VI.

Miss Johnston's "Audrey."*

A reviewer of books becomes at last extremely difficult to please. He reads so many fairly good ones that fairly good ones finally to him are identical with fairly bad ones. They are all in the end a welter of words and a turmoil of type, and he wishes that they had never been written. Then he ought to go away somewhere out of doors and let literature alone for a little while till he acquires again an appetite for reading. In a jaded state of over-reviewing he cannot be fair to a mediocre book. Still, he may have his uses even then. If his condemnation ceases to be authoritative, at least his praise is better worth the having, for only something very good indeed can wring it from his pen. When, at the very end of the rush of "holiday books," he comes upon one that can rivet his attention and get firm hold of his feeling, and compel him to put aside important and importunate demands until he has read it through, then it is safe to say that the book in question must at any rate have something in it that is quite unusual.

De nobis fabula narratur. We are the jaded reviewer and Miss Johnston's *Audrey* is the book that took possession

*Audrey. By Mary Johnston. Illustrated. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company. $1.50.

of us. We mention this rather personal fact as testimony to the exceptional quality of the novel; and, perhaps, we may be thus relieved from the necessity of explaining in too much detail just why the book appears to be so very good. It is, we may say, however, a distinct advance upon *To Have and to Hold* in every essential particular—in construction, in execution, and in style. Those who read the other novel found it just a very entertaining story. It carried them along and kept them wide awake and interested them, even though they knew all the while that Captain Ralph Percy was never in any real danger, and therefore that he was a quite impossible hero; for a possible hero in the same situation would have been pinked and scalped and drowned a dozen times over if he had had the necessary number of lives.

But *Audrey* is not that sort of a book at all. It is just as absorbing, and even more so, but it has a subjective as well as an objective interest, and there are character and characterisation in it as well as stirring scenes of love and strife. The central theme is *au fond* a psychological study of the man who is still young and at heart unspoiled, but who is superficially *blasé* and bored, because he has done everything and seen everything and experienced everything except the profound emotion that comes to one who for the first time loves greatly after having heretofore loved lightly. The man of the world, polished, invulnerable, sufficient to himself in everything—how and from whom shall the supreme stroke come to rend his heart, dissolve his pride, and sweep away all self-control in an overwhelming storm of passion? Who shall be the one woman of his life? Shall it be she whom all would instantly select as his natural mate, some dainty, well-born girl, with the *cachet* of gentility plainly evident in her every word and gesture, no stranger to the great world of fashion, perhaps a little bit *rusée*, but pure and proud and noble and high-bred? Or shall it be the one who has learned little of life, whose simplicity is that of nature itself, and whose fascination is the fascination which owes nothing whatever to experience or art? This is the problem which is back of all the pure romance of Audrey, and it makes the book a study in temperamental psychology.

Miss Johnston, alone among the very popular novelists of the day, possesses the gift of style. Some of her pages are wonderfully well written. She has somehow infused into her story the shimmer of Southern sunshine and it tints her scenes with a beauty that often rises to pure loveliness. Listen to these opening sentences:

> The valley lay like a ribbon thrown into the midst of the encompassing hills. The grass which grew there was soft and fine and abundant; the trees which sprang from its dark, rich mould were tall and great of girth. A bright stream flashed through it, and the sunshine fell warm upon the grass and changed the tassels of the maize into golden plumes. Above the valley, east and north and south, rose the hills, clad in living green, mantled with the purpling grape, wreathed morn and eve with trailing mist. To the westward were the mountains, and they dwelt apart in a blue haze. Only in the morning, if the mist were not there, the sunrise struck upon their long summits, and in the evening they stood out, high and black and fearful, against the splendid sky. The child who played beside the cabin door often watched them as the valley filled with shadows, and thought of them as a great wall between her and some land of the fairies which must needs lie beyond that barrier, beneath the splendour and the evening star. The Indians called them the Endless Mountains, and the child never doubted that they ran across the world and touched the floor of heaven.

And so, all through the book, there is a most delicious *plein air* effect, an inspiration of health, of strength, of beauty, that never fades away.

Not that *Audrey* is devoid of faults. Miss Johnston here, as in her other books, forgets that even in romance *non omnia possumus omnes*. Romance, indeed, has its limitations and restrictions as well defined as those inherent in the most rigid realism, and they are in fact essentially the same. In realistic fiction everything must be true to life; in romantic fiction everything must for the moment seem so. You may introduce what improbabilities you will, but you are bound in doing so to maintain the illusion. If you do not, then you drop at once from the heights of art to the depths of dulness, and this is true whether you are building a romantic novel or whether

you are telling a mere nursery tale. Now, in the body of her book Miss Johnston holds you well in hand. For the moment, you accept her courtly, cavalier Virginia as the Virginia of historic fact. You do not disbelieve even when Audrey, untaught, ignorant, and primitive, pours forth her indignant eloquence in language which no *grande dame* of the period could have had at her command. But at the last the thing goes wrong. Audrey's sudden loss of love, her implacable resentment, her tenacity of purpose against the man whom she adored and who was all that she had ever had or ever dreamed of having—and this because when in a half-delirium of fever he had made her seem what she was not—this strains credulity to the breaking-point. And that old, old transformation of an untrained girl into a great actress—surely Miss Johnston might have left that to the twentieth century and not have asked us to believe it of the young eighteenth. It became a mere *cliché* full fifty years ago.

Therefore, let the reader go on through the splendid duel scene in Chapter XXIV., and then let him take our word for it, and close the volume there. It will require self-restraint to do so, but not to do so will only lead to disappointment. For the rest of *Audrey* is a serious mistake.

H. T. P.