DRAWING ROOM FICTION

By Isabel Paterson

AFTER a longish run on homespun and calico in fiction fashions, this season's novels incline to the employment of more sophisticated and luxurious materials. Having investigated the small town and the remoter rural regions, the slums and the service quarters, we are invited to refresh our

æsthetic sensibilities with an hour of drawing room amenities.

The drawing room is an international rendezvous. Of distinguished foreigners, E. M. Forster ranks as guest of honor. "A Passage to India" is probably the best novel of the year; and it is a fortunate year can show such a product.

The theme is stupendous, though the plot is very simple, being based upon an incident that never happened. An English girl visiting India, Adela Quested, in a fit of hysteria or hallucination accuses a decent young educated Hindu of attempting criminal assault. The entire British government of India is shaken by the report. It comes near being disrupted when Adela's mind clears, and in the midst of the Hindu's trial she withdraws the charge.

The far reaching significance of this imaginary episode, as analyzed by Mr. Forster, cannot be appreciated from any brief summary. He has succeeded in weighing the imponderables. The subtlety of his shading, his hair's breadth accuracy in catching mental moods and inflections, are downright uncanny. Every speech, action, and thought of his characters is referred to its deepest source in the individual idiosyncrasy, racial inheritance, or national tradition. Stupidity is to Mr. Forster as marvelous and complex as the most dazzling cleverness. Like a homely spaewife, he can read a real and rational meaning in matters no greater than a whorl of tea leaves in the bottom of a cup. He turns an X-ray on the thick complacent inert mind of British officialdom; and the result is truly a devastating novel, a complete exposure of the super-Babbittry of Imperialism.

Yet this keenness and clairvoyance is a disadvantage to any author who cares for popularity. Because of it, Mr. Forster can dispense with the more obvious and gaudy events beloved of lesser craftsmen; but unfortunately, the public also loves the gayer pattern, and has scant patience with finesse of this high order. The technique alone of "A Passage to India" is nothing short of wonderful; but the lay reader may not care about virtuosity for its own sake. Why should he? So I suspect that not a few readers, inveigled into plowing through the book by the enthusiasm of the professional critics, will lay it down disappointed and bewildered. On the other hand, for such as will honestly like it, "liking" is too mild a word.

But if the ultimate consumer really is interested in learning what writers mean by technique, "The Little French Girl" affords a palatable demonstration. The style is exactly adapted to the substance; and the construction exemplifies that satisfying economy which can only be practised upon an abundance of means — an orderly richness, a choice liberality. In a rather long narrative there is not a line of padding nor a thin spot; and the action is interwoven with that nicety which seems entirely natural until one remarks that there are never any loose ends, as in nature. Though it is more artifice than creative art, there is a vital spark in all the characters.

But the genuine appeal is that almost all the persons involved have charm. Alix de Mouveray, the little French girl, is lovable. Her mother, Madame Vervier, is a *grande amoureuse*, possessed of the fascination and finish of a painting by Fragonard or Lancret. Even the English girl, Toppie, the sweet, pious prig whose mystical passion was singularly misdirected to a very worldly young man — even

she extorts her tribute of credence and admiration. She suits her surroundings; she is as right as a lily of the valley in its ambush of chill fragile green. And Giles, the dependable hero, though he is not exciting, is as good as bread, and as relishable. Alix is the protagonist of all that is best in the French character and system, as Giles is of the English. Their love story is in some sort an allegory of the *entente cordiale*, but it isn't spoiled by over insistence on the parallel.

Another contrast of French and English occurs in "Nina", though in this case the story would not be much altered if the young Frenchman were entirely eliminated. He is merely chorus and commentator, who cannot quite understand Nina's enduring infatuation for her scapegrace husband, Morton Caldwell. Neither can I, but I acknowledge that it is possible. Nina is somewhat akin to Patient Griselda; Morton is a faint echo of the magnificent Burgo Fitzgerald. The unvarying quality of Nina's affection makes her story seem repetitious, which it is not actually. The limited cast and background also tend toward monotony; a few minor characters and subsidiary developments would have been welcome. If this were a song, one could say there is nothing to it save a simple, agreeable melody, but that the pitch is true. The elder Mrs. Caldwell is most completely realized; she is the salt of a concoction which would otherwise be rather insipid.

There is much more sting and sharpness to the work of Grace Flandrau in "Entranced". It is like the difference between the American and English air. And Mrs. Flandrau's special quality, which is brought to perfection in this book, is her ability to render atmosphere; not mere local color, nor even a personal background, but the tension and temperature, the shading and tone, of a certain group of persons involved in a given relation to each other at a definite place and time. The action of "Entranced" passes in St. Paul, and it really is St. Paul, not even Minneapolis, or perhaps anything but Minneapolis, since unplumbed spiritual abysses separate the Twin Cities. So this is no vague, delocalized "midwestern metropolis", but St. Paul. The Robinsons belong in it, are rooted there. Richard and Rita Malory, marrying into the Robinson family, attempt to amalgamate themselves with it. They fail.

That is the story. Richard and Rita are not of the same stuff as the Robinsons; there is a difference in texture, in density and specific gravity. The Robinsons are solids and the Malorys are fluids. They are cursed with the curse of Reuben: "unstable as water, thou shalt not excel." Richard Malory is a dilution of Lucien de Rubempré, a man lacking in that inner integrity which is essential to success. Rita does not lend herself to glib definition. I should like to read more of her — what happened to her and Ives and Gordon, afterward. There is, by the way, an especially delicious chapter — what a woman thinks about when she is annoyed at her husband. Don't miss this.

"Julie Cane" is in an entirely different genre. It is built around character, but character in the abstract. Everyone in it exemplifies some psychological trait or theory, accordant to the newer school of that dubious science. Perhaps deliberately, the author has given Julie no positive personality. In the old phrase, she cannot call her soul her own, because she hasn't any. Even her red hair

is like an endowment, given her for one special purpose. It is to draw the eye of Alan Birdsall, who is obliged to love Julie because his mother used henna. Upon the same compulsion, Julie's father had married Julie's mother; thus Julie existed only by and for her red hair. Her father supplied her a counterbalance to this weight in the scale of destiny; else she would have been dragged to perdition by the hair of her head. It is all quite logical, just as one and one makes two; but life isn't mathematics, it's a sort of insane algebra, most of the factors being X. "Julie Cane" is both clever and interesting; nevertheless, an unregenerate reader — meaning myself — cannot avert a suspicion that it would have been three instead of two dimensional if Mr. Higgins would allow that living must be dealt with as a condition, not a theorem. All the same, I recommend "Julie Cane". Mr. O'Higgins can write. He has a conscience about his work. His stories read with that delightful ease which indicates much labor on the part of the author.

So has Margaret Culkin Banning a most tyrannical conscience, mainly preoccupied with ethical problems. Perhaps it is impertinent to go behind the returns, and speculate upon a novelist's avenue of approach to her task. But I cannot help surmising that Mrs. Banning is one of the more fortunate minority; that she has seen tragedy rather than experienced it. Her grave and deep sincerity, her respect for any form of suffering, gives me this impression. No sensitive person dares take sorrow lightly until after it has been fully proved and outworn. The humor which grief distils as its own antidote is absent from Mrs. Banning's books. It is the one respect in which her sane and even realism falls short. In "A Handmaid of the Lord" she has elected to state the case of the average woman, whose experience is the common feminine lot of marriage and motherhood. Veronika Pearse is quite an ordinary girl, but not a blurred composite portrait. She is neither generalized into flatness, nor sensationalized for the sake of factitious suspense. From the inevitable problems which best the dependent wife and mother, Veronika is forced to evolve a serviceable philosophy. Being inevitable, the answer is old: that one must endure with dignity what one cannot alter. This is a fine novel, fine in grain.

Holyoake Tarrant, hero of "The Triumph of Gallio", also in search of a philosophy, comes to a very different conclusion. His progress toward that end is not so much a novel as an example of dialectic, an exercise in metaphysics. The word doesn't mean anything, I suspect, and so it fits the occasion; Tarrant's final refuge is in pure negation. Through a series of losses and frustrations, he is convinced that all moral and spiritual values are imaginary. They must be, he argues, since even in the material world one cannot arrive at an absolute; and how much less so in the shadowy realm of the abstract. From the ancient Stoics Tarrant borrows their indifference to appearances; and from the Epicureans

---

A Passage to India. By E. M. Forster. Harcourt, Brace and Co.
The Little French Girl. By Anne Douglas Sedgwick. Houghton Mifflin Co.
Nina. By Susan Ertz. D. Appleton and Co.
Entranced. By Grace Flandrau. Harcourt, Brace and Co.
Julie Cane. By Harvey O'Higgins. Harper and Bros.
A Handmaid of the Lord. By Margaret Culkin Banning. George H. Doran Company.
The Triumph of Gallio. By W. L. George. Harper and Bros.

he takes their rule of enjoying whatever brief pleasure his senses can afford him. For love, religion, honor, fame, like Gallio he cares for none of these things, after sampling them all.

His narrative would be more engrossing if the end were not so clearly in sight from the beginning. It has a certain brilliance, but is thin and mechanical, with something of the staleness of yesterday's newspaper. In it Mr. George attempts to "come back" to his earlier form. But yesterday never returns.