

# UNEXPECTED HAPPENINGS AND SOME RECENT NOVELS



CERTAIN critical friend was discussing the other day a recent magazine story of no particular importance, excepting in so far as it raised a psychological question of rather general interest. The story concerned a moral coward, a weak-backed, flabby type of man, who habitually followed the line of least resistance, even though it made of him a liar, cheat and thief. But he had one surviving ideal, to which he clung—the honour of his house. And when he learns that this has been assailed, the discovery awakens a latent manhood, and for once galvanises him into an act of heroism. The critical friend above mentioned maintained that this ending was fundamentally wrong, impossible, false to the elemental laws of human nature. Character in man or woman he compared to water in a hose-pipe at a constant and easily computed pressure. Turn the nozzle of your hose upon a certain window, and if the pressure is strong enough the water will break the window; if it is not strong enough, it will not break the window; nor, if you turn it in an opposite direction, upon another window, will it break that one either. Similarly, he argued, if a man is morally under too low a pressure to do habitually what is right and honourable, you will gain nothing by changing his environment or exposing him to new trials; you will simply change the direction in which he will waste his ineffectual efforts.

Now all this, like so many other sweeping generalisations, contains just enough truth to be misleading. It is quite true that a man's nature is a fairly stable quantity, that in nine cases out of ten the big crises of life pass and leave him essentially the same man that he was before. The birth of a son, the death of a wife, the loss of a fortune, or the election to high office may stir a man to the depths of his being, make him feel that he has been refined by fire, that his old self is

dead and a new self born of the new joy or sorrow. Yet after the first bitterness or the first elation is passed habit reasserts itself, the man settles back into the old, familiar grooves of life, essentially the same compound of qualities and weaknesses that he always has been. This permanence of human traits may profitably be preached to the novice in fiction making, because young writers—and older writers, too, for that matter—err far oftener in neglecting this principle than by following it too slavishly. The mistake lies in exalting it to the dignity of a fixed law, unyielding as that of hydrostatics.

To say that a man who has consistently played the coward for the first forty years of his life is likely to go on playing the coward to the end is simply to apply one of the first and simplest rules for lifelike character drawing. To deny that any possible combination of circumstances could galvanise him temporarily into heroic action is to refuse to recognise that in every human being there is an unexplored territory, a latent, unmeasured energy for good or evil, which the individual himself would be the last to guess that he possessed. The novelist who habitually refuses to recognise the existence of this indeterminate factor in human nature will err as far from the truth in one direction as the melodramatist does in the other; he will reduce life as a whole to the dead level of mediocrity; he makes it a game in which every possible combination may be worked out mathematically, like the game of checkers; he robs it of the greatest zest which life offers, in or out of fiction—its Unexpected Happenings.

Here is precisely where so many disciples of realism have made their greatest blunder. They seem to have taken as a leading article of their creed, "The unexpected never happens!" They show you an environment as definite in its effect upon character as the mainspring of a clock upon its complicated mechanism;

and within this environment a number of separate entities, each revolving in its appointed place, the movements of each definitely dictated by a fixed number of faults and virtues, like the fixed cogs upon each separate wheel in the clock's works. Now, it is all very well for the novelist to study the general laws of social life, the influence of environment and heredity; but unless he makes allowance for the unusual and the unforeseen, his resultant story will be as unexciting as a familiar chemical analysis. According to the law of probabilities, a certain number of accidents happen annually in every community; an easily ascertainable percentage of the population die from sun-stroke or tuberculosis or railway collisions; and while it is atrociously bad art to invoke the intervention of fate in order to solve a complicated situation, it is equally inartistic to leave wholly out of account the element of accident, since many of the most interesting problems in life have their origin in the Unexpected Happenings. And while no modern author can afford to ignore the subtle combination of influences which makes a certain man or woman precisely what they are, yet the really big situations in fiction or in fact result from imposing upon that man or that woman such a stress that for the time being they will be taken out of themselves, stripped of their acquired veneer, their inherited personalities, and left with nothing but the big, basic, primordial instincts of the race.

Accordingly, it is well for the maker of fiction to remember that while human nature is normally under a fairly uniform pressure, there may arise circumstances that will generate a sudden irresistible energy, like the "short circuiting" of an electric current, resulting in strange, irrational explosions of pent-up passion. It is easy enough to echo glibly Assessor Brack's dictum in *Hedda Gabler* that "people don't do such things"; but the fact remains that strange, mad deeds are all the time being done, and by people from whom we would least expect them. Deeds of the most violent sort—theft, murder, suicide—are fundamentally less a matter of temperament than of opportunity and incentive. Make the circumstances and the motives sufficiently con-

vincing, and no reader will doubt that your Noras committed forgery and your Heddass killed themselves. Indeed, we may go one step further and assert with considerable assurance that when any one stigmatises an episode in a novel as unconvincing, on the ground that it is contrary to the character and temperament of the principal actor, the real trouble lies in the lack of a convincing motive rather than in the lack of temperamental fitness. It takes a keener joy, a deeper sorrow, a stronger temptation to goad one man or woman into action than it does another. What the author must do is to apply the simple law of action and reaction to proportion his propelling force accurately to the degree of inertia to be overcome.

In the main, the big dramas of life reduce themselves down to a struggle of the individual against environment and heredity, with the odds heavily against the individual. Yet it is the one chance in ten, or twenty or a hundred that gives a novel or a play its interest. Make your reader feel from the start that the case is hopeless, that men and women are helplessly enthralled by their own temperaments, and your book is hardly worth the trouble of the writing. But keep alive the possibility of a moral redemption, the hope that the Unexpected may happen, and whether at last it does or not, the interest has been kept alive. A good illustration of the point at issue is conveniently furnished this month by Warwick Deeping's new novel, *A Woman's War*.

The significance of the title lies in the protracted struggle between two women, wives of rival physicians, to advance their husbands' interests, protect them from their besetting weaknesses, and win the decisive victory which each in her heart believes her husband is entitled to win. But the interest of the book lies quite as much with the husbands as with the wives; it might with equal justice have been called *A Man's War*—the war that each man wages silently against himself. Of the two physicians in the story, James Murchison and Parker Steel, it is hard to say at first which is the more heavily handicapped. Murchison has that inborn sympathy with suffering, that enthusiastic

love of his profession, which is the first great requisite for success in the art of healing. But he inherits the weakness of intemperance. His father and grandfather before him both owed their death to alcohol; and he himself, while in the first flush of brilliant achievement in London hospital practice, suddenly awoke to a consciousness that the vice had fastened so powerful a grip upon him that his only hope lay in fleeing the temptations of a big city, sacrificing the opportunities it offered, and contenting himself with the humbler sphere of a small local practice in a country town. Dr. Steel is in every way a man of smaller calibre, a man who could no more have big vices than big virtues. His inordinate vanity and professional ambition ought to have made him a formidable rival of Murchison's had he not lacked that elemental love of his fellow-men, which would have helped him overcome his fastidious shrinking from contact with the rank and file, his arrogance toward the poor and humble. In short, at the opening of the book, the inhabitants of Roxton have a choice between a supercilious and incompetent practitioner, who can be depended upon to keep sober, and a physician of the highest type, who may at a critical hour be found in a drunken stupor. It is inevitable under the circumstances that each of these physicians should at times make serious mistakes, the one from physical unfitness, the other from fundamental lack of knowledge. In the small town of Roxton it is equally inevitable that these mistakes cannot occur without becoming a subject of current gossip—as when Steel treats one of his most important patients for hysteria, not recognising the symptoms of acute glaucoma, which may result in blindness within a week; or when Murchison, operating on a farmer for some intestinal trouble, lets a sponge and a pair of forceps slip from his unsteady fingers and remain within the wound, causing his patient's death. It is the part of the two wives to shield, so far as possible, these men from the consequences of their errors. But the gulf which separates Catherine Murchison from Betty Steel is as wide as that between the characters of the husbands. Catherine is inspired by love; she wants her husband to succeed

by being worthy of success; if she conceals his occasional lapses, it is in order that he himself may keep up his courage and continue the fight that is to end in victory. Betty Steel has no real love for her husband. She wants him to win the bigger practice, by fair means if he can; but if not, then by foul. She will not only hide Steel's blunders, but she will eagerly circulate stories to the discredit of his rival. With such formidable odds against him, one is apt to conclude that Murchison is foredoomed to defeat, especially after his bungling operation on the farmer forces him temporarily to leave Roxton and struggle along upon starvation earnings in a grimy colliery town. Here we have fairly and squarely a case of the hose-pipe under a given pressure. Murchison has not been strong enough under prosperous conditions to resist his besetting sin; and now that the conditions are changed, now that he sees his wife fading and his favourite child dying from the unwholesome air of a colliery town, will he continue to be the same man, will his nature remain at the same pressure, or will he, on the contrary, derive from some crucial trial an accumulation of energy that will give him the ultimate victory? Mr. Deeping evidently is one of those who believe that the pressure of human character varies with the stress from outside; and in the present volume he amply justifies his belief.

*Rich Men's Children*, by Geraldine Bonner, belongs to the class of stories in which the characters are constantly struggling for that higher pressure, that extra energy, which will enable them to win a victory over themselves, but find in the end that heredity and early training are too strong. All things considered, it is rather the best piece of fiction that has yet come from Geraldine Bonner's pen, the clearest character drawing, the strongest situations, the most thoroughly human appeal from first to last. Dominick Ryan is not the first rich man's son who has allowed himself to be tricked into an unworthy marriage by a scheming young woman, who cares for him only as a stepping-stone to higher social circles. Rose Cannon is not the only girl whom a

young man, thus unhappily married, has met and loved when it was too late. Nor is Dominick's wife, Berny, the only unloved wife who discovers the cause of her husband's truant affections and is inflamed with an unreasoning jealousy, based upon wounded pride, in lieu of love. Yet the case in point offers some unique and interesting features that differentiate the plot from its familiar prototype. It is a San Francisco story, dealing with the second generation of that hardy stock of pioneers who made California what it is to-day. They inherit the strong constitutions, the iron will of their fathers; they live normally at high pressure, the sort of pressure that will break windows in whatever direction it is turned. You don't expect in their case to have the pressure increased by circumstances; you feel that even their normal condition imposes a dangerous strain. Before she became Delia Ryan, Dominick's mother had been a cook in a mining camp; but that half-forgotten fact does not prevent her, now that she is a social power in San Francisco, from refusing to receive Dominick's wife or to give him a single penny of the lavish allowance that he has hitherto believed to be almost his by rights. To Delia Ryan her son is the dearest thing on earth, yet she will die unreconciled with him sooner than yield an inch in her attitude toward her daughter-in-law. Dominick also has his share of dogged adherence to what he thinks is his simple duty. He knows now, after those wonderful weeks of the blizzard, when he and Rose Cannon were snowed up together among the mountains and he nearly lost his life, that he never loved Berny, and that he loves and always will love Rose. Yet beyond that first mad moment, when her father, old Bill Cannon, comes upon the two in each other's arms, he will never be false in outward deed to what he thinks is due to Berny—that dogged, joyless loyalty to a woman who has tricked him, a woman socially ostracised, is characteristic of his nature; he may struggle, but he won't overcome it. Bill Cannon, one of the richest, most successful, most influential men in the far West, is not one who will calmly see a married man making love to his daughter Rose; but with his shrewd reading of character, he grasps

the peculiar and pathetic irony of the situation, decides that Delia Ryan's son, if free, would be a worthy mate for his daughter; that if Rose wants Dominick she shall have him, and that it will be a comparatively simple thing to buy off such a woman as Berny—give her ten thousand, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand, anything she will take, to desert Dominick and make a divorce simple and decisive. Under ordinary circumstances Berny would jump at such a chance—so far old Bill Cannon reads her aright; but when she discovers that they want to rid themselves of her in order to marry Dominick to Rose, her jealous pride revolts, and though the old man should offer her his whole fortune and Delia Ryan's besides, she would not yield. You feel that the story has reached a deadlock, that any combination of circumstances which would avail to overcome this clash of wills is beyond the author's ingenuity to invent; and accordingly you are not surprised when she suddenly escapes from the dilemma by resorting to a bit of melodrama, which is the one weak and unconvincing episode in an otherwise strong and well-sustained piece of fiction.

There are unquestionably cases in which the idea of a constant pressure may be effectively used, especially when seeking for certain subtle shades of satire, irony and cynicism. An admirable example is furnished by one of the short stories included in the recent volume by O. Henry, called *The Trimmed Lamp*. It is characteristic of Mr. Henry's stories that they should be packed full of suggestion, so that if a reviewer were to attempt anything like adequate treatment of a number of them there would be little space in an article of this sort for other volumes. So beyond the passing suggestion that the reader who skips a single story in the collection runs the risk of losing something that he would have liked quite as well as those he read, if not rather better, it seems necessary to speak only of the particular tale which fits in so peculiarly with the point under discussion. It is merely the story of a commonplace man married to a commonplace little wife and living in a commonplace little apartment on a salary the smallness of which also

seems to have the element of common-placeness. A story, you will perceive, in which the temperamental barometer on the whole stands rather low. After the glamour of the honeymoon wore off the man fell gradually into the habit of spending his evenings away from the dulness of the home atmosphere. As surely as the hands of the clock came around to half-past eight he would reach for his hat. "Now, where are you going, I should like to know?" the wife's querulous voice would question, and his stereotyped answer would be flung back to her through the closing door, "Just going down to play pool with the boys for half an hour." But one night when he comes home there is no wife to meet him, no dinner waiting, nothing but a pervading disorder and a hasty note telling him that she has been called away by the sudden news of her mother's serious illness. Disconsolately he makes a comfortless meal from cold remnants found in the ice-box, the

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loneliness of the apartment each instant forcing itself deeper into his consciousness. It is the first night since their marriage that she has been away from him, the first time that he has asked himself what life would be without her. He begins to regret the hours of her society that he has voluntarily lost, the evenings he has gone out and left her to bear the same solitude from which he is now suffering. Never again, he tells himself, never again! He will make it up to the little woman when she comes back, he will take her out more, to theatres and all that sort of thing; she shall never again be left to the ghastly loneliness of these silent rooms. And in the midst of his good resolutions the door opens and the wife walks in; mother's illness was a false alarm, she did not need to stay, after all. This topic occupies them until she finishes her dinner. Then, as the hands of the clock move around to half-past eight, the man reaches mechanically for his hat. "Now where are you going, I should like to know?" comes the stereotyped question, with all its wonted querulousness; and the stereotyped answer comes back through the closing

door, "Just going down to play pool with the boys for half an hour."

The struggle of men and women against temperament makes strong tragedy. Comedy, on the contrary, is oftenest made by placing men and women in whimsical situations and watching the curious complications that result from their following their natural bent of character under abnormal conditions. Such, for example, is the essence of the humour in *Jerry Junior*, by Jean Webster, a book as airy-light, as iridescent, as inconsequential as a soap-

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bubble. In plot it is just a piece of amiable nonsense; the story of a young American temporarily stranded in an out-of-the-way corner of the Italian Lake district, who discovers in the near vicinity another American with a pretty daughter, tries to make their acquaintance, and is severely snubbed for his pains by the pretty daughter. She has no use for the moment for any sort of man, young or old, excepting a guide to show her the way up the neighbouring mountains—a picturesque guide, like a Venetian gondolier, with sash and broad-brimmed hat, and gold hoops in his ears. But Jerry Junior is of the kind not easily daunted where a young woman is concerned; so he audaciously undertakes to masquerade as the picturesque guide she has ordered, oblivious of the difficulties into which his double ignorance of Italian roads and language is sure to bring him. The chronicle of Jerry Junior's frequent discomfiture, his tempestuous wooing and his ultimate success is really the whole sum and substance of a tale whose whole charm lies in the blythe spirit it diffuses of youthful joyousness and hope and love amid the golden atmosphere of Italian hills.

The idea of the hero masquerading as a hired man is utilised in still another novel this month—*His Courtship*, by Helen R. Martin. As in the author's earlier volume, *Tillie: A Menmonie Maid*, the setting of the story is among the Pennsylvania Dutch, whose linguistic

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peculiarities she reflects with refreshing drollery. In fact, both books are far cleverer as studies of a peculiar people than as stories of individual lives. You feel all the while that there is something distinctly artificial about the plot, as though it were put into the book not because it was part and parcel of it, but simply because the conventional rules of fiction require some sort of a framework on which to hang dialogue and character sketches. The bucolic atmosphere of the Morningstar farmhouse, where Dr. Kinross goes to rusticate after his hard winter of university work, is delightfully rendered; you get a lasting impression of the involved slowness of the Dutch manner of speech, the sluggishness of the Dutch method of thought. But when the undercurrent of story is brought to the surface and made the object of central attention; when two more boarders unexpectedly arrive—fashionable young women whom Kinross feels it will be an insufferable bore to be polite to three times a day—and in order to escape them, he bribes the Morningstars to let him masquerade as one of the hired labourers; when in his new capacity he is thrown in closer contact with the young women of the establishment, the daughter, Ollie, and the household drudge, Eunice, and discovers in the latter an unexpected beauty of mind as well as of body, the whole thing somehow seems to lack conviction. The idea of a young girl, inured from earliest childhood to the hardest and most unremitting daily drudgery, and denied all opportunities of education, teaching herself, surreptitiously, with the aid of a small store of volumes to which she has access only in the middle of the night, in time snatched from her scant hours of sleep—all this savours of the melodramatic and quite prepares us for the final discovery that Eunice is a long-lost, long-sought-for child, only heir to the fortune of Kinross's oldest friend, and consequently the bride that destiny has had in keeping for Kinross ever since the beginning of things. The book is a curious mingling of keen-eyed observation, great naturalness in narrative and dialogue, and exasperating artificiality of construction.

It is always exasperating in reading a book that is good only in streaks to feel that the author could easily have done better. It is doubly exasperating to come across an author who, having already achieved something distinctly big, deliberately leaves the field of his success and does without distinction something that at best would hardly be worth the doing. In *African Nights Entertainments* Mr. A. J. Dawson achieved something that belongs to the order of distinctly big things, something that you may or may not like—for that is a question of temperament—but which you assuredly cannot forget after having once read it. To say that Mr. Dawson's new

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volume, *The Message*, belongs in a different class, does not give adequate expression to the gulf between them. *The Message* belongs to that extravagant and, on the whole, futile class of books that aspire to the rank of prophecy. Its apparent purpose, so far as it has any, is to warn England to beware of Germany's pretended friendship, to show the necessity of remaining constantly upon a war footing, and to picture the abject humiliation of the British Empire should the Prussian eagle once effect a landing, march triumphantly across the island, lay siege to London, and having forced a surrender, impose her own terms of peace. Such a theme at the hands of Mr. H. G. Wells would still be nothing more than riotous romance, but it would be of the quality that grips the attention. *The Message*, on the contrary, is for the most part rather frankly boresome, with here and there a welcome oasis of something distinctly better, something that seems almost worthy of the author of *Hidden Manna*. The real trouble with *The Message*, judged by the standard of its class, is that the author has tried to do two things at once: to utter a fantastic prophecy and to picture certain phases of journalistic life in London with a realistic minuteness—and the two things do not belong together. It is as incongruous as though Mr. Wells and May Sinclair should collaborate to embody *The Divine Fire* and *The War of the Worlds* in a single book.

One advantage of the romantic school of fiction which we are all willing to concede is that the men and women who play their parts in it need not be required to act precisely as men and women in real life are expected to act. On the contrary, if they did so act, the average reader would feel grievously disappointed, and fancy that he had been rather unfairly treated. Therefore, in taking an estimate of *The Sons of the Seigneur*, by Helen Wallace, one may frankly disregard all vexed questions about the barometric pressure of temperament, whether of men or women, in the work-a-day world, and simply ask whether the men and the women of Helen Wallace's creation live up to our ideal of true romance. On the whole, it

is what may fairly be called a brave story of the type it represents. The time is the middle of the seventeenth century; the scene, the channel islands, when the men of Jersey and of Guernsey had conflicting views regarding what constituted their duty to God and loyalty to their king. What this clash of views meant to the islands as a whole, and to one young man and woman in particular forms the warp and woof of a story that is not lacking in bravery or in tenderness, a story that has caught something of the salt fragrance of the sea in its substance, and last but not least, a story that ends as this type quite properly should end, with marriage and happiness ever after. All of which is only another way of saying that if you like this sort of story, it is the sort of story that you will like.

*Frederic Taber Cooper.*

## TWO BOOKS OF THE MONTH

### I

E. A. BAKER'S "HISTORY IN FICTION"\*

What is "historical fiction"? It all depends upon the point of view. Mr. Howells, if asked, would unquestionably point out Jane Austen as the queen of historical novelists, while at the same time expressing his appreciation of *Roxana*, but in both cases the judgment would be given for artistic, not historical, reasons. There lies a vast field between Walter Pater and Sienkiewicz, between Trollope and Stanley J. Weyman, between *The Scarlet Letter* and *Richard Carvel*, between *The Valley of Decision* and *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, between the historical novel and the historical "romance," but it all comes, and properly, within the scope of Mr. Baker's useful bibliography. Its standard of merit is historical, not literary, and it considers the study of manners as im-

portant a part of the *genre* as the sword-and-dagger tale. These two volumes are the result of an enormous amount of labor well expended, a record not only of English and American history in fiction, but of that of the Continent as well, and of Asia, Africa, and Australasia, the historical fiction of the youngest of continents being, for obvious reasons, mostly undistinguishable from the story of adventure. Only such foreign historical fiction is included as has been originally written in or has been translated into English.

Translations form but a small proportion of this historical fiction dealing with Continental Europe in English, however; the bulk of it is the work of English and American novelists. It is curious to note the preferences of these writers. Italy stands first in their esteem as a profitable field for exploitation, the Anglo-Saxon historical fiction of the country being so large, and of such great merit, that one hardly notices the almost total absence of translations. France holds second place, but here the native author is fully repre-

\*History in Fiction: A Guide to the Best Historical Romances, Sagas, Novels, and Tales. By Ernest A. Baker, M.A. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company. 2 vols.