THE TOUCH OF POETRY AND SOME RECENT NOVELS*

MONG the volumes which have been selected to make up the group for this month's article, there happens to be one of which the well-known critic, Dr. Robertson Nicoll, recently expressed himself in these enthusiastic terms: "The story is a masterpiece, and it lacks only a touch of poetry to put it in the very front rank." Regarding the special merits of the book in question, there are a number of things to be said presently; but for the moment it seems worth while to discuss briefly the question of a Touch of Poetry in fiction. A novel, it would seem, may be a masterpiece, although the Touch of Poetry is lacking; and the plain inference is that, with the addition of this missing Touch of Poetry, it would become something better and bigger, something, in short, that would give it distinction even in a carefully selected company of masterpieces. It becomes, then, a matter of importance to determine just what is meant by this phrase, a Touch of Poetry, and also whether as a matter of fact its presence does make a work of fiction better and finer and more enduring.

Now, in the first place, before even attempting to find a definition for the phrase, a Touch of Poetry, it is quite safe to say that there is no quality whose presence will make a work of fiction in any sense better or bigger unless it be a quality which forms a part of the real life which that volume of fiction purposes to transcribe. If the sort of poetry which Dr. Robertson Nicoll has in mind is the sort of poetry to be found in every-day life, then it belongs in a novel of every-day life, and its omission from the pages of that novel is so serious, so vital, that one is at a loss to know how such a faulty piece of work may deserve the name of masterpiece. But if such a spirit of poetry is not a part of life as life really is, then no matter how dull, dispiriting, and monotonous a record of such life may be, the Touch of Poetry does not belong in it—and its intrusion would be not a touch of genius, but a blemish.

Accordingly, the whole value of a criticism, such as the one above quoted, turns upon the definition of a single word. If poetry, as sometimes defined, is the concrete expression of an emotion, then life, even commonplace, every-day life, is full of poetry. A rose, a skylark's song, a sunset are a few of nature's ways for finding a concrete expression of emotions that well-nigh baffle an attempt to put them into words. It is hardly possible to write a chapter of quite ordinary and uninspired prose narrative without, in the course of it, calling to our attention some of these every-day and yet endlessly wonderful expressions of the poetry of life and nature.

But this, surely, is not what is usually meant by the very large class of readers who demand, in Dr. Nicoll's phrase, a Touch of Poetry in the books they read, any more than it is what is meant by a certain class of writers who in this respect attempt, with the best intentions in the world, to give the public what it wants. In spite of the fact that one of the greatest of all our English poets has said that "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty," there is, unfortunately, a widespread aversion to facing the truth of life, a foolish and deep-rooted impression that the truth of life is something ugly, something to be to a large extent evaded and ignored. And when a writer has the

*The Old Wives' Tale. By Arnold Bennett. New York: The George H. Doran Company.
The End of the Road. By Stanley Portal Hyatt. New York: D. Appleton and Company.
Sir Guy and Lady Rannard. By H. N. Dickinson. New York: Duffield and Company.
The Veil. By Ethel Stefana Stevens. New York: The Frederick Stokes Company.
As It Happened. By Ashton Hilliers. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
The Greater Power. By Harold Bindloss. New York: The Frederick Stokes Company.
The Calling of Dan Matthews. Chicago: The Book Supply Company.

clear vision to perceive and the unfaltering hand to record, quite dispassionately, the truth of life, there are always a certain number of visionary and idealistic persons who cry out against him for his pessimism, his narrow, sordid outlook, his lack of what they call the Touch of Poetry.

Now, there are many forms and many degrees of the sort of thing which these well-meaning critics have in mind; they range all the way from what is pardonable and even justifiable down to the rankest and most offensive forms of romanticism. But in one respect they are all essentially of the same tribe and kin; they are all slightly varying forms of artificiality. It is worth while to keep in mind that the very etymology of the word, poetry, is something made, something artificial, something produced not by nature, but by man. The Touch of Poetry in fiction may be an artificial development of action, of character, or merely of language. Of the three, the last-named form is the most easily defensible and the one which in the long run does the least harm to the cause of good art. A rhythmic style, a purposed pattern of vowels and consonants may afford an amazing degree of satisfaction to its maker; may, indeed, produce certain pleasingly sensuous effects upon the ear of the reader; and may even, in spite of its obvious affectation, succeed in conveying, in some exceptional cases, a more vivid and incisive picture of reality than could have been achieved by simpler forms of speech. In their several ways, George Meredith, Henry James and Maurice Hewlett depart radically from the simple forms of ordinary written prose. All three of them are consciously and deliberately highly artificial for the avowed purpose of obtaining effects which would elude a simpler form of speech. Of the three, Mr. Hewlett is the only one whose eccentricities of style might reasonably be defined as having the Poetic Touch; he alone has learned how to utilise poetic rhythm in order to enhance prose effects. But the purpose of this comparison is to show that rhythm in prose is defensible not on the ground that it has the Poetic Touch, but on the broader and more logical ground that, like other artificialities of style, such as the obscureness of Meredith or James, it happens to be the best vehicle for conveying the truth of life.

But when we come to the Touch of Poetry in character or in plot, we find ourselves confronting not merely a form of artificiality, but of downright dishonesty. The Poetic Touch is the commonest of all excuses for those authors who insist upon painting men and women not as they really are but as optimists would like to have them. A man dies; and in real life his widow, however sincerely she may mourn him, finds the practical cares and needs of daily life at once intruding upon her—finds herself, in fact, anxious about his business, his saving, his life insurance, and in an unacknowledged way somewhat soothed and comforted by the discovery that in a worldly way he has left her better provided for than she expected. Your novelist with the Touch of Poetry will, however, insist on picturing the widow as too absorbed in her grief to think of such sordid considerations as yesterday's debts and to-morrow's dinner, and begging her solicitor to spare her the pain for the present of intruding business matters upon her desolate bereavement. That fine old cynic, La Rochefoucauld, once wrote, among scores of other maxims from which big novels might be wrought, that "in the sorrows and misfortunes of our friends there is always something which is not altogether unpleasing,"—one of those immortal sayings which it would be well for every novelist softly to repeat to himself each time that sorrow or misfortune intrudes itself into the pages he is writing. There is none of us so perfect, so unselfish, so removed from petty temptations as to feel when the news of loss of money or of honour or of life of some dear friend arrives, a simple unmixed emotion. Because we are human beings, and therefore infinitely complex, we see another man's calamities from a hundred different points at once. The dominant emotion may be a sincere and disinterested grief, but underlying this, scarcely confessed to ourselves, are a score of other less worthy thoughts, mere momentary flashes some of them, thoughts perhaps

that we would be forever ashamed to put into words, but in our secret hearts we know that for a moment they were born and lived in our brain. The novelist who is deficient in the Touch of Poetry, but who sees life and reads human hearts and records what he sees and reads with the grim inflexibility of fate, recognises all these obscure overtones of human selfishness and records them along with other things good and bad. But your novelist who prides himself on his Touch of Poetry pictures only the dominant and resultant motives, gives an impression of unalloyed friendship and sympathy and self-sacrifice, flatters human vanity by making us say as we close his book, "Human nature is better than it gets credit for, after all!" And so few of us stop to realise that it is far wholesomer, in the long run, to look human nature frankly in the face; to say, "Yes, we are pretty mean and self-seeking and vicious at times; but in spite of it all the sum total of what we do is pretty good. The wonder is that with all our conflicting impulses for good and evil our record of accomplishment should be half so creditable as it actually is." And that is the difference between the strong, sane touch of honest pride and the illusive Touch of so-called Poetry.