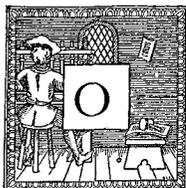


# THE BIGGER ISSUES AND SOME RECENT BOOKS

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER



ONE of the stock-in-trade phrases of the reviewer of fiction is to speak of the Bigger Issues that are woven into the fabric of some novels and because of their presence make those novels bigger and stronger than other equally ably written novels in which such issues are wanting. And, so far as it goes, this statement of the case is as true as any similar generalisation is ever likely to be. Supposing we state the question in a slightly different form: certain episodes in the life of a man or a woman studied in connection with a big, vital problem, make a more important story than the same episodes studied in connection with some trivial, transitory problem. But even in this form we have nothing definite, nothing in the shape of a practical working rule. It all depends upon what we mean by the words "Bigger Issues." Bigness is not absolute, it is always relative. For the purposes of fiction, you cannot assume that any one thing is absolutely right and its opposite absolutely wrong; it must always come back to a question of individual standards and beliefs as contrasted with the prevailing standards of the age and community in which they live. The bigness of any problem in fiction depends upon two factors: first, the extent to which it represents a living, vital interest in the mimic world which the author is depicting; secondly, the extent to which it will awake a sympathetic response in the hearts and minds of the readers to-day. Slavery would be no more just or unjust, considered abstractly, than it always has been, even though Mrs. Stowe had never lived and written, and the Civil War never been fought. But *Uncle Tom's Cabin* succeeded, not because of any inalienable right of all men to be born free and equal, but because for a brief period half a nation had worked themselves to fever heat

in maintaining this principle and the other half in denying it. No novel written to-day on the theme of emancipation, though fifty fold better and stronger than Mrs. Stowe's imperishable epic, could take such a hold upon the public, not because the doctrine of freedom has lost its bigness, but because the *issue* has. An issue implies at least a fighting chance: you cannot arouse excitement over the contention of a hopeless minority. Similarly, *L'Assommoir* with its colossal sales was a possibility in a generation awakening to the physical and moral menace of alcohol; but any ambitious novelist, no matter how erudite in archæological lore, who should attempt to portray the excesses of imperial Rome, in the same crusading spirit that prompted Zola, would waste his time, because temperance in Roman times was not an issue: wine-drinking was still the culte of the god Bacchus.

Accordingly, we may safely formulate our definition somewhat after this fashion: The main issue in any novel is relatively big or little according to the degree of intensity with which it is felt, on the one hand by a majority of the characters in the book, and on the other by a majority of the generation and class of readers for whom it is intended. The rule holds good equally for the book with a hundred characters and the book with only two. The essential thing is for the novelist to make us feel that his two characters or his hundred characters, as the case may be, are typical of their time and country. The one vital, decisive, unteachable trick for giving the impression of massed humanity, wrought up to a point of patriotic or religious fanaticism, does not depend in the least upon the number of individuals by actual count that are specifically mentioned, but upon the author's success in making the reader see in imagination the thousands and tens of thousands that are not mentioned at all, and that none the less are

there, behind the middle distance, behind the background, beyond the vanishing point where perspective melts out of sight. A street fight, involving a dozen ruffians, with a swarming ring of spectators enjoying the impromptu show, and the clang of the patrol wagon sounding not far off, is at best rather sordid material for the novelist. The issue is a private one, not shared by the world at large. A fight to a finish by the same number of men on the deck of a schooner isolated in a plain of tumbling waters, with captain and mate on one side and a mutinous crew on the other, is a far bigger thing. For the time being, that schooner deck is the world, and every human soul in it is keyed to the same murderous pitch. And in both of these illustrations, the reader's sympathies, in kind and in degree, are a reflection of those of the majority of participants. In the first case, he would imagine himself in the grinning crowd of spectators on the sidewalk; in the second, he would be in the thick of the fight, tingling with the tensivity of partisanship.

Or take, in contrast, the two-character novel, which is the typical psychological novel of the French school. Many specimens of this type are startlingly, tremendously, unforgettably abnormal—but abnormality is never bigness, in the better sense—it is the bigness, not of Hercules, but of Barnum's Fat Woman. Contrast for the moment Maupassant's *Notre Cœur* with D'Annunzio's *Innocente*. Infanticide is in one sense a bigger thing than the emotional sterility of a frivolous woman—at least the law sees it that way, for it takes cognisance of the one and ignores the other. And yet these two books are separated by a gulf that cannot be fathomed or bridged. Tullio Hermil, the man who secretly, diabolically murders his wife's helpless little child because he knows it is not his own, and that, too, after having gone through the farce of forgiving her, is a morally misshapen monster, as untrue to the normal Italian type, let us hope, as he is to the Anglo-Saxon. Mme. de Burne, in Maupassant's most symmetrical and, the present writer believes, biggest and wisest novel, is a type that is and has been always with us, all the world over—the

type of the woman who is *mondaine* to her finger-tips, and whose very soul is barren of the instincts of a fully normal woman.

And so we come down to this: We cannot decide the bigness of any issue in fiction by consulting the apparently obvious authorities—in case of a crime, for instance, by taking down the *Code of Criminal Procedure*, because then the burning of your neighbour's hay-rick or the theft of a loaf of bread is relatively bigger than beating your wife or half-starving your children; or in the case of a question of faith, going to the apostolic creed, because then you get that peculiarly magnified and false impression—characteristic of a couple of decades ago—of books like *John Ward, Preacher* and *Robert Elsmere*. The popular verdict in actual life is not dictated by the theologian, the professor of jurisprudence, the sociologist, or the expounders of the latest problems in eugenics: it is dictated by the generous, spontaneous, inborn enthusiasms of humanity at large—and what holds true of real life, holds equally true of fiction.

There are two books this month which, taken together, serve as an admirable object-lesson in this question of relative bigness: *The Fruitful Vine*, by Robert Hichens, and *Her Roman Lover*, by Eugenia Brooks Frothingham. Let no one misunderstand the intention of this comparison: Mr. Hichens has all the advantages of a strongly entrenched position, a truly Italian gift for brilliant colouring, an almost uncanny understanding of women, in short, the assured touch of a man who has incontestably achieved. The author of *Her Roman Lover* has barely finished her novitiate. She has a hundred things yet to learn in the sheer craftsmanship of building a novel. Taking the two books together, just as they are, there is no question at all of the relative æsthetic and literary value of them, any more than there is of the relative sales they will each achieve. And yet, when we come down to the measurement of the central issue in each of these books, the instinct of the woman has been truer than that of the man. His issue had the bigger

possibilities; hers, as she has chosen to work it out, remains actually the bigger. And this is distinctly odd, because on general principles one would say that a marriage wrecked for the reason that it is blessed with no children is a bigger problem than a betrothal that proves a fiasco because of a dispute over the colour of a hair ribbon. Let us first look rather carefully at Mr. Hichens's book, which, whether we like it or not, is beyond question as important a piece of fiction as he has yet produced. The setting is modern Rome, the leading characters two married couple, both English, Sir Theodore Cannynge and his wife, Dolores, Sir Theodore's closest friend, Francis Denzil and his wife Edna—and just one Italian, Cesare Carelli. Cannynge, having lost his first love in a painful tragedy years before, remained unmarried almost until middle age. At the opening of the story Dolores has for ten years been his wife, but no children have come to them. Whatever regrets he may have felt have remained unspoken: until within a year his whole interest seemed to centre in his diplomatic career, first in one European capital, then in another. But when the inheritance of an independent fortune came almost simultaneously with the loss of his great ambition, the Austrian Embassy, in a moment of pique he resigned, and from that time on had more time for thought than was good for him. Finally comes the day when, fresh from a visit to Denzil's home, full of the merriment of children's voices, he catches up his wife's Chinese poodle by the throat and, while the miserable little beast writhes and coughs and blinks, tells her violently: "Look at it! This is all we've got, you and I, to make a home—after ten years!" Dolores is not surprised; she has felt instinctively that sooner or later this outbreak was bound to come. None the less it hurts her—just as every one of his almost daily visits to Denzil's home, blessed with a fruitful vine in place of a barren one, has hurt her. She is not jealous of Edna, Denzil's wife, although she knows that the idle gossip of Rome has settled their relations for them. The Roman world would be incapable of understanding that the attraction might be the children and not the woman. Do-

lores's troubles, however, are only just beginning. Francis Denzil, husband of "the happiest woman in Rome," is suddenly stricken down with cancer of the larynx, is operated upon and never rallies. His last request is that Sir Theodore will be a second father to his little son—and Sir Theodore promises. From this time onward, Dolores sees less and less of her husband; a vicarious fatherhood has taken possession of him, absorbed him, made him a new man. When the summer comes, he disappoints her regarding her long cherished plan to visit London, and insists upon taking a villa at Frascati, so as to be near the Denzil children. Then comes a day when Dolores rebels, packs her belongings and goes by herself to Lake Como, to escape the torture of neglect. Meanwhile Roman gossip has been busy in coupling her name with that of another man, that of Cesare Carelli. Since he was a mere boy, Carelli has been faithful to just one woman, the Mancini. But suddenly and quite recently it has become common knowledge that he has definitely broken with her. Why? asks Rome insistently; Romans do not do such things; a man may be untrue to his wife, but a lover remains faithful. There must be some other woman—and Rome is quick to find her in Dolores. As the Countess Boccara tells Dolores to her face, with a malicious little stress on the pronoun: "The rupture happened in the summer, very soon after you left Rome, *cara*." Now it is while Dolores is in hiding at Como, and just at the crucial moment when the insistent thought has first taken possession of her, "If I could only give Theodore a child!" that Carelli tracks her down—and this is the beginning of the tragedy that the reader at once foresees is inevitable. What actually follows may be put into a dozen words. Dolores does give a child to Sir Theodore—a child of alien parentage—but she never reaps the harvest that she has hoped for, the harvest of reawakened love; because the child costs the mother her life, or rather, not the child, but her own loosened hold upon life itself, due to a loathing of her own deed. As for Carelli, he is truly Italian in his inability to conceive of Dolores's real motive. For love, yes, that

he could understand; but for motherhood, never! And when the woman is dead, and the stricken husband is just awakening to his loss, the Italian thinks to square accounts by claiming his child. But his revenge misses fire. His revelation simply results in quickening Sir Theodore's own self-knowledge, and he says at last, in all humility: "She was better than I, better than I!"

Such is the story of *The Fruitful Vine*, analysed as generously and as sympathetically as possible. It is written with extraordinary power, and it is thrown into strong relief against a background of rare richness, the vari-coloured background of the Roman world. But it has two weaknesses: First, Sir Theodore as shown to us is thoroughly antipathetic. In order to forgive Dolores for her sin, the reader must sympathise with her desire to win back her husband's love, must feel that he is worthy of her tremendous sacrifice. As a matter of fact, the reader feels nothing of the sort. Sir Theodore has squandered the best years of his life in selfish bachelorhood; has for another ten years neglected his wife in favour of the fascinating game of European politics, and then, without warning, taunts her where a bigger souled man would have taken the blame upon himself. And secondly, the main issue lacks bigness because it is abnormal. As the author makes quite plain, such a tragedy, for such a motive would be impossible had all the characters involved been Italians. It would have been equally impossible for an Englishwoman living her life quietly at home, or, indeed, anywhere else than in such an artificial environment as Rome, where infidelity of certain kinds is accepted as a matter of course. It is all very strong, very horrible, very cruel; but it falls just short of real bigness, because the normal reader cannot apply the conclusive test: "put yourself in her place."

In contrast with the amplitude of Mr. Hichens's book, that of Eugenia Brooks Frothingham is little more than a novelette. One may dispose of it very briefly as a dainty, deftly drawn pastel, full of soft colours and subtle shades. It is the story of a

"Her Roman  
Lover"

thoroughly normal young American girl, as new and strange to the ways of Europe as was Daisy Miller a generation ago. She meets and with many a secret rebellion comes to love a certain Roman, not one of the petty princelings greedy for American dollars, but a plain, honest man, socially well received, and with ample fortune for them both. But he has the inborn jealousy of the Latin races; he cannot understand the harmless coquetry of the American girl; he resents her frank comradeship with a man of her own people—and what makes it worse is that this other man does not disguise the fact that he, too, loves her. The Roman lover forgives many things—things that, however small they may seem to us, are very big to him; but one day it casually turns out that the girl is wearing a ribbon of a certain colour, brown or green, it does not matter which—because her American friend thought it becoming, in fact because he chose it for her. That is the end of the idyl: "no other man dictates the colour of my wife's ribbons," says the Roman proudly, and they part definitely. A simple little story of the broken destinies of two people, just because they had failed in the essential meeting of minds. But, in a broader sense, this is one of the really big issues, because it involves that inevitable and universal menace that is behind all unions between two different races, the difficulty of finding a common meeting-ground.

*The Awakening*, by Maud Diver, presents more poignantly the same question, plus several other considerations. It is nothing less than the history of a marriage between a young Englishman of a proud old family, and a Hindoo girl, Lilamani, daughter of Lakshman Singh, a high caste Brahmin. It is difficult to handle a story of this sort without betraying a certain degree of partisanship, and in the present case the author's sympathies are obviously on the side of the Hindoo girl. The man's difficulties and disillusionings, the hard battle that he must constantly fight with his family and friends on his bride's behalf, to ensure her the courtesybefitting her position, are not inadequately done;

"The  
Awakening"

but the author shows far more sympathy and understanding in her presentment of the Hindoo girl's shrinking from Western manners and customs, the violence she does herself in meeting socially men who are strangers to her, in listening to the discussion of topics that no Hindoo would think of mentioning before a woman. The young husband, in spite of all that his family unkindly do to make his position difficult, never wavers in his devotion until one unlucky day when the thought is driven home to him that if ever he should have a son, that son, with his features, might, indeed, almost surely would, have a swarthy skin. It is this thought that nearly estranges the two, because Lilamani learns that he has this, to her inexplicable, prejudice—and sooner than face the future, she prefers to take her life. Fortunately, the awakening comes in time to avert a tragedy.

The central issue in *Margery*, by E. F. Benson, is whether a young woman, replete with the joy of living, can find happiness in marriage with a man who has never in his life

known a passion warmer than his delight in Grecian urns and Tanagra figurines. Margery is the child of an ill-assorted marriage; and when, as a forlorn little orphan, she first comes to live with her father's relatives, her aunt Aggie takes good care not to let her forget that her mother was a mere vaudeville dancer. Margery is not malicious or vengeful, but just a sweet, wholesome, not over brilliant girl, whose innate goodness men unconsciously recognise. That was the explanation of the failure of all her Aunt Aggie's too obvious manoeuvres to keep Margery in the background, and marry off her own daughter, Olive. Almost simultaneously Margery has the task of refusing an offer from Cousin Walter, Aunt Aggie's only son, and from Arnold Leveson, whom Aunt Aggie already felt sure of as a son-in-law. Arnold Leveson had all his life been a student and a recluse. He had already written one epoch-making volume on the Alexandrine Age, and was now engaged on a companion work, the Age of Pericles. The wonder was that, in his absorption in antiquities, he ever raised his eyes high enough from

books to rest them on Margery's face. But such happened to be the case, and presently they were married. And then, for a while, the experiment succeeded. But after the honeymoon and a brief season of London gaiety, Arnold felt a return of the old fever of study, the old impelling need of creative work. From that moment, Margery's loneliness began; and the rivalry was harder than that of another woman, because against a woman she could have offset her own charms, but she was powerless against ancient tomes and crumbling marble. Mr. Benson did not lack a big issue, but of his own accord he dodged it. What Margery and Arnold would in the end have made of their lives, he refused to tell us, because one fine day in Athens, antiquarian zeal led the man a step too high upon a tottering ruin, and when he and the ruin fell together, he was undermost. It is vexatious when a novelist has all the elements that go to make up a human problem of vital interest, and then deliberately shirks his task.

*The Following of the Star*, by Florence A. Barclay, is, like *The Rosary*, another of those religiously

**"The Following of the Star"** ought to be as unwholesome to a normal mentality as candied rose-leaves to a college athlete. The underlying situation is artificial in the extreme. Because of an eccentric will, a young woman, accustomed since birth to every luxury, will be left penniless if within a year she fails to marry. The year is almost up when she meets a distant cousin, a missionary home on sick-leave from Africa. This cousin is zealous to the point of fanaticism; he knows that the African climate, dangerous at best, is in his case fatal; the doctors frankly give him two or at most three years more. Nevertheless, he intends to go back. The young woman, having heard him preach several times, and having become more deeply interested in him than she is aware, makes him this extraordinary offer: she will provide him with countless little things that he needs for his African flock, she will bear the expense of building him a church, that he has begun to despair of; she will allow him a thousand pounds a

year for running expenses—provided he will do his share to save her fortune from loss, namely, marry her on the day he sails for Africa. In other words, here is the problem that he faces: is it right, is it even pardonable for a minister of the gospel to go through such a farce of a marriage, even to accept the profits of it for the salvation of others? This is the problem that he has to fight out by himself, through an all-night vigil; and the course of reasoning by which he justifies himself in accepting simply illustrates the ingenuity with which the Scriptures may be twisted, when the wish is father to the thought. The book is pervaded with a glitter of gold, and a redolence of frankincense and myrrh, sufficient to justify the titles of its three subdivisions. Only somehow, in escaping from it, one turns in relief to the unashamed naturalness of Jack London's animality.

It is hard to forgive Mrs. Wharton for the utter remorselessness of her latest volume, *Ethan Frome*, for nowhere has she done anything more hopelessly, endlessly grey with blank despair. Ethan Frome is a man whose ambitions long ago burned themselves out. He early spent his vitality in the daily struggle of winning a bare sustenance from the grudging soil of a small New England farm. An invalid wife, whose imaginary ailments thrived on patent medicines, doubled his burden. And then, one day, a pretty young cousin, left destitute, came to live on the farm, and brought a breath of fragrance and gladness into the gloom. Neither Ethan nor the cousin meant to do wrong; it was simply one of those unconscious, inevitable attachments, almost primitive in its intensity. It never was even put into words, until the day when Ethan's wife, perhaps because of a smouldering jealousy, perhaps because the motive she gave was the true one, namely that the girl was shiftless and incompetent, sent her out into the world to shift for herself. It is while driving her over to the railway station that Ethan consents to the girl's wish that just once more he will take her coasting down a long hill, that is a favourite coasting place throughout the neighbourhood. It is a long, steep,

breathless rush, with a giant tree towering up near the foot, to be dexterously avoided at the last moment. It is while he holds the girl close to him on the sled, that a ghastly temptation comes to Ethan, and he voices it: How much easier, instead of letting her go away, to face unknown struggles, while he remained behind, eating his heart out with loneliness—how much easier merely to forget to steer! One shock of impact, and the end would come. And to this the girl consents. And neither of them foresees that not even the most carefully planned death is inevitable, and that fate is about to play upon them one of its grimmest tricks, and doom them to a life-long punishment, she with a broken back, he with a warped and twisted frame, tied beyond escape to the slow starvation of the barren farm, and grudgingly watched over by the invalid wife, scarcely more alive than themselves. Art for art's sake is the one justification of a piece of work as perfect in technique as it is relentless in substance.

Nothing could be more refreshing by way of contrast than *Pandora's Box*, by Mr. J. A. Mitchell. It is not a book with a big issue; it is a book with a hundred issues, big, small, and middle sized—or rather, the story, without being slighted, is nevertheless the medium for a host of ideas such as a widely read, widely travelled man, with broad sympathies and a deep knowledge of men as well as books, might casually expound in the course of a delightful evening of rambling intercourse. This does not alter the fact that the story remains intact, a blythe, wholesome, optimistic story, as pleasantly improbable as are many of the pleasantest things in life: only one cannot help feeling that to Mr. Mitchell himself the little subordinate things, the *obiter dicta* that every now and then get themselves expressed between the lines, if not actually in them, are of more genuine interest than even the momentous words which the hero must sooner or later speak, in order to make the heroine his. The plot itself is one of the simplest. A young English girl, proud of her name and heritage, proud of the old, crumbling castle in

which she lives, and the ancestral faces that look down at her in the portrait gallery, and the suits of chain armour, every one of which has its own cherished legend; proud above all of being an English girl: finds herself one day face to face with a stranger, in one of the unused corner towers. The stranger is clad as a working man, and is occupied in making sketch after sketch of the old castle; when he speaks, she becomes aware that he is an American, and when she questions him, he explains that he is there by permission, to make designs for the purpose of restoring the castle to its original condition—but by whose order or at whose expense must remain a secret. What this secret is, does not concern us

here; it serves to whet the appetite of readers who accept the refreshments by the way only as a means of arriving more swiftly at the journey's end. What the discriminating reader will enjoy is the daily interchange of views between these two young people, neither of whom is supposed to know the other's identity, anent the real worth of inherited titles and estates and family traditions. It is a daily clash between the American and the British point of view; and the sparkle of it, with its surface exaggeration, its amusing impertinences, and the mature philosophy concealed beneath, would alone make the book one of those for which a weary and sadly sated reader is devoutly thankful.

## CHOPIN AMONG THE NOVELISTS

BY EDNA KENTON



MUSICAL atmosphere in the early novels seems now a quaintly handled bit of literary technic. One recalls that Lucy Deane and Stephen Guest sang the duets from "The Creation"; that the blind Muriel in *John Halifax, Gentleman* played Catholic masses, the Dies Iræ, and Händel; that the woolly-headed Miss Schwartz played "The Battle of Prague" and two other "pieces" for George Osbourne; that Becky sang old melodies of Mozart and Haydn for Lady Steyne, and that all the greatest artists would leave off their sore throats to sing at Becky's parties. This was the age of Haydn and Mozart and the Italian aria. No Walkurie had screamed, and no Salome had kissed a severed head—nor ever would, in the Eliot and Austen novels. The harp was still a mighty rival of the harpischord and the pianoforte had yet to make its way into every drawing-room and "parlour" in the land.

Since then it has been Chopin, the predestined composer for the pianists of fiction. Wagner of course, Brahms, the Symphony Pathétique—these have fig-

ured in the modern musical arabesques. But Chopin and his opus give that tang, that flavour, that flare to a scene that is sought after and prayed for by every novelist that writes.

There is a reason—Du Maurier expresses it in one of his own novels, *Peter Ibbetson*. Here is the phrasing of it:

Then a gypsy-like little individual seats himself at the great brass-bound oaken Broadway pianoforte. And under his phenomenal fingers, a haunting, tender world-sorrow, full of questionings—a dark mystery of moonless, star-lit nature—exhales itself in nocturnes, in impromptus, in preludes, in mere waltzes and mazurkas even! But waltzes and mazurkas such as the most frivolous would never dream of dancing to. A capricious, charming sorrow—not too deep for tears, if one be at all inclined to shed them—so delicate, so fresh, and yet so distinguished, so etherially civilised and worldly and well-bred that it has crystallised itself into a drawing-room ecstasy to last forever. It seems as though what was death (or rather euthanasia) to him who felt it, is play for us—surely an immortal sorrow whose recital will never, never pall—the sorrow of Chopin.

The old adorers of Trilby—how remote that ancient craze seems to-day!—