VIII

Maria Thompson Daviess's "The Road to Providence"*

The taste for moral sayings or "sentences" has always been a marked trait of the English genius in literature. Mingled with a relish for humorous whimsicality and eccentric characterisation, it remains a feature of American fiction. What character recurs more frequently in our most popular novels than the rustic philosopher who holds forth at the cross-roads store, and seasons his rude wisdom with a strong spice of the vernacular? The *fin lettré* may feel disdain for the crudeness of the convention which keeps the type alive, and which constructs a hundred such Socrates of the wood-shed and front yard, out of a few well-worn aphorisms whose novelty, in each instance, consists solely in the manner in which they are revamped with a new homeliness of simile, and tortured into a new uncouthness of expression. But for the great public there is no staleness in the repetition, and each remote descendant of Polonius is received with warm welcome as guide, counsellor and friend, and is added piously to the already well-filled gallery of familiar deities—the lares and penates of American hearth-side shrines.

It is the distinction of Mrs. Alice Hegan Rice that, in her Mrs. Wiggs, she created the feminine counterpart of David Harum, and blazed a new path for those women writers qualified to enter that particular field of fiction wherein didactic intention is masked by mild sentimentality, and humorous character study. Such a writer is Miss Daviess, whose delineation of a little group of Tennessee country folk living on the "Providence Road," is at once differentiated from the work of the writers of the earlier local colour school dealing with the same locality, by its lack of insistence upon any particular traits that set these people apart from the people of any other section. Miss Daviess's characters—Mother Mayberry, Squire Tutt, the Deacon, and all the rest—are merely rustics of a conventional type that is recognised at once as belonging rather to fiction than to life. Mother Mayberry, whose heart is welling with love for all her neighbours; who is possessed of such sound good sense and tact in the application of it to the affairs of village life; who finds a solution for every difficulty; who supplies the sick with simple remedies for their ailments, and the well with cup custards and raised biscuits—her motto, and that of her kind, would seem to be: "Eat and the world eats with you"—and who is of an inexhaustible

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sentimentality and loquaciousness—is there any one who does not at once recognise this central figure, about whom all the mild happenings in this simple little book revolve, through having met her, not in any known circle of society, but in more books than one can recall by title? Let us admit that she is a good soul, but let us also be grateful that she is always safely confined behind the bars of a book. For who could possibly stand the terrors of daily intercourse with one who releases such a flow of words on the slightest provocation, who invariably curses the sacred silences of sorrow and sympathy with a ready-made discourse, and who, with a fiendish aptitude for the figurative style of expression, seems ever half gasping with impatience to fling the flowers of her exuberant fancy at the sufferer she would encourage and refresh? A woman of this kind, if she really existed, would, in spite of the feverish goodness of her heart, be a public nuisance, and would never be mistaken for anything but a maniac. Sentimental paranoia is her malady.

As for the story itself, it is too slight for criticism or analysis, but those who are sentimentally inclined will find pleasure in the love-story of a famous singer lady who loses her voice and the handsome young doctor who helps her to find it.

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