The Novels of William Black

WHEN the news of Mr. William Black's death came hurrying over the wires to be duly and decorously announced in our morning papers, how many memories sped back with one swift leap to the Manse of Airlie, how many readers recalled with a smile and a sigh that never-to-be-forgotten battle between the village boys and the minister's sons with the redoubtable Whaup to lead them. A Homeric fight is this, equal to the combats of Sir Walter's boyhood, when the heroic Green-Breeks defied all opponents, and held the narrow streets of Edinburgh as Middleton and young Dunbar held the Bass fortress for King James. The stones and gravel fly hurtling through the air, the Whaup's shrill voice rings above the din, and then—forth from the Manse steps the minister, horse-whip in hand, and besieged and besiegers scatter like chaff before that awful presence. "When I was your age," says the outraged divine to his scapegrace son, "I was busier with my Greek Testament than with flinging names at a wheen laddies." To which the Whaup—

"his soldier's pride
Touched to the quick"—

retorts with spirit: "It was mair than names, as ye might hae observed from their noses, had ye seen them." And at this point the poor little "Daughter of Heth" comes upon the scene, her dark hair blown across her face, her soft eyes wide with wonder, and the charming story which made its author's fame begins with a lad's first love.

It was not Mr. Black's maiden novel, nor was fiction the field in which he earliest sought to win distinction. Art had beguiled his boyhood, and it was only after years of labor that he realized very sadly the inadequacy of his talent as a landscape painter. That manual skill, without which, as Mr. Marion Crawford dryly reminds us, genius cannot find expression, was lacking to the student; and failing to make himself an artist, he became, in the course of development, an art critic, according to the programme laid down by that arch-scoffer, Disraeli. But not for long. The impetuous young Scotchman had none of the qualities out of which good critics are made. His was the creative faculty; and when journalism had taught him the use of his pen and some measure of self-confidence, he found at last the way along which the kindly fates had meant that he should travel to success.

His first novels, "Love or Marriage" and "In Silk Attire," were received with that easy tolerance which the English reading world extends to anything in the nature of fiction. They were published before he was thirty, and were followed quickly by "A Daughter of Heth," his third book and his best. It is true a note of plaintiveness was sounded so often in this otherwise delightful story that we wearied a little from time to time, and wished Coquette would pluck up her spirits, or that Lord Earlshope would emigrate to Borneo; but then

we could always turn for distraction to the "third volume of Josephus," hollowed out to hold white mice; or we could watch the Whaup and his fellow-conspirators dipping their good little brother, Wattie, into the burn until he consented to "say a sweer," and this "vision of sin" comforted us through a great many melancholy chapters.

"The Strange Adventures of a Phaeton" repeated the success won by "A Daughter of Heth," and people enamored of cheerfulness found it even more to their liking. A rambling, sunshiny book, full of gentle humor and charming descriptions of English scenery, and with some unimpassioned love-making to fill up idle hours. Then came "A Princess of Thule," and Mr. Black's literary reputation reached its zenith, both in England and in the United States. The novelty, not of the theme, but of the setting; the wild, sweet vision of that far northern land cradled in waves, swathed in mists, rocked by the voice of the tempest, touched all hearts with a sentiment that was half pleasure and half pain. There are books which bring to the tired dweller in towns some gleam of nature's face, some fresh keen wind from the Hebrides, some gentle breath from the Adriatic, some fleeting dream of sea and sky, valley or moor or mountain peak; and, reading them, one sickens of brick walls and the city's hateful din. Such a book was "A Princess of Thule." We stood with Sheila by the water's edge, and saw the great crested waves break in masses of foam on the coast of Stornoway, and the wet grasses shine under the morning sun, and the birds dipping their white wings into the roughened sea. It was a delicious moment while it lasted, but with the turning of a page the illusion vanished, and the wide beautiful horizon narrowed and darkened into the familiar meanness of a street.

The universal welcome extended to this island story made its author one of the most popular novelists of his day. He sprang at once into such dizziness of renown that hysterical admirers wrote magazine articles about his "methods of work,"—always so much more interesting to the public than the work itself,—and about his house in Brighton and his chambers in Buckingham Square. They even described for us his carpets and wall-papers, his tiles and wainscoting, his Florentine embroidery and Indian pottery, and all those manifold household possessions which become of such importance to the world when a man has written a successful book. This was five-and-twenty years ago, and so many newer stars have burned since then in the horizon, so many other houses and chambers and carpets and wall-papers have been written about with equal enthusiasm, that few remember when William Black was the bright particular luminary towards whom every eye was turned with curiosity and expectation.

"Macleod of Dare" in no wise lessened the author's fame. Wilder and sadder than any of the tales which preceded or followed it, melancholy in its forebodings and tragic in its accomplishment, this eery novel held its own, and won its army of readers even in a world which

seldom tolerates what is painful, or pitiful, or true. After its publication in 1879, Mr. Black wrote nothing that added materially to his literary reputation, though he poured forth stories with an industry and a fertility which earned for him an enviable income, and kept his name steadily before the public. No year passed without a novel from his pen. "Kilmeny," "Madcap Violet," "Three Feathers," "Green Pastures and Piccadilly," "White Wings," and a host of successors, terminating in "Wild Eelin," the last of a long line.

All these books have the same general characteristics. The heroes are young, ardent, honorable, and much addicted to healthy outdoor occupations. The heroines are pretty, modest, well-bred, and very musical, playing or singing with that rare perfection which is so common in fiction, and so exceedingly infrequent in life. There is perhaps no fallacy so pathetic as that which persuades the English or Scottish novelist to believe in the singing of his countrywomen, and to describe it with a gallant enthusiasm which does credit to his heart and to his imagination. Mr. Black's young people are as devoted to nature as to song. They live a great deal in the open air. They know the heathery moors, the sweet green pastures, the hills and crags, the curve of the rocky coast line, the lonely Highland lake. Like the Wandering Knight of old, they "ride from land to land," they "sail from sea to sea"; and the descriptions of scenery scattered through the books—if over-abundant—are invariably good. There are adult readers who conscientiously "skip descriptions," just as children—if they be real children—"skip the moral"; but one course is hardly as justifiable as the other. The landscapes Mr. Black could not put upon canvas he transferred to the pages of his novels with a grace and a fidelity which have given them lasting charm.

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