Literature

Men and Women in Recent Fiction

We do not actually know the men and women with whom we associate. We only know their outward appearance in action or repose, receive enough conversation views and love glimpses of them to form partial judgments. It is therefore the peculiar business of novelists to make us acquainted with the people we meet in real life. They can produce an illusion of personality with mere words which is more veraciously representative of character than the conduct of the average person is under the lynx-eyed surveillance and of his kind, and more fascinating because it is more intimately revealing.

Thus, in real life we should never comprehend the heroine of Mr. Howells' recent novel.[1] To all appearances she is the highly specialized product of an artistic and artificial system of living and thinking. She has too much the symphony effect. There is not a pastel in the art galleries of this new country so exquisitely delicate in manner and suggestion as this word portrait of a young "new" woman who delivers lectures in a Western university upon the virtue of being entirely natural and sincere!"

> "Her silvery gray veil misting her gray hat above her hair, sprinkled even at her age with gray, and her gray gloves lying beside her plate, physically, but not spiritually detached from her gray costume. Her intelligent eyes, glancing from her aunt to him and back again to her, had lovely skyey lights in them of the sort that haunt the horizons of passing summer."

Add to this that she could afford "the serenity like that of a September afternoon," and it is easy to see how admirable, mysterious and disconcerting she would be to comprehend in real life. We have Mr. Howells's word for it that she is all for "naturalness," but if so Nature must greatly inprove before she can measure standards with her. Nothing could be more gracefully supernatural than her attitude appears to be toward the incoherent, ignorant, fussing world about her. And we should never know anything of her as a human being but for the fact that Mr. Howells includes the backbiting conversations of her aunt and uncle, betrays her love secrets, and in recording her "inspiration" he offers one of the most cunningly diverting jokes ever perpetrated at the expense of feminine casuistry.

These cobweb interpretations, with humor shining through like the autumnal sun, are becoming more characteristic of Mr. Howells. The only possible objection to the types he portrays is the indolence of his men. It would be a breach of literary etiquet for a man to do a day's work in one of his novels. No more perfect gentlemen were ever bred into life or fiction. They have excellent views upon all subjects, and still more excellent morals. And they should have an easy time living up to them in the vacation existence provided by Mr. Howells. On this account it is difficult to say whether they were moral for moral reasons or because their sensibilities are too refined to endure the indelicacy of an immorality. In any case the snub nosed average reader is introduced and made intimately acquainted with one class of the best people in America, which will probably go a long way toward awakening those finer feelings in him that tend in time toward the development of taller, more aristocratic noses, a feature significant of certain qualities that he greatly needs.

But along with other extravagances of a new and rich country we have more than one class of "the best people." The author may choose from several, and those represented in Anna Robinson Brown's new novel, *The Wine Press*,[2] differ radically from those portrayed by Mr. Howells. The heroine is the product of a Woman's College, where education is a sort of moral and intellectual surgery by which women are alienated

[1] Miss Bellard's Inspiration. *By W. D. Howells* New York: Harper Brothers. $1.50.

[2] The Wine Press. *By Anna R. Brown.* New York: D. Appleton & Co. $1.50.

from and rendered independent of men. She is beautiful, sentimental and morbidly bent upon treading her wine press alone. And like others of her class she feels downtrodden by man, suspicious of his most innocent smile, insulted by his very existence, no matter how politely he leaves her to tread and tread alone. She is a simpler type than Mr. Howells' heroine, who is a philosopher, with French heels to her logic. And the reader recognizes in her the old maid version of the most primitive kind of women, those savage, simple creatures who fight against taking a man for a mate. In this evoluted type it is a severely intellectual form of coquetry and as unbecoming to a maid as a warrior's helmet.

There are just three books among those mentioned in this review in which the poor average reader would feel "at home." He could meet Alice Hegan Rice's *Sandy*[3] upon the grounds of common interest. For Sandy is about as near as a lady can come to interpreting the cross which he represents between a useful citizen and a baseball hero. She has not realized the character so intelligently as she did that of "Mrs. Wiggs" and "Lovey Mary's," but it is near enough the original to entertain every old "fan" in the country. And while they are out on the edge of town somewhere whooping up the game, if Aunt Ploomie, Leagan Mott, Mrs. Tibbins and Miss Ellaretta could put on their Sunday things and step out of Mary Waller's delightful novel, *Sonna,*[4] through *The Little Hills,*[5] in Nancy Husten Banks' new story, and if they could there meet "Mrs. Pottle," "The Widow Wall," "Mrs. Crabtree" and "Miss Arabella," we should have such an exchange of gossip, opinions and homely wisdom as this world never heard before. The first group live in an island village, with men to correspond. The latter live among the little hills in a remote corner of the world, without a sufficient number of men to correspond. This accounts for the difference in the premiums placed upon masculinity. The prevailing characteristic in them all is a serpent's tooth curiosity concerning one mother's affairs, which is healed by a natural tender heartedness. And there exists among them a commendable rivalry in every branch of the culinary art. Never before has there been such cooking and eating in fiction since authors began to serve tea and salads to their fatigued characters. Readers often marvel at the length of time heroes and heroines do without food in the hurried parts of the tale apparently without inconvenience. And of course the author may leave this to be inferred. But there can be no question of the fact that people in fiction do not get enough wholesome food, and this no doubt accounts for their scandalous conduct in many instances. Meanwhile we observe the superior morality in these books, where much time is given to homely eating and drinking. If there be any left among us who wish to have their memories refreshed concerning the cakes of their childhood, or who would recall the clove pink qualities of old fashioned human nature, they should read *Sonna* and *The Little Hills.* Almost any one can think up a tale, but to put in all the feeling, the tender heart logic, that makes people companionable and kin is another business. And it must be done on a sublimated diet of ices and salads.

Men predominate in Western fiction and they belong to that class who go forth with the determination to amass a fortune within six months. But as a rule they are morbidly subjective in their relations to the natural scenery. It overwhelms them so that they sometimes commit murder, or suicide, or chase an attractive girl forty miles over the burning prairie. And the author makes a point of convincing us that it is not the devil which caused them to get drunk and act this way, but a sort of domestic nostalgia produced by loneliness in the midst of so much savage grandeur of mountain peaks or bubbling desert heat —a charitable construction certainly to place upon conduct otherwise so dubious. But Mr. Nason avoids this danger by causing all the people in his new California story[6] to take a civil engineering

[3] SANDY. *By Alice Hegan Rice.* New York: The Century Company. $1.00.

[4] SONNA. *By Mary E. Waller.* New York: Harper Bros. $1.50.

[5] THE LITTLE HILLS. *By Nancy H. Banks.* New York: The Macmillan Co. $1.50.

[6] THE VISION OF ELIJAH BERH. *By Frank L. Nason.* Boston: Little, Brown & Co. $1.50.

view of the scenery. In this way he saves everybody's life and reason except the hero's. He is described as "Praisin' the Lord an' callyhootin' around like a skyrocket with its tail on fire." Conceiving that the plan of a great water reservoir in the mountains had been revealed to him from heaven, he was conscientiously unscrupulous as to ways and means of achieving his ends. Men of this type often become great statesmen in the Church, but to be a visionary and unscrupulous at the same time unfits a man for financial success. Some things cannot be mixed in the business world which are very successfully mixed in certain circles of the religious world.

And besides the people we live with but do not know there are the people we remember. We may never have seen them in real life, but we remember them out of tradition, poetry and history—fair, heroic forms vanishing into the golden meter of the passing years. To this class belong the man and the maid in Mary Austin's *Isidro,*[7] a story of mission days in old California. They come to us enhanced through the memory of three generations, and they are dearer to the fancy than many characters more rudely modern. Two romances of Southern life during the war period ought to lend color to the conviction abroad that the only people in the South were those of military and antebellum fame whom we remember. For the novelist rarely presents any other from that section. It is doubtful if *Serena,*[8] her impossible kindred, her revolting slaves and absurd lover ever existed at all; but it is certain that none like them will ever live again. The Federal officers who court Southern women in Charles Egbert Craddock's new story, *The Storm Center,*[9] are more credible types, and it is the first time in its history that the Civil War has been reduced to a neighborhood affair, but the story of their wooings is the best this author has written in years.

So far we have been dealing with our own kind in our own country, but in *A Dark Lantern*[10] we meet our other kind in England. The scene opens with a line of carriages drawn up before Lady Peterborough's mansion in St. James's Square, and the humble reader is given to understand that royalties are being entertained within (there are as many male royalties oggling innocent heroines in British fiction as there are Confederate colonels strutting through stories of Southern life!) and that it is the German princeling soldier who steals the pretty heroine's heart in this instance. In the second chapter every one adjourns to the terrace about the House of Parliament, and the humble reader stands aside to see the characters introduced to all the famous men in England, not because they are needed in the tale, but the ceremony is inevitable in a first-class English novel; it is a sort of literary obsequiousness paid to a "paternal government." After that the story moves briskly. The princeling soldier having failed to seduce, offers morganatic marriage to Katharine Dereham, and the woman's character is revealed in the pathetic helplessness with which she resists his arguments. She is a good woman deserted by her heart in the fight. With her virtue is not a principle, but a matter of taste and temperament. She is of a quality which requires ideality in love and shrinks from the grossness of mere passion. Her weakness is psychic rather than physical. Thus she does not fall through the princeling's appeal to her senses, but, brought under the hypnotic influence of the man with the dark lantern face, she yields to a questionable relationship. And having solemnly abandoned herself, she recognizes her condition and submits with the calm reticence of a spirit who has lost the power to save herself. The man is an even rarer type. He lacks the clairvoyant sense upon which he plays in others, and staggers fiercely, distrustfully, through every relationship in life. Viewed as a hypnotist there is nothing remarkable in his character, but the impotence of so regnant a spirit to shield himself is a curiously subtle point for an author to make in character drawing and is likely to attract attention.

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[7] ISIDRO. *By Mary Austin.* New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. $1.50.

[8] SERENA. *By Virginia F. Boyle.* New York: A. S. Barnes & Co. $1.50.

[9] THE STORM CENTER. *By Charles E. Craddock.* New York: Macmillan & Co. $1.50.

[10] THE DARK LANTERN. *By Elizabeth Robins.* New York: The Macmillan Co. $1.50.