim. With his novels labelled "remarkable" by a number of the best London critics and alluded to as "two very extraordinary books" by Mr. Howells, Mr. Trites has come home. For he is an American by birth and by education. He is a native of Philadelphia. But the conditions which he describes are common to all of these United States and the souls which he strips for our observation are the souls of every land and every age.

And what is there "remarkable" about these novels? Let us consider them one at a time, in their natural sequence.

"He wrote his stories without pity. . . . He never dreamed . . . of holding back a sentence because it might hurt." This is a partial characterisation of John Cave, a newspaper man—like Mr. Trites himself—whose experiences form the warp of the first novel. There was every reason for Cave's attitude and yet, insidious as a catchword, it affected, almost controlled the reader's judgment. Why? Because of his blindness through carelessness or preconception to the author's method, to his exceptional art. For an artist Mr. Trites is, first and last; and the secret of his art is an *intimate aloofness.* To be explicit, the nature of the material he has given us suggests sympathy with John Cave, a sympathy so deep as almost to identify creation with creator, but the manner of its giving is that of a chance passer-by with his mind on his own personal affairs.

The fortunes of John Cave are as multicoloured as those of any star reporter of our popular romances; but without recourse to limelight, without the subterfuge of sentimentality. We are offered John Cave as he appears to the eye of common day. And so he becomes one of us, a man whose experiences bear upon our own. We are not sure that we trust him, but we are friendly disposed for all that: interested, in any case. For John Cave is a commanding figure, when exalted by his ideals; an embarrassingly human one when wine promises to blot out the memory of his wrongs and failures. We share gladly his ambitions and we share also his bitterness, his shame. We share them because, in some degree, they have all been ours. This is the touchstone of Mr. Trites's appeal.

Successful in his delineation of man, the author becomes unconvincing—in his first novel—when woman is his subject. John Cave stands out as saliently as the Hurstwood of *Sister Carrie* or Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness.* Collier, Gray and others of "The Press," old Jake of Sunapee, Prudence's fat "friend" and many others could be singled out from a crowd. But opposed to these individuals—not types!—Diana Scarlett is as inconclusive as a dream. And even Prudence, a more vivid personality, is little more than a Humour, a Humour of picturesque waywardness, and that in spite

*John Cave. By W. B. Trites. New York: Duffield and Company. Barbara Gwynne. By W. B. Trites. New York: Duffield and Company.

of her very material environment, her plainly defined weaknesses. It is only her last words, and not so much her last words as her last glance, her last breath, that reveal an unmistakable woman. This saving magic has not been exercised in the case of Diana. Physically lovely, virginal, almost ethereal, she is made to typify a purity of refinement utterly incapable of baseness,—the implication of her surname to the contrary! We accept her marriage with the backslider, John Cave. It would not be foreign to her nature. But completely alien to it would be the average preternuptial amour. Upon this dénouement, we feel that Mr. Trites and not Diana is the responsible agent and that we have been unnecessarily duped.

Diana's futile lapse from grace—and other situations which call for gloves, he has displayed an unusual sensitiveness to proportion and an amazing delicacy. There are no equivocal evasions, but there are omissions as eloquent as they are flattering to good taste and intelligence, —true omissions, by repression, not suppression. At least that is the effect produced, so natural and clear is the flow of language, so untroubled yet compelling its onward movement. Repression, indeed, is the keynote of Mr. Trites's whole method of projection. Rare are the occasions where he has failed to maintain this tenor of excellency. In addition to his adroit studies of men, he has indicated briefly but with great sharpness many phases of the economic and social evils which are now receiving so much public attention. Occasionally, there is a tendency to let a character's opinions—his own transparently veiled —verge on homily, but they do not bore us and so can be forgiven.

Mr. Trites's contribution to the folklore of journalism, old-fashioned and latterday, is more solid, more perfectly rounded, and rings more true than almost anything so far issued through this sub-treasury of fiction. What is more it is authoritative. He has also furnished a well-diversified feast for lovers of pure description: passages for those who are proud of the enchanting effects which the genie of our industrial centres have evolved with plumes of smoke on backgrounds of hazy blue or rose or gold; and passages equally suggestive for those who are drawn to the countryside.

John Cave is preëminently a study of the struggle between honest resolves and temperamental frailties. *Barbara Gwynne* is more complex. It contains, in the first place, both a thesis and a problem. Its thesis is "the dignity of a single purpose"; its problem, the war of the sexes, with the mutiny of animal instinct against self-respect as a crucial factor.

Obviously, this second of Mr. Trites's novels is the broader in scope and intention. It is unquestionably more mature than its predecessor. The themes, one and all, are handled with extraordinary sureness and skill. The characters are more numerous, more varied, and even more graphically differentiated than in *John Cave* and with no greater expenditure of words. Thesis and problem are alternated with a quiet dexterity which permits us to follow each undisturbed, although both of them are manywise motivated.

In Jerome S. McWade, we have a figure which will stand in the front rank of fiction. Jerome is the protagonist of the thesis, "the dignity of a single purpose." Dr. Ford, bacteriologist, is its nobler exponent, but a minor one none the less. Among the lesser manifestations of the same idea is Jacob Abercrombie, theatrical manager, a truckling henchman of the thesis. Jerome's ambition is to grow rich at any cost. He succeeds. The aim of Dr. Ford is an ideal: the service of humanity. He fails, not through disloyalty to that ideal but because of an intellectual egoism which allows his anger, though righteous, to get the better of him. The women, also, are studied in relation to this thesis, Barbara in particular. In her case thesis and problem overlap, but with the majority of the women portrayed by Mr. Trites, the paramount concern resolves itself into this question, paraphrased from a reflection of Mrs. Woodford's:

"Should she deem her frugal, chaste years of self-denial well spent?"

In his second novel the women are neither marionettes nor automatons. Mr. Trites proves that Diana Scarlett was merely a blunder. Unlike her, Barbara Gwynne is spirit, flesh and blood, indeed very much of the flesh in the eyes of the specimens who pursue her haunting beauty. True love she appears to rouse in none but Jerome S. McWade, and in him it takes the form of a fanatical, unappeasable yet purifying hunger, the instinctive craving of a lion for a royal mate.

Mr. Trites begins both of his novels with a concise statement of fact and back to the fact in this statement he returns like a draughtsman describing a circle. *John Cave* is the more perfect circle of the two, because it stops short with the complete sweep of the compass. It is the more perfect circle, but its radius is much the smaller. *Barbara Gwynne*—but then the latter is in reality composed of two intersecting circles—*Barbara Gwynne,* even granting this, should have come to a period in the penultimate chapter. It should have closed when Barbara "shook her head." But instead of shaking her head, she should have nodded assent. Why? Because her refusal was made to Jerome and we know that he is to dominate her—as he does!—just as he has dominated every obstacle from the start. We know this because the author is mercilessly logical; because his opening sentence reads: "Jerome S. McWade, 'grocery clerk,' dominated the little shop." And so the final chapter falls outside of the intersecting circles, nor is it an exact tangent of either. It rises from their juncture, but is not a tangent at all. It is a spiral, a broken one like a spiral of incense, full of lights and shadows, winding heavenward. It is the artist-draughtsman's musings in pencil, fanciful, symbolic—a wish, a hope, both of them tremulous with doubt. The last chapter is a very poignant prose poem, but it terminates with a wish or a hope which is made incredible of fulfilment by all that has gone before. The scene is the bull ring of San Sebastian.

A half-dozen horses lay here and there at the side of the ring. A black and white bull, surrounded by small, glittering, gesticulating figures, pawed the sand in rage, exhaustion and despair. The flower-hung darts in its flesh rose and fell. . . . The bull, looking mournfully on its bright tormentors, bellowed. . . . The sky bent over the earth with a divine smile, offering its secret through the ages. . . . If man would but look up. . . ."

"Barbara, beautiful in her Eastern dress," had "lifted her soft eyes to the sky." But the toad-like gossips of Cinnaminson, the Yahoos, male and female, of the Fourth of July picnic, of the daily press, of the metropolitan green-rooms—man and woman, as they are penetratingly described in the pages of *Barbara Gwynne*—will *these* look up? *can* these look up? More profitable to both and to all is the "secret of happiness" propounded by John Cave in his hour of failure and self-abasement:

His aspiring soul loved the sunlit heights. It loathed the pollution of the morass. . . . He knew the secret of happiness. Work was the secret. All else deceived, or failed, or perished. Friends deceived, drugs failed, passion perished. But work remained, kind and fair and faithful to the end. And the more ardently and devotedly man gave himself to work, the more ardour and devotion work gave back, the richer and finer the rewards that she extended with both hands.

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