IV.

Norman Duncan's "The Soul of the Street."*

This book deals, indeed, with soul, but it has nothing to do with the street. The scene of the six stories is lower Washington Street, and the characters are real individuals of Little Syria. But the author has seen in these people only those attributes which are common to fervidly sentimental humanity. We learn nothing about the special characteristics of that quarter of our city, the habits of life of the inhabitants. The point of view is not that of the realist, who, if he is faithful to his school, will allow only that degree of feeling and poetry which is inherent in his subject, and will keep, as much as he can, his own soul out of his book. Lower Washington Street has been strained so thoroughly through Mr. Duncan's temperament that in these stories it is, I fancy, the tones of the author's character and imagination which stand in high relief. It is the personal, lyric quality of the poet, rather than the impersonal transference of life into art.

These tales, therefore, are told by a dreamer and an idealist, are tales about the impalpable soul, which has no local habitation. We cannot well quarrel with poetry; and, I fancy, few of us would wish to in this case. For the subjective mood is sincere enough, the unworldly spirit is simple and charming. The author's treatment of his characters is loving and sympathetic in the extreme, and into his style he puts the same tender care. Surely any one who reads the book for the first time would feel the artistic consistency of mood in which the work is done, would feel the charm of the genuine enthusiasm for simple virtue. The conventional values of the work-a-day world are reversed. The book tends to reconcile the weary world to heartfelt obscurity.

But the note, though pure and sweet and sincere, is limited, and the restless modern spirit, pleased at the first reading, is apt to be rendered somewhat impatient at the second. Undiluted soul in large quantities is a little palling, and when I took up *The Soul of the Street* for the second time, I missed variety, modulation, moral light and shade. What had soothed me at first I passed over, in the second reading, rather impatiently, feeling that that quality had been tasted and gave no new flavour.

The character which best expresses the dominant note of these stories is Khalil Khayat, the editor of the Syrian newspaper in New York—*Kawkab El-horriah,* or the *Star of Liberty.* He is portrayed as an ingenuous, devoted old man, who loves the good and knows practically nothing of the bad. He is a dreamer and an enthusiast for the rights of man, and writes many articles instinct with the spirit of revolution against the Sultan. He loves little children, and one of the tales is that told by the editor to his lame friend, Billy Halloran, son of a drunken Irishwoman. Another story tells how the old editor voluntarily reduces his small salary so that the proprietor of the paper need not accept a bribe shamefully to change the political policy of the *Star of Liberty.*

Nageeb Fiani, violinist, the "greatest player in all the world," is another of the real persons in the "quarter" who are portrayed as beautiful, Quixotic enthusiasts. It is for music and rich, Oriental imagery; for visions of roaring lions subdued by sweet sounds, and lovely princesses; for all the vague, coloured effects, for which, perhaps, the eternal narghile was partly responsible, that Fiani waxes poetic. The contrast between this sweet, remote soul and the rough, Tammany politician is one of the best isolated points in the story of "The Greatest Player in All the World."

*The Soul of the Street. By Norman Duncan. New York: McClure, Phillips and Company.

Besides these two characters there are the important and high-souled doctor who gave up a good practice in the East to take care of the proletarian Syrians of our quarter; the seventy-year-old janitor of the Greek Church, who counts time from the date of the death of his wife, to whom he was married for more than fifty years; the priest of dauntless soul who crushed the spirit of the wicked Wrestler in love with his neighbour's wife, and other characters, through all of whom shines the idealistic temper of the author.

It is not only in the conception of the characters, but also in the style and the things said that we find reiterated statement of Mr. Duncan's heartfelt, loving attitude. It is obvious from his language that he loves to "feel" rather than to think, that he cares only for goodness, gentleness, poetry, and deprecates anything morally or physically unpleasant.

There is a wide, blue sky and a stagnant gutter, and the eyes of men move freely in their sockets; and in the contemplation of the one there is a great lifting up, but in the other an unprofitable sickness of soul.

Here are some extracts, taken more or less at random, which express the dominantly soulful quality of the volume:

Billy Halloran was in rare, sore need of some comfort and courage—such, perchance, as may be found in a hand laid on the head in tenderness, be the touch ever so swift and diffident, and in the sound of a voice speaking softly of old, far-away things.

No man knew better than this old one the worth of a touch and a tale in the twilight.

Khayat was still as a statue, and his eyes were shining like the eyes of a roguish child playing at hide-and-seek. Ah, he is comparable only to a child—Khayat is! The spirit had taken life lease of a corner in his heart!

The rapture beneficently lingered, providing him a little dream with which to comfort himself through the evil hours of many days. . . .

The book ends thus; the editor says:

"And concerning blessedness, this I know—know for truth, though it be all I have wrested from the eternal in a long life—that it is more blessed to lighten the life of a child than—than—any—other—thing."

He leaned back in his chair—and nodded—and smiled—and nodded, and fell gently asleep, like a child; for he was an old man, and used to the world's hard knocks.

From the style of this book there is many a writer to-day who can learn a good lesson. There is nothing slap-dash about it, nothing hasty. It is done with evident pleasure in expression, and the skill of it is often quite remarkable. Sometimes, indeed, the style is too rich for our Western senses, and suggests obscure effort and almost conscious perversity of phrase. But the sentences and phrases which delight for their own sake are many, and serve well to reinforce the impression already made by characters and theme—the impression that Mr. Duncan is one of the rare modern writers who sincerely attempts to put down nothing but what is best in human nature, and what is most worked over and perfect in literary dress. There are many rough persons who would condemn both the things Mr. Duncan has done—his emphasis of "soul," his sentimentality, on the one hand, and his conscious, tender, lingering over the details of style on the other hand. But the fact remains that *The Soul of the Street* is an excellent book in a limited way—a little note that is soon exhausted, but that is pure and admirable as far as it goes.

Hutchins Hapgood.