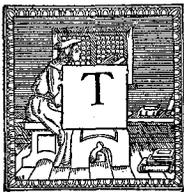


papers are dry and replete with political history. It was witty, intellectual Mistress Abigail Adams who wrote the initial letters from the White House, and to her we owe what pictures we have of it in those unvarnished days, when a straggling village bordered by river and forests and traversed by red mud roads was the nucleus of what is now considered even by the British Ambassador to the

United States, "the most beautiful capital in the whole world." Many other ladies of the White House related its social history in epistolary form in the days when it was regarded bad taste to have one's social affairs chronicled in the daily press; and to these we look for truthful accounts of White House social affairs in the era which was free from social advertisement.

THE NEWEST PROBLEMS AND SOME RECENT BOOKS

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER



HERE is a growing tendency, more noticeable perhaps in England than in this country, to make the latest social problems, the most recent ethical movements, the basis for fiction; and on the whole there is something distinctly encouraging in this tendency. It shows at least a more widespread recognition of the serious value of the novel, as well as an assumption that the weighty problems of the hour are of sufficient interest to the general public to justify their adoption even into the literature of relaxation. The English novel is in this respect simply following in the footsteps of the Continental novel—and so long as the thing is done intelligently and with a wise discrimination between what is foolish and ephemeral and what is important and eternally true, the Novel of the Newest Problem should be a beneficent and a widely popular type.

It is essential, however, to approach new problems with a certain amount of sound conservatism, viewing them in the light of past experience and not championing them with the zeal of a reformer. There is no reason why such themes as the suffragette movement, the trial marriage, ethical culture or any other of the latest fads and fancies in economics, science or art should not be made the central theme of a strong, compelling novel—providing always that the author handles his subject sanely and does not try to debase the whole art of fiction into

an instrument for winning converts. It is an important truth that while the public is forever clamouring after new lamps for old and forever hailing the latest one discovered as the true Aladdin's lamp of infinite possibilities, the world as a matter of fact goes on in its wonted course and throughout a long succession of social upheavals and philosophical reforms human nature remains pretty nearly a constant quality. We might possibly be better off under some other system of law and order than that which we have—the thing which we have not is always alluring, offering a tempting and rather dangerous field for speculation. It would, of course, be quite simple to write a purely imaginative novel seeking to show what would happen if the United States should adopt the Chinese currency system or make Mohammedanism the state religion—but it would not be a valuable or instructive proceeding. And the reason why a book of the type of Mr. H. G. Wells's much discussed *Ann Veronica* is to a good many people rather irritating, is because to a mild extent it is just that sort of an attempt. It imagines a young woman who has chosen to live under exceptional conditions, a young woman who has put herself voluntarily outside of the pale in defiance of established codes and conventions; and it has pleased Mr. Wells to imagine that by so doing she has achieved happiness. In other words, he has chosen to hazard a guess about what might happen to an abnormal woman under abnormal condi-

tions and to establish his results as a safe precedent for the world at large. The safer and in the long run, more enduring type of fiction is that which remembers that woman to-day, hobble-skirt and all, is not essentially different from the woman of yesterday, and that while she may muster the courage now and then to defy convention, she usually pays heavily for her rashness.

But while we admit that the newest problems are a proper subject for treatment in fiction, the value of the books based upon them must inevitably differ very widely. A problem, though it looms up portentously for a passing hour, may be of no more serious importance to the world than a soap bubble and in passing leave as little trace. The new problems, whether in fiction or in actual life, that have a lasting quality will be found to be simply old problems in disguise. The latest phase of the woman's suffrage movement, whereby gentlewomen of birth and culture made themselves notorious in public brawls, finds its level as a literary theme in the comic supplements and the joke column. Yet the same problem viewed simply as one manifestation of woman's demand for fair treatment and recognised rights is a problem centuries old and deserving of a courteous and unbiased hearing. The social position of the Eurasian in India and the Philippines seems at first glance to be an essentially modern problem; as a matter of fact it is as old as the existence of racial antipathy. And similarly we might take, one by one, the new doctrines, new philosophies, new codes and discover, just by taking the trouble to see them clearly and without prejudice, that they are based upon some great and enduring human verity. Otherwise they would not be worth the expenditure of time and ink that goes to make a novel; for a book based upon what is really the fad of the moment is doomed in advance to perish together with the fad.

An excellent illustration of a comparatively new problem which in reality is as old as civilisation is offered by Ellen Glasgow's latest novel, *The Miller of Old Church*. It is new to this extent, that the specific conditions which determine the separate details of

its episodes are of recent origin, forming a definite stage in the slow transition of southern social life that began with the reconstruction period after the war and is not yet ended. But in all its essentials Miss Glasgow's theme is nothing more nor less than that of the universal and inevitable struggle of the lower classes to rise and the jealousy of caste that would hold them back—and it is precisely the universality of the theme, studied under vividly local conditions that gives to Miss Glasgow's book a large part of its vital and compelling interest. The central human story of *The Miller of Old Church* has to do with the complex fortunes of Molly Merryweather, the illegitimate daughter of Janet Merryweather and Jonathan Gay, both of whom have died many years before the opening of the story. Janet Merryweather belonged to that humble and despised division of the white race in the South whom even the negroes felt at liberty to look down upon; Jonathan Gay, on the contrary, was of the aristocracy; the Gays were easily the social leaders of the community. Now Jonathan had a married sister, Angela, slender and fragile, whom her family and friends and even her physician united in declaring not to be meant long for this world. In fact, Angela possessed only one factor of strength, an indomitable pride of family and of caste. In a vague way she knew of Jonathan's scandalous irregularities of life; but according to the standards of her station and her time they were matters which a woman of refinement could not allow to be mentioned in her presence. At heart Jonathan sincerely loved Janet and he would gladly have made reparation by marrying her; but such a step was recognised to be impossible because for a Gay so to demean himself would be equivalent to a death blow to his sister, Angela. Janet Merryweather's disgrace and early death would have distressed Angela had she known all the facts; but marriage would have been something a thousand times worse, a stupendous, unimaginable calamity. That is why Jonathan contented himself with leaving a secret trust providing amply for his unacknowledged daughter, Molly, after she should come of age. He did not dream at the time that his fragile sis-

ter would outlive him by nearly a generation and that the knowledge of his secret bequest would fall upon her all the more harshly because so long delayed. Now, at the opening of the story Molly is on the threshold of womanhood. She has ripened into great beauty and is sought after eagerly by many of the young men in the steadily rising class of respectable white farmers and tradesmen—but by none more eagerly than by Abel Revercomb, the miller of Old Church. Now it happens that Jonathan Gay, the younger, Angela's only son, after long years of absence in the North has at last returned to Old Church, meets Molly, learns the story of her origin and, in the course of subsequent events, strongly casts his influence in favour of publicly recognising her. A marriage with Molly would have righted the ancient wrong and simplified many complex matters. But young Jonathan is, after all, a true Gay by nature. At the same time that he is openly paying court to Molly he is secretly meeting Blossom Revercomb, the miller's sister, and the old time tragedy is re-enacted. There has been a long-standing feud between the Revercombs and the Gays; and when the truth about Blossom is revealed, one of the Revercomb clan, old Uncle Abner, who has never been quite sound in mind since the old days when the sweetheart of his youth, Janet Merryweather, was lost to him, takes the law into his own hands and by Jonathan's death squares his long-standing account with the Gays. So much of the plot it has seemed necessary to tell in detail, carefully omitting all the numerous secondary plots, the complex interwoven threads that make this story a richly embroidered piece of living tapestry. Considered as a story dealing with the intimate concerns of a group of people whom we grow to love in a very personal way on account of their stirring merits or rare whimsicalities, the real interest of the book lies a good deal less in the plot structure than in the fine portraiture of character—in which respect it is far richer than any of Miss Glasgow's earlier works. For that reason it is unfortunate that it should be necessary to put so much stress in a review upon the plot itself. But it is necessary and for the following reasons:

here, as in all her books, Miss Glasgow has developed finely and powerfully the epic method. In the broadest sense, this story is not so much the history of Molly Merryweather as it is the story of the New South. In the character of Angela, for instance, we have personified the survival of the old time Southern aristocracy, with its pride and its traditions—a survival that seems with each year to approach extinction and yet clings to life with the amazing tenacity of chronic invalidism. In the older Jonathan, we have the bygone type of the reckless, devil-may-care, hot blooded Southerner who at any cost would maintain his family pride; and in the younger Jonathan and Abel Revercomb we have typified the new aristocracy already beginning to yield to the encroachment of the new triumphant democracy. And lastly, in Molly Merryweather herself, we have, if we read Miss Glasgow's thought aright, the future solution of the social problem. In her origin and in her nature Molly represents a compromise between the upper class and the lower, combining the better qualities of each; furthermore, she typifies a social intermingling which in its origin was a disgrace but which to-day, owing to changed conditions, has come to be accepted. And even her marriage has its symbolic significance. Even had he lived she would not have married Jonathan, the last representative of an effete code of living; she would inevitably have taken the miller—because the younger society of the New South is destined more and more to draw fresh strength from the sturdy ranks of the rising democracy. This apparently is what Miss Glasgow set herself to say and she has said it with a courage, a clearness and a strength of conviction that makes it easily her best book up to the present time.

Mrs. Maxon Protests, by Anthony Hope, is another apt illustration of the new problem that is eternally with us. *Mrs. Maxon Protests* Maxon is simply one more young woman who has discovered marriage to be something vastly different from what she had imagined; and her difficulty is of the variety which she regards as almost humilatingly commonplace—namely, incompat-

ability. Her husband happens to be one of those narrow, self-satisfied, dictatorial men, with old-fashioned ideas about women in general and a rooted conviction that a man has a high moral responsibility for his wife's conduct and must mould her in all fashions to his own way of thinking. Mrs. Maxon bears the strain for five years; then she consults a lawyer. She learns that while she cannot get a divorce in England, she can leave her husband and he cannot force her to come back. At the time of their separation, or to be more accurate, her desertion of him—for Maxon refuses to take the matter seriously—there is no other man in her life; but in the weeks that follow during which she stays at the country home of some friends with lax ideas of life and a houseful of curious and often irregular people, she suddenly surprises herself by falling in love with a certain Godfrey Ledstone and promptly scandalises society by eloping with him openly and unashamed. The rest of the book traces, with a clear-sightedness that Mr. Hope has not always shown in his books, the subsequent career of a woman who thinks that by the force of her own example she can bring the whole world over to her way of thinking. He does not spare us any of her disillusion, her humiliations, her heartache and loneliness. But through it all she is learning, strangely and cruelly learning much that is exceedingly good for her. She is learning, for instance, that charity and sympathy and understanding are often found where least expected. She is learning, too, that there are many other standards in this world as well as her own and that they are just as reasonable and perhaps nobler. She learns, for instance, that one of the best men she has ever had the good fortune to meet, loving her, pitying her, utterly disapproving of her, would nevertheless have made her his wife in spite of the scandal that had preceded and followed her divorce—but for one reason: he is an army officer and a woman with a taint upon her name would lower the social tone of his regiment and be in some degree a menace to the moral tone of the younger set. It is a temptation to analyse at some length the separate episodes of this rather unusual book throughout the years while Mrs. Maxon is slowly finding

her way out of the quagmire of her own making into a belated peace and happiness, but after all what the book stands for is so admirably summed up in the concluding paragraph that one cannot do it a greater service than to close with one brief quotation. It is a satisfaction to find a book written upon this theme which, while recognising that there is much to be said on both sides, shows neither vindictiveness toward the woman nor a misplaced championship that would exalt her into a martyr.

In the small circle of those with whom she had shared the issues of destiny she had unsettled much; of a certainty she had settled nothing. Things were just as much in solution as ever; the welter was not abated. Man being imperfect, laws must be made. Man being imperfect, laws must be broken or ever new laws will be made. Winnie Maxon had broken a law and asked a question. When thousands do the like, the Giant, after giving the first comers a box on the ear, may at last put his hand to his own and ponderously consider.

The Old Dance Master, by William Romaine Paterson, better known under the pseudonym of Benjamin Swift, is in contrast with the foregoing not a problem story, but a whimsical and tender little tale full of odd and lovable characters that his English critics have found not unworthy of comparison with some of the portraiture of Dickens. Imagine a quixotic old gentleman, tottering on the verge of mental breakdown, who is recklessly giving away to charity a vast fortune that his conscience will no longer let him keep because his great-grandfather acquired it in the slave trade. Imagine this old gentleman taking his son and daughter one night to a middle-class dancing academy that is for the moment one of his pet charities. Now it happens that the delightful old German dancing master, Herr Habenicht, has a favourite pupil, a very beautiful young woman, the reputed daughter of the proprietor of a hansom cab establishment. The old man's son falls in love with her at first sight, scandalises his sister and father by seeking an introduction and actually leading the ball arm in arm with the cabman's daughter. Nay, not so fast,

gentle reader, for the plot is about to thicken. The heroine is not really the daughter of the stable keeper, she is the unacknowledged child of rank and wealth, and must be rescued from her base surroundings through the clever manipulations of Herr Habenicht, the present teacher of the dance and formerly a baron of high social standing in Vienna's exclusive set. In other words, as the tone of this review has tried to suggest, the book is a tissue of plausible extravagance. It is made up of some exceedingly well-drawn low life characters quite realistic in their execution and some equally clever but frankly caricatured personages of high life. The great merit of the book is the rare success with which it makes its way along that narrow path that separates the pathetic from the grotesque. Of the old dance master himself this at least must be said: that in recent English fiction the nearest parallel case of a nobleman who in adversity performs a humble task cheerfully and with unflinching dignity and under no circumstances allows himself to forget the compelling force of *noblesse oblige* is Herr Habenicht's worthy compeer, Count Skariatine, in Marion Crawford's *Cigarette Maker's Romance*.

Dawn O'Hara, by Edna Ferber, is a book that does offer a problem and in a certain sense answers it in its own sub-title. The problem is this: supposing a girl, after a few months of mad happiness, finds that she is bound for life to a man who has suddenly broken down and whom the doctors pronounce incurably insane. The sub-title of the book is "The Girl Who Laughed;" and that is not a bad answer to a good many of life's most trying problems. At the opening of the story, however, Dawn is very far from being in a mood for laughter. Ten years of unrelieved strain on a New York daily paper, with the driving necessity of paying her husband's hospital bills ever at her heels, at last breaks her down; and her sister and her fairly well-to-do brother-in-law pick her up bodily and transfer her to the peace and quiet of their home somewhere not many miles from Milwaukee. At this point it is not surprising for the reviewer to discover

that he has a story before him which he is simply going to spoil if he tries to retell it. Supposing, for instance, he should say bluntly: This is the story of a young woman who has no right to think of love and marriage; and to whom a perverse fate has sent the kindest, staunchest, most lovable young German doctor you can well imagine. He makes a well woman of her by the sheer magnetic force of his will to have her live. And then, when they both realise what they mean to each other and what the hopelessness of their case means to both, they try to bury themselves in hard work, he in his Milwaukee practice, she in newspaper reporting on a paper in the same city, where his influence has found an opening for her. And then, at an hour when it seems as though nothing worse could overtake them, fate does give one added twist of the screw and her husband is released from the asylum as cured and comes to Milwaukee to claim her. None of this begins to touch the real essence of the book because, although it deals in tragedy, it is a fabric woven from threads of sheer light heartedness, unquenchable courage, warm-hearted understanding of the things which go to make the essential joy of living. There are, for instance, certain chapters in the book picturing a delightful, unique, inimitable German boarding-house in Milwaukee that makes one sigh while reading them, partly from a vague nostalgia for happy bygone days in German pensions, partly also from sheer envy of the subtle touch that penned them. And then, too, there is one portrait of a broken-down sporting editor, a man whose days are numbered, a man vulgar in speech and with many sins upon his conscience, but who, nevertheless, is rich in some of the rarest gifts that human nature knows and whose final tragedy leaves a vacant spot in the heart akin to that of a personal bereavement. For these reasons it seems the part of wisdom to inscribe the name of Edna Ferber in some easily accessible part of our memory whereby there shall be no danger in the future of missing anything that may come from her pen. It would seem that she is a young woman who has gone some distance already on the road of achievement and is likely to go much further.

The Sins of the Children, by Horace W. C. Newte, is precisely what its title implies. It deals with that unconscious ingratitude and lack of appreciation with which so often sons and daughters repay half a lifetime of self-sacrifice and devotion. It is an English story, the setting being either in London or the immediate vicinity. The narrative follows the history of a certain young woman named Jeanie Pilcher from her earliest memories of life with her widowed father through the long grey years that follow until the time when filial ingratitude bears sharply home upon her the extent of her own failure to appreciate what her father had done for her. The book is rather sombre, rather colourless, rather hard reading to the majority who demand a sensation at the end of each chapter and perhaps an extra one in the middle. But to those who appreciate careful workmanship, a desire above all things to tell the truth and an unveiled, unflinching outlook upon life, whether it happens to be rose-coloured or drab, this volume by Mr. Newte may be confidently and cordially commended.

Mr. F. W. Bain, who has already put forth from time to time five volumes professedly "translated from original Hindoo manuscripts," adds one more to the collection under the title *The Ashes of a God*. Unless we seek deliberately for some hidden symbolic meaning there is no problem here, modern or otherwise. It is simply the story of the way in which the gods hoodwinked a would-be saint who as a matter of fact had not the true essence of faith in him, but who, nevertheless, was piling up merit, such as by prayer it is possible for a Hindoo to do, at such a fearful rate that he would soon have on his credit side a sufficient amount to overbalance the whole assemblage of the gods and sweep them out of power. What has happened is this: there was a certain king named Ruru who having been deceived by the woman he loved conceived a hatred for all women, and forthwith proceeded ruthlessly to ruin the peace of mind and the material well

being of as many women as possible. Now this king had a trusted minister named Trishodadhi, who had recently taken a wife much younger than himself, named Watsatari. Trishodadhi, knowing the king's weaknesses, is haunted by the fear that his own wife may fall under the king's covetous eye; and to his horror, one day, on returning home he sees Watsatari standing apparently enfolded in the arms of the king. He realises that the blame is not upon them, since they have followed the dictates of human nature; it is rather upon himself for having put faith in any thing human. So, forsaking both his wife and his court duties he retires to the wilderness of the Windhya Hills and devotes himself to a life of prayer.

Now when in the course of years Indra and the other gods realise the amount of merit that this endless piling up of prayers is acquiring for Trishodadhi they realise that something must be done to trick him into forgetfulness of his vows, something to make him if only for a moment yield to the attraction of feminine charm. One after another their experiments fail, but finally Indra goes in person to beseech aid from Kalanidhi, one of the hundred daughters of Aparapakshi who lives at the bottom of the sea. And she, after much bargaining, consents to aid him—and this is what she does. She assumes the form of the hermit's wife, and through the lips of an elephant who asserts that in a former birth it was King Ruru she tells an elaborate tale which proves to the man of prayer that his wife was innocent, that he was a victim of circumstantial evidence and that in leaving her he committed a cruel wrong and shortened her life. The immediate result of the tale is that Trishodadhi forgets for a moment his prayers and seeing the reincarnation of Watsatari herself, eagerly clasps her in his arms and by so doing at once loses all the accumulated merit of his millions of prayers. And the final touch to the story is this: the tale that he has heard from the mouth of an elephant is not a fiction, but the simple truth, his wife and King Ruru were quite innocent, and his suffering was all groundless.

TEN BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD WAGNER*

The history of literature for a hundred years does not show us a biographical or autobiographical work so profoundly and widely interesting as this very frank series of confessions, written down by the greatest musician of our age, the maker of a musical epoch. This may seem an extravagant assertion; yet if we compare other books of the same sort we shall see at once wherein this narrative stands first. It represents the triumph of the sensuous artist over the artist whose work is done through a single medium. Take, for example, Lockhart's life of Sir Walter Scott. That was a work of extraordinary interest and was written by one with first-hand intimate knowledge. Scott, moreover, was no local figure. His books were read all over the continent of Europe, and he was one of the primal influences in developing Romanticism. Nevertheless, those who read him outside of England were comparatively few, and they were obliged to do so through the medium of a translation. In other words, they never beheld Scott, save through a veil and at a distance.

We might even say that Boswell's *Johnson*—the greatest biography in English literature—was even more restricted than Lockhart's *Scott*. The book is delicious to an Englishman, because of the *curiosa felicitas* with which the perky Scot has drawn the huge, lumbering, self-opinionated, gluttonous Englishman—almost the caricature of an Englishman, and yet sound and sane, with unfathomable good sense. Every Anglo-Saxon delights in *Johnson*, because he understands him; but what would a Frenchman or an Italian make of him? Why simply an uncouth, disgusting monster, swilling twenty-five cups of tea at a meal, snorting and puffing like a whale, and combining gross self-assertion with frequent insult.

*My Life. By Richard Wagner. 2 Vols. Illustrated. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

Coming down to modern times, let us think of Tennyson's biography by his son. Here again the limitations of language and country shut in the biographer and make his work of little interest to foreigners, save a very few. And the same thing is true of biographies not composed in English. Thus there are Bismarck's alleged *Memoirs*. Bismarck was a world-figure, a giant whose very nod was felt at the ends of the earth. Yet what sort of a biography was produced and made to appear his own life's narrative? A poor eviscerated fragment of the truth, containing not half so much meat as the books written about him by Busch, and being little better than the trebly expurgated papers of Talleyrand, for which the world had waited many years only to be cheated at the last. One thinks with a wistful longing of those mythical iron boxes which are said to be safely stored in England, packed full of vitriolic political explosives, to be brought out, perhaps, at the end of another fifty years when the present Kaiser and his eldest son shall both have died. As for Morley's *Life of Gladstone*, that made a temporary stir—mainly because Lord Morley writes so well, but in very small degree because of Gladstone's own career which was the career of a self-deceiver given over to the exploitation of little things and to his own enormous egoism.

For that matter, take what biographies you will and you will almost always find them wanting in that wider interest which makes the whole world seek them out and read them from generation to generation. Benvenuto Cellini offers a rare treat to the cultivated few. Goethe in his *Dichtung und Wahrheit* sheds inextinguishable light for scholars upon the pages of him who gave the great Faust poem to the world. Rousseau's *Confessions* have had a profound effect upon his readers ever since he wrote them. Yet when we consider all these writers we find such limitations, either of subject or of personality or of place and time, as to leave Plutarch in his unique position as the great master of biography for all time.