

HAROLD BINDLOSS'S "THE DUST OF CONFLICT"*

The title of this book is well chosen. There is enough conflict in it to satisfy the most exacting of strenuous minds. And there is much dust—in fact, it is mostly dust. A book may typify a fad or a fashion, or a natural current of evolution in literature, by being either the best or the worst of its kind. It is equally instructive in either case. And the best of the kind, in a sense, is apt to be the worst in that it carries to cumulative effect all the qualities of the type and proves them either good or bad. The story here under consideration is an example of this sort of book. It is, or should be, one of the best of the kind, because it gives in over-rich measure all the qualities supposed to be necessary for that type of story. In reality it is one of the worst of the kind, and in being so it proves the type to be a bad type, because, as seen in this book, its faults are so glaring. We are told, somewhere in the personal notes of literary journals, that the author is a quiet person who lives at home in England. Presumably he reads many such books, and if he were an Irishman instead of an Englishman, one might easily imagine this volume to be a huge practical joke, a sort of parody of the kind of book it imitates. The thing the professor in Mrs. Wharton's delicious story, *The Descent of Man*, attempted to do, with the disastrous result of being taken seriously and making money at it, perhaps this is what has happened to Mr. Bindloss. Anyway, it would be hard to find a book which is so complete a satire on all the faults of the so-called "novel of adventure." The characters are the mere shreds to hang the happenings on, the old conventional lay-figures of the novelistic property-room. And the happenings tumble over one another with such rapidity that it is scarcely possible for the most careful reader to keep any sort of a coherent thread of narrative, or to disentangle the intrigue, the fighting, and the mix-up generally. The hero is, of course, the usual fine

**The Dust of Conflict*. By Harold Bindloss. New York: F. A. Stokes Company.

young Englishman, poor, but of good family, who takes the crime of a cousin on his shoulders because of the woman who loves this cousin. That goes without saying; they all do it in that sort of book. Then this fine young hero goes to America . . . also goes without saying. He meets the daughter of an American millionaire on shipboard, saves her life, her father gives him a start . . . beautifully according to rule. The hero goes to Cuba. . . . Cuba is more or less up to date; it was South Africa some years back. There his rush of strenuousness begins, and he gets mixed up in the Cuban insurrection, in the blowing up of the *Maine*, and in the growing dawn on the horizon of that much-tried country when the gallant American troops are likely to come down . . . hurrah, boys, hurrah! Oh, how exciting it is! We hold our breath . . . because of the dust . . . and try to find out what the conflict is all about. Of course it all comes out right in the end, the right man finds the right woman, and all goes merry as a marriage bell. As Kipling says, "I left the lovers loving and the parents signing cheques." They always do in that sort of novel. Of course it's all very harmless, and for those who like that sort of thing, this is just the sort of thing they will like . . . if the bromide may be excused. But what a sober-minded reader may find to cavil at in this type of book is that it is not so harmless as it seems. With great mouthfuls of sounding words about honour, and courage, and morality hurled at one, there is a calm disregard of honour of the finer sort, of the higher sense of decency and morality. A man fights and slashes about him regardless of the right or justice of the cause he may be fighting for. The American millionaire comes down to Cuba to make money out of the troubles of the harassed island, and there is absolutely nothing in the point of view of the author, or any of his lay-figures of characters, to show they feel that these shady financial operations are anything but legitimate and quite the proper thing. There is a "might is right" attitude about the book which is pernicious . . . as about most books of this type. As long as a man doesn't actually murder his

friend or ruin a woman, he is an honourable man. It doesn't seem to matter if he has absolutely no sense of civic decency or of public spirit, or of any other of the viewpoints that have come to mean something in our present-day life. That is why this type of book does harm. The "adventure" novel that opens out new countries to us, that takes us into wild lands among wild people, or shows us civilised man in places where civilisation stops—that sort of book is one of the finest blossoms on the tree of American literature. And the story of stirring adventure for younger readers is all right in its way, if the moral taught be one of uprightness in the higher sense, not from the mere prize-fighting point of view. But for the sort of book this present volume typifies there is no legitimate use in literature. Probably it will sell very well, however.

J. Marchand.