Three Interesting Novels

By education and reputation Mr. Lang is a linguist, an essayist, a critic, but by nature and genius he is a Scotchman and a humorist. And it is Andrew Lang smiling grimly from the heather background of his true character that we meet in the author of this volume.[1]

A number of excellent but impecunious men and women in London society form a syndicate and earn a livelihood by *disentangling* the romantic affairs and family feuds of people who apply to them for help. Their operations extend over two continents with the best results in smoothing both the true love courses and the financial difficulties of their clients. And Frank Stockton never displayed more ingenuity, more whimsical wit in dramatizing the happy incredible than does Mr. Lang in this volume. His purpose in not only to amuse the ordinary reader, but to tease the scholarly and scientific world with an occasional mockery of their serious undertakings. He squints at every situation, however grave, in such a manner as to dispropor-

[1] THE DISENTANGLERS. *By Andrew Lang.* New York: Longmans, Green & Co.

tion it and suggest the ludicrous extreme. He makes an unconscious clown of every lover, and turns each man's grief into a joke of shrewd Scotch economy in human frailties,—in short, a harmless, heartless performance, not altogether dignified, but delightfully entertaining, especially for those who are in the mood to approve mischievous *diablerie*.

Nor does America escape his humor. The sly philosophy that led "Poppa McCabe" to found his famous Freak Mu-

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seum is thus interpreted by his daughter, "the fair American," who seeks aid and council from *The Disentanglers:*

"Poppa used to argue, the lives of our citizens are monotonous. . . . They see men and women, but almost all of them have one head; and even a hand with six fingers is not common. This is why the popular mind runs in grooves. This causes what they call 'the dead level of democracy!' . . . Now Poppa would not hear of aristocratic distinctions. . . . He was a Hail Columbia man on the Democratic ticket. But *something* is wanted, he said, to get us out of grooves, and break the monotony. That something, said Poppa, Nature has mercifully provided in Freaks, the citizens feel this unconsciously. . . . So Poppa founded his museum of natural varieties, all of them honest Injun."

This is the truth, that no matter what condition of life we are in, there is always an evident "long, straight road" which leads at last to a sort of crucified contentment. It is the chastened adjustment we ourselves make to virtue and to the other fellow's shortcomings. But the "road" alluded to in Mr. George Horton's new novel[2] is the matrimonial highway of life,—a mountain and desert journey out of the fairy land of youth and romance into the sweet trance of a dual old age, fulfilled with many sorrows and blessings. The lugubrious adjectives attached are accounted for by the fact that the scenes of the story are laid in Chicago, where marital bridal paths are too numerous, and where, as Mr. Horton himself puts it, "everybody you know is about to be married or divorced." The title therefore (really a quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson) is meant to be emphatic, sermonic.

And after all we have endured in fiction from the immoralities of social life in this Modern Nineveh, a story with modest mother women casting their little domestic halos over the pages is a welcome departure. And there are real children, corrupting their pinafores with jam, and perfecting maternal patience with innumerable demands.

But occasionally an author holds fast the integrity of his women and children in order to make greater the contrast between them and intelligent, masculine depravity. And for this reason the decency, the high respectability of the three heroes in this novel is the more remarkable. In fact, nothing more daring in modern fiction has happened than this, that three honest, virtuous married men should be found starring *rôles* in one novel, and all of them Chicago citizens!

Still, Mr. Horton's shortcomings as an artist are so apparent that they cannot be overlooked. He is tediously long in his descriptions of persons. A few graceful charcoal sentences give a more incisive impression of a woman's face and figure than two pages of tedious millinery details. Also, Mr. Horton is unfortunate in the fact that he has no *lift* in his imagination, no power of illusion sufficient to render pleasing the monotonous realities of the life he portrays. There is something stolidly truthful in his method, more righteous than artistic.

[2] THE LONG, STRAIGHT ROAD. *By George Horton.* Indianapolis: The Bowen-Merrill Company.

But even here we should take into consideration the dead level of the material out of which most American fiction comes. The past is not yet far enough away to be idealized, and the present is but the fetus of a mighty, perhaps a monstrous, future.

After all, women are more bloody minded than men are,—possibly because sex bars them from receiving the enlightenment which fighting experiences give to men. This story of France during the reign of Louis XIV[3] belongs to the famous female series of desperate novels, such as "The Helmet of Navarre," "To Have and To Hold," "Hearts Courageous,"—all, no matter where the scene is laid, full of masculine bravado, swaggerings and fightings. Miss Seawell begins therefore in the first page with the trumpetings of an old braggart captain of the guard belonging to Count Saxe, Marshal-General of France. But it is a cheerful, witty performance that charms the reader's attention and good will for the forthcoming tale. A concession which dooms him to disappointment, by the way; for while the movements of the story are fast and dramatic enough, they never reach the expected climax. Nothing good enough or bad enough happens to justify so many splendid details and critical situations.

"Francezka" is simply the universal type of the historical maiden met in every romance of this class, and never found in real life, either during the seventeenth century or out of it.

The author's style is suggestive, however, of a fine and discriminating intelligence. And the quaintness of her literary manner reminds us that there is a poetic delicacy of passion which these old romantic forms of speech were better suited to convey than our modern realistic use of terms.

[3] FRANCEZKA. *By Molly Elliot Seawell.* Indianapolis: The Bowen-Merrill Company.