

# THE MAGNITUDE OF THEMES AND SOME RECENT NOVELS\*

BY FREDERIC TABER COOPER



QUITE recently a Western literary review, in the course of a survey of current fiction, singled out two volumes, Mr. Dreiser's *Financier* and Mr. Edwards's *A Man's World*, as entitled to the high tribute of being "unquestionably the biggest novels of the year." Now, there is no question that both these books are serious pieces of fiction, and indicate a commendable trend in the direction of earnest, forceful studies of modern social and economic conditions. But there is a certain recklessness about this sort of sweeping assertion of the supremacy of any particular book over all others of a given month, or year, or decade, that calls for a protest. Every one is entitled to an honest opinion or preference; you, for instance, may find more beauty in the Salisbury Cathedral, or the Sistine Madonna, or the Divine Comedy, than in any other building or painting or poem in the whole world; but your preference does not establish their supremacy; it simply sheds an interesting side-light on your literary and artistic standards. The question of relative bigness in any branch of creative art, including the modern novel, is one to be answered with a becoming modesty, with abundant allow-

ance for the personal equation, and above all, with a careful and thorough definition of the terms employed. For instance, the careless comment above quoted, as to the "biggest book of the year," is meaningless until we know in what sense the writer used the word "big." Was he measuring the book by an artistic, philosophical or ethical standard? Or simply as a human document, big because of its literal truth? Or was it, to his thinking, that still rarer achievement, that could be weighed in the balance of all these different tests and still not be found wanting? And, after all, even with this question answered, we are scarcely further advanced; for who is to judge, in ethics, philosophy or art, as between two themes, the one, let us say, dealing with a man's integrity in business, and the other with a woman's fidelity in marriage, which of the two is inherently the bigger theme? Analysed to the last degree, it amounts to a request to judge between the relative sanctity of two separate Commandments.

Now, there is no intention in the above comments to deny that novels do differ from one another in magnitude, nor that there are some whose inherent bigness is incontestable, and others which cannot be mistaken for anything more exalted than profitable merchandise. But if we are not satisfied with trusting to our instinct, and want to probe a little deeper into the why and wherefore of relative magnitudes, the first step is to realise that, in order to be big, a novel must have a big theme or central idea; secondly, it must have a big treatment, or specific story; and lastly the art, the craftsmanship, the sheer dexterity of method must measure up to the standards set by the subject. Many a novelist has squandered a big idea on an inadequate situation or a group of uninspired characters; many a poignant human story, with a noble lesson behind it, has missed achievement because of a faulty style, a clumsiness of

\*The Heroine in Bronze. By James Lane Allen. New York: The Macmillan Company.

The Royal Road. By Alfred Ollivant. Garden City and New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

The Reef. By Edith Wharton. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

The Soul of a Tenor. By W. J. Henderson. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

The Career of Beauty Darling. By Dolf Wyllarde. New York: The John Lane Company.

My Little Sister. By Elizabeth Robins. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

The Street of Two Friends. By F. Berkeley Smith. Garden City and New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

Hell's Playground. By Ida Vera Simon-ton. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company.

structure, a poverty of words. And conversely, a faultless technique will not galvanise into life a set of wooden dummies, destitute of an inspired thought.

But while there are many different reasons why certain books fail in bigness, it may be said with some confidence that no novel can be bigger than its underlying theme; it may be, and often is, infinitely smaller,—but the central idea behind the specific story is as much the index of its possible intellectual height as a man's stature is of his physical height. The theme of a novel or play, like the text of a sermon, embodies what the author purposes to say; whether he succeeds in saying it, remains to be seen; but no matter how well he says it, he never can rise to greater heights than are embodied in the theme itself. Usually, these themes will prove, at last analysis, to reduce themselves to one or the other of the few big, basic human problems, or relations or emotions: love and hate, friendship and motherhood, liberty and death, faith, hope and charity. And it takes a bold critic to decide which of these themes is of greater and which of lesser magnitude. In fact, the various possible basic themes for fiction start pretty nearly on an equality, their relative importance varying through the centuries, in accordance with shifting faiths and philosophies. It is the specific human story which immediately begins to limit and minimise the basic thought. Love is as broad as the universe; but in a human love story, even though it be the greatest love story in the world, and its heroine the ideally perfect woman, Helen of Troy herself, love is perforce stripped of more than one of its divine attributes. Anger is one of the corner-stones of the world's great epics: and Satan's anger, which led to the fall of man, is relatively a bigger theme than Achilles's anger, which culminated in the fall of Troy; yet every decade is proving the *Iliad* a bigger, because a more universal poem than *Paradise Lost*, because the one was as broad as the whole free, joyous pagan world and the latter narrow with the narrowness of puritanism.

A very common mistake made in speaking of the relative magnitude of novels is that of assuming that fiction is

important in proportion to the size of the canvas, the sheer mass and weight of the humanity introduced into the picture. Zola and Tolstoy are the examples which naturally first come to mind; but their degree of greatness was not due to the number and variety of their characters,—a detail of method,—but to what they succeeded in saying,—a definite achievement. A story with just two persons in it may be a bigger and more enduring story than one with a thousand: the test lies not in the size of the picture, but in the breadth of its application: it must strike the note of kinship. The hero must never be so superlatively invincible as to oppress the reader with a sense of his own hopeless inferiority; while he reads, he must cherish the pleasant delusion that he himself, if only he had an additional inch of stature, might not make such a very poor showing under similar circumstances; and conversely, the villain, even in melodrama, must not be too incredibly, too diabolically inhuman; the touch of genius in Milton's Satan is that his vengefulness is so distinctly human. Physical and mental frailties may be the underlying fabric of big fiction; but not when they become deformities. The moment a character in fiction becomes so abnormal that the reader finds it impossible to say, Under other circumstances, that might have been I, the author has handicapped himself, belittled his opportunities. The proper study of mankind is not only man, but normal, average man, the man with whom we can sympathise, whose hopes and sorrows we can share; even the cleverest nature fakir in the world cannot deeply interest us in the ponderous gallantries of a pterodactyl, or the volatile flirtations of a luna moth.

As it happens, the Western review above referred to furnished a most convenient illustration of the points above discussed, by citing, very much to its disparagement, Mr. James Lane Allen's almost faultless little volume, *The Heroine in Bronze*, as representative of the type of fiction to which Mr. Dreiser and Mr. Edwards form a contrast and a protest. It must seem, to any broad-minded stu-

dent of modern fiction, as though the example were a peculiarly unfortunate choice. There undoubtedly is a struggling younger school of what, for lack of a better term, may be called the New Realism: and this younger school has some qualities which the present writer would be among the first to recognise and to encourage. But it happens that Mr. Allen is one of the very few older writers who, either by instinct or choice, has interwoven, through all the woof of his idealism, a strong and tenacious warp of realistic fibre, embodying all that is best of that element which the younger generation flatter themselves that they have discovered or invented. Mr. Allen, when he chooses, can crowd his canvas; he can handle the epic novel with powerful, sweeping, cumulative strokes,—and without losing a single touch of the latent poetry of life. But he knows, just as every really big artist knows, what the smaller type of craftsman will never learn, that great art is independent of size,—that you can paint as noble a picture on a foot of canvas as on ten square yards,—and that there are times when an eternal verity may be conveyed through the communion of two souls alone on a mountain top as it never could amid the rush and turmoil of Piccadilly or the Champs-Élysées. *The Heroine in Bronze*, in mood if not in literal fact, is a case in point. It seems on the surface a delightful bit of literary dexterity, a clever craftsman's exhibition of his mastery of material and methods. It is a tale of youthful lovers: the old, old tale of the remote, unapproachable princess and the humble adorer,—only the princess is a New York multi-millionaire's daughter, the humble adorer is an impecunious and perennially hopeful novelist, and the enchanted palace is an ostentatious city mansion near the precincts of Fifth Avenue, with stately grounds fortified against intrusion, not with drawbridge and moat, but with a friendly hedge, outside of which the hero can linger, murmuring audacious adorations, which the heroine in the garden need not admit that she has heard,—unless she so chooses. At this point, the reader,—if he is a discriminating reader, and Mr. Allen merits no other kind,—will ad-

vance his estimate of the volume several degrees, and recognise that here is a new addition to that very slender list of stories of youthful love, seen through the discriminating eyes of maturity, which none the less sympathises and understands the portentous importance of it all. Mr. Howells gave us *April Hopes*, Marion Crawford confessed to having "put a great deal of himself" into *The Three Fates*, William Black achieved some of his best work in his rather wonderful *Madcap Violet*. And to the same class of almost mystic understanding of the glamour of young love belongs this unpretentious little idyll by Mr. Allen. But the turning of a few pages reveals that there is more serious purpose underlying it than at first appeared. The heroine as she looked at graduation, delivering her valedictory address, has lingered in the young novelist's mind as so ineffaceable a figure that little by little he builds up around her a new novel, the first novel that he has ever been quite sure of,—this time he knows that he has a masterpiece. On the eve of her departure for Europe, he tells her the outline of his new story; but, as she listens, she sees nothing of its power and beauty, she sees only that he has used her for the purposes of his craft, stripped her bare, violated her inmost thoughts and hopes, for the purpose of winning public acclaim. With the intuition of love, he understands her; and he is too proud to explain. As a matter of fact, the book he purposes to write is a historical novel, the scene of which lies two centuries back, in a country where she has never been. But they part in anger and sore disappointment; and for weeks he can make no progress, because the girl who has been his inspiration failed him at the moment of need. But one day, one desolate, stifling day in mid-summer, he comes across a little bronze statue at an auction sale. This little statue might almost be a portrait, not of the girl herself, but of the ideal woman whom he had believed her to be. And with the inspiration of this wonderful little figure in bronze before him on his desk, the young novelist toils ceaselessly, all through the suffocating days of a New York August, upon the book that is des-

tinged to achieve his first big public recognition. Meanwhile, the girl, through loneliness and heartbreak and dangerous illness, is slowly learning her lesson, slowly coming to a realisation of the fact that each of us builds upon the lives of others, and that the artist achieves fame by giving to the world certain personal joys and hidden beauties that are almost sacredly intimate. And, more than that, she learns the lesson of a woman's joy in sacrifice, and knows that, however hard it may be to see herself, her personality, her very soul stripped bare to the public view, it is a privilege as compared with the pain of seeing her lover owe the same debt to some other woman. Of course, when she reads his book and hears his confession of the inspiration that he has drawn from the bronze statuette, she realises that in a measure she misjudged him, that he would never have consciously flaunted the woman he loved before the public gaze. None the less, she can see only herself in his heroine, and fails to realise that by her earlier misunderstanding of his purpose she has lost something in his eyes: and that the reason why the heroine in bronze inspired him when she failed to do so was because the statuette stood for certain immutable ideals which the living woman could not maintain.

Another recent volume in which the inherent bigness of theme is at first

“The Royal Road”

pretty effectually disguised, is *The Royal Road*, by Alfred Ollivant. On the surface, it

is merely a glimpse behind the scenes into the lives of the hopelessly poor, the bleak and barren misery of London slums. It is only gradually that we realise that we are witnessing the groping of a human soul to find itself, the slow budding and unfolding of a miraculous flower of hope. In Ted Hankey, the brave-hearted, physically defective little Cockney, we have a typical case of a man who from birth has never really had a chance; he is foredoomed by heredity and environment to failure and premature death. If he could have lived in the open, like all the generations of sturdy farmers who lay behind his father, he, too, might have some share in the joys of

living; but fate decreed that he should spend his days as a splitter of hides in the vitiated atmosphere of tanned leather. It is impossible to convey at second hand a tithe of the simple human appeal of Hankey's little home circle, his devoted and heroic wife, Lou, his one little daughter, Meg, and the loving pride that at one time leads him into foolish extravagance, in order that the loved ones shall have everything of the best, and at another drives him to the opposite extreme of parsimony, so that the accumulating gold pieces in the old cracked teapot shall increase more rapidly, as a safeguard against stormy days. The fact bursts upon you suddenly that, in spite of the little cockney's chronic cheerfulness, in spite of his bird-like whistle in sunshine or in cloud, there is ever present, in the back of his mind, a vague yet haunting foreboding, a fear of the grim giant of business competition, the inevitable law of survival of the fittest, that underlies the modern industrial system. Ted Hankey's case is a pitifully common one: the transition from the overheated shops to the chill of London fogs results in an attack of pleurisy; the factory routine fills his place with another and, it happens, a better workman, and red tape keeps him out of work just long enough to dishearten and embitter him. Foolish socialistic arguments among his comrades inflame his awakening sense of injustice, while anxiety and the haunting need of holding his position force him to work beyond his strength. In a few months tuberculosis has claimed him beyond all hope; while a foolish and impotent attack on a London policeman, made under the inflammatory influence of cheap gin, results in some months in jail, from which the kind intervention of the prison doctor sends him home to die. But there is a good deal of life still left in the weakened body of the little Cockney; he is not to win his freedom until he has passed through still darker days and groped his way to a new light. For weeks Ted Hankey sits grim and taciturn, hovering on the brink of madness, recognising his wife and child only long enough to fling an ugly word at them. Then one day, when his wife is out seeking work, the madness she has feared

comes upon him. In the centre of the kitchen floor he heaps all that is left of their pitiful household goods, and sets fire to them. Then he takes his little girl in his arms, leaves a few hastily scrawled words for Lou, makes his way to the Thames and plunges in. This point in the story covers parts I and II, telling respectively of "His Life" and "His Death." The third and last part concerns "His Resurrection." Ted Hankey is not destined to drown. He and Meg are rescued by the big, warm-hearted family physician who has helped his little family through many a trying hour, and who now, by a few charitable lies, saves him from the grip of the law. But there is little that remains for any earthly physician to do. Ted's eyes are already opening upon immortal things. In his last few hours of life the dying Cockney awakens to a sense of peace, a love for his fellow-men, a comprehension and tolerance of the injustices of life that is almost divine in its broad charity. He knows that he is dying, and he is content to go, with his head pillowed on the shoulder of his faithful Lou, and his eyes beholding visions of a radiance that he tries to describe, but cannot. "Lazarus was allowed to come back," Lou tells him, hoping against hope, and Ted replies, "But I won't be allowed to come back; Lazarus didn't tell what he saw, and I have." And with Lou's hand still clasped in his nerveless fingers, the little Cockney slips smilingly and painlessly away into the Great Mystery. It is almost an injustice to this book to review it at all, because of the reader's sense of the baffling difficulty of conveying in any adequate degree the haunting spirit of faith and hope and charity with which this humble death-bed is transfigured.

In spite of her finished art, the latest volume by Edith Wharton, entitled *The Reef*, leaves the impression of a retrogression, a perceptible falling away from this same author's earlier standards. Although the plot turns upon a made situation, due to a most unlikely coincidence, the underlying theme is not lacking in bigness: it is that of a conflict between two points of hon-

our,—a man caught, through his own folly and weakness, and forced to choose between the loss of the woman he loves and the ruin of the girl who loves him. Any theme which measures our modern social conventions against abstract principles of justice contains the essential elements of bigness; but it is always possible to belittle any theme by the specific handling,—and this is precisely what Mrs. Wharton has happened to do. Her characters are human, so far as they go; they are humanly erring, and humanly helpless in the web of circumstances. But they lack that higher distinction that might have raised them out of the common crowd and have made them the object of the reader's tense and poignant sympathy. Here, in a few words, is the essence of what happens: Darrow, who believes himself deeply in love with Mrs. Leath, is on his way to Paris to see her and make a final definite offer of his heart and hand. But just as he is preparing to cross the Channel, he receives a despatch from her, curtly intimating that his visit is inconvenient and must be delayed for a fortnight. Now, if you happen to be in the diplomatic service and have moved heaven and earth for a brief leave of absence, this sort of swift change of mind, without the courtesy of a word of explanation, produces a pardonable irritation; Darrow, none too sure of her affection, is in a reckless mood; and at the psychological moment he runs across a desolate little female, a certain Sophy Viner, who recognises him joyously and recalls herself as the paid companion of a London society woman at whose house Darrow occasionally dines. Sophy has been undiplomatic and has lost her position at an hour's notice; she is on her way to Paris in search of the only friends she has left in the world; a few pound notes stand between her and destitution, and she is full of unsatisfied longings to see life. Darrow, smarting under his own disappointment, begs to be allowed to give her a couple of weeks of life,—the gay, tinsel life of Paris; the proposition is made without ulterior motive, and is accepted in a spirit of frank comradeship. But before the two weeks are over, Sophy has fallen into his arms out of sheer gratitude; and

when a belated letter from Mrs. Leath arrives, Darrow has awakened to a consciousness of his unworthiness and casts the letter unopened into the fire. All this is the prelude to the main story. Mrs. Leath, who loves Darrow quite sincerely and means to accept him, although she takes her time in explaining to him her motives for changes of mood and of date, waits patiently another six months, and then once more sends for him. When Darrow arrives, he finds that Mrs. Leath has a new governess for the little daughter of her first marriage, and the governess proves to be no other than Sophy Viner. Furthermore, Sophy has so far ingratiated herself into Mrs. Leath's home circle, that the family look without disapproval upon her prospective marriage with Mrs. Leath's younger brother. There we have the whole issue raised with the utmost clearness: what is Darrow's duty, as a man of honour? Must he make public his own share in Sophy's downfall, or must he remain silent and see his future brother-in-law bind himself for life to an adventuress? The situation is dramatically strong: the trouble lies rather in the lack of moral strength on the part of all the characters involved. Everybody guesses the truth; indeed, the perspicuity they all show argues an unclean mind, an abnormal readiness to suspect the worst. But nobody does anything worthy of the situation. Darrow urges the girl to renounce her chance of marriage,—not because she is unworthy, but because "he cannot believe that it is for her happiness;" she finally does make the renunciation, not in a spirit of self-sacrifice, but because she discovers that she really is in love with Darrow; and Mrs. Leath, after forcing Darrow to admit the truth and casting him off, repents and decides to forgive everything and even win Sophy back for her brother's wife, but finds that she is twenty-four hours too late,—Sophy has patched up her quarrel with her former employer and is on her way to India in her old capacity as companion. In a word, the situation is full of opportunities, but the net impression of the actions of the principal actors is that they all savour of the ignoble.

In *The Soul of a Tenor*, Mr. W. J. Henderson has propounded a theme which, although sorely trite, has given us, in the annals of modern fiction, a number of rather big novels, from the days of George Sand's *Consuelo* downward. That the physically most perfect voice in the world cannot stir human hearts and sway them at pleasure with supreme mastery of smiles and tears until the singer's heart has awakened, until he himself has learned to love and to suffer, is a truism too old and familiar to need argument,—and unfortunately it forms the sum total of Mr. Henderson's underlying idea. The tenor whom he makes his leading figure is a young American, of the type that somehow slips through our American colleges with only a scant veneer of culture. He is consumed with a colossal egotism; he cares nothing for music as an art; symphonies and oratorios bore him to distraction; and even the operas in which he sings the leading rôles mean nothing more than a series of opportunities to display his vocal dexterity,—and any composer who happens to write a passage too difficult for the compass of his voice sinks proportionately in his good opinion. Now, in the course of time, two women come into the life of this foolish and badly spoiled young man; the first of these young women, a born musician who takes him seriously, he makes his wife; the second of them, a passionate Hungarian gypsy, all fire and no illusions, with whom he sings his leading rôles, he makes his mistress. And when his wife awakens to her husband's shallowness; when she grasps his monumental conceit and his total lack of the artistic sense, and at the same time realises that the Hungarian woman stirs him as she, with her less passionate nature, never can stir him, she acquiesces in what amounts to a separation, hoping that her rival may awaken the man's dormant soul and give him the one thing he lacks to make him the world's greatest tenor. No one can say that there is anything amiss with this idea; the trouble with the book is simply that Mr. Henderson fails to convince us that his Hungarian gypsy is the right sort of woman to effect the special kind of

awakening that he depicts. She might, of course, shake him out of self-complacency, through his awakened passion for her; but that she, the temptress, should arouse him to nobler things, fit him mentally and morally to understand and to sing the great Wagnerian rôles that heretofore were beyond his spiritual and vocal powers, is a contradiction in terms. The author draws a comparison between his hero and Tannhäuser, with Venus and Elizabeth standing respectively for the mistress and the wife: and this is all very well to a certain point; but when he attributes his singer's regeneration to the gypsy's influence and shows the wife, rejoicing in her new-found happiness, coming in all contrition and gratitude to give thanks to her husband's mistress, it strikes the impartial reader as grotesque, as though Tannhäuser's Elizabeth herself had undertaken a pious pilgrimage to the Venusberg.

It is four or five years ago that "Frank Danby" wrote *The Heart of a Child*, "The Career of Beauty Darling" with the avowed purpose of proving that a young girl, born and bred in the slums, could grow to maturity and, without money, friends or influence, go upon the stage and, by her own force of character, keep herself unspotted. Like all of "Frank Danby's" work, this story had a certain undeniable distinction of style and substance, and, although it was quite unconvincing, it gave us a series of pictures of stage life that are unforgettable. The volume was again brought to mind rather forcibly by the reading of Dolf Wyllarde's latest novel, *The Career of Beauty Darling*. The present occasion is not a propitious one for a detailed discussion of this rather exceptional book. Dolf Wyllarde has her faults and her limitations. There are many people who on the whole may be called fairly broad-minded who cannot read a succession of Dolf Wyllarde's novels without admitting a keen sense of physical repulsion. Yet the present writer is free to admit that the author of *The Story of Eden* is one of the very few women novelists now writing in English whom he can read with any real interest, and also one of the few who,

if writing for a French or German audience, would long since have received the tribute of serious critical consideration. For the moment, it will suffice to say that *The Career of Beauty Darling* is a better piece of work than "Frank Danby's" kindred novel, in so far as it leaves the impression of literal truth. The heroine, starting with advantages that Sally Snape never enjoyed, none the less found that the handicap of poverty and friendlessness is a fatal one in the theatrical profession, and her artistic success and moral downfall go hand in hand from the opening chapter,—just as any one who is a rank sentimentalist foresees that they are bound to do. Beauty Darling is the woman of pleasure, the play-toy of man, and nothing else; and her hideously spectacular suicide, perpetrated as the only possible escape from what she regards as the supreme disgrace of maternity, is absolutely in keeping, and artistically the one inevitable final touch to a rare, although remorselessly cruel, piece of technique.

*My Little Sister*, by Elizabeth Robins, is a curious combination of an exceptionally tragic situation and a faulty technique, inexcusable from an author of her repute.

The errors of construction will undoubtedly escape the average reader; in fact, it is only when a reviewer starts to sum up the substance of this story that he suddenly realises them. The present reviewer had the story outlined to him in advance, somewhat after the following fashion: The central characters are two young girls, two sisters, who for the first time in their lives go away on a visit, at the invitation of an aunt who lives in London. Aside from the fact that the woman who meets them at the station is unexpectedly young, hard-featured, and oddly nervous in manner, there are many little details which strike the older sister as queer, if not alarming; but it is not until the close of the first dinner at her supposed aunt's house,—a dinner that has been a succession of horrors to the delicately nurtured girl, because of the license which the male guests allow themselves in speech and manner,—that her special partner, more decent than the rest,

is prompted to ask her, "Where do you think you are?"—and when she replies, "At my aunt's, of course," naming street and number, tells her ominously, "You are a twenty minutes' drive from there, and at the most infamous house in all Europe." How the older sister makes her escape from this house, too lacking in presence of mind to note its number or location, and how her subsequent frantic efforts to rescue the younger girl result in a permanent and maddening ignorance of her fate, does duty, of course, as the logical and foreseen climax of the book. But Elizabeth Robins's purpose was a higher one than merely to write an ephemeral "thriller"; and she has something more in mind than to utilise for publicity purposes the current catchword of the "white slave traffic." If the book stands for anything, it stands for a powerful protest against the unconscious iniquity of the sheltered-life system of education. And the serious blot on what would otherwise have been easily one of the big books of the current decade, is the fact that the first three-quarters of the story, which pave the way up to the tragedy, are all wrong. The reason why the invalid and widowed mother, who has brought her two little daughters back from India, fears the outside world with a fear that is almost hysterical; why she vaguely hints at some nameless tragedy in her own youth; why she is poor and friendless, and scorned by her dead husband's relatives—all these are just a few of the many confusing details, the meaningless loose ends which the author does not deign to finish off. Furthermore, she has chosen to see the tragedy through the eyes of a young girl, scarcely wiser than the sister who falls a victim. And because of the supposed narrator's youth and ignorance, it is impossible to reach a full understanding of the situation. The book cannot fail to attract attention, in spite of its vagueness; it cannot fail to leave a poignant heartache behind it. Nevertheless, the author has undertaken a task for which she was technically not qualified. It takes a Henry James to write of "What Maisie Knew," and through the indirect medium of a young girl's eyes tell us a thousand things that Maisie herself did not and could not know.

*The Street of the Two Friends*, by F. Berkeley Smith, is one of those refreshing little volumes which largely disarm criticism because of their unpretentiousness. It does not lay claim to any very momentous theme; it simply seeks to express the author's personal enjoyment of a certain phase of life, a little circumscribed locality, whose distinctive features, as he knew them, are rapidly passing away. To express it more specifically, he has given us one more volume in praise of the Latin Quarter of yesterday,—not quite the Latin Quarter of Henri Murger, yet still much the same in spirit; the old joyous quarter where social conventions were as little regarded as the Commandments east of Suez; where a man and a woman might be frankly good friends if they did not happen to be something more; where poverty was light-heartedly shared, and a personal windfall of a few hundred francs was blithely squandered in giving a widespread and indiscriminate festival. Mr. Smith may not appeal to a wide audience; but those whom he reaches instinctively reach back to him, as to a kindred spirit.

There is just one more novel of the month which emphatically demands attention, *Hell's Playground*, by Ida Vera Simonton. The scene of the story is the Congo region of West Africa, and the spirit of the narration, in spite of many crudities of style and immaturities of judgment, inevitably challenges comparison with Joseph Conrad,—the Conrad of a decade ago, the Conrad of *The Heart of Darkness*. Aside from the rather important difference to be expected between a master craftsman and a novice, the striking distinction in method is that Mr. Conrad first, last and always has utilised the suggestiveness of indirection, forcing the reader to imagine for himself countless inexpressible, unprintable things; while Miss Simonton indulges in a Zolaesque frankness of utterance, which must have required some courage on the part of her publishers to reproduce. Her theme is the same, identical theme that has served Mr. Conrad a dozen times, in *Al-*

*mayer's Folly* and most of the volumes which succeeded it,—the inevitable, foreseen degeneration of the white man in the tropics, due to three chief causes: the absence of his ordained companion, the white woman, the slow poisoning from alcohol, and the still more pernicious degradation wrought by the native female. Miss Simonton's story is kaleidoscopic in its breadth and depth; there is no question whatever that she has made a highly ambitious attempt, and has largely, if not wholly achieved it. Her specific story shows us a young Englishman who, because his troth is already plighted at home, almost escapes contamination, in spite of the deadly strain of a three years' residence. And then, because a false message is sent to his affianced wife, and she chooses to believe that he has taken a temporary native mate, and to cast him off, the young Englishman throws restraint to the winds and rivals the rest of his resident countrymen in

debauchery and ruthless cruelty. Incidentally, it should be noted that Miss Simonton's real interest is not with the individual, but with the system, and that she does not hesitate to attack in unsparring terms the foreign administration in French and Belgian Congo. She pictures the native women as mere chattels, merchandise to be sold or leased by father or husband to the highest foreign bidder. And in the episode of La Gabonnaise, daughter of a tribal chief and as flawless in her physical modelling as an ebony Venus, who, because of her infidelity to her white master, is by his orders literally cut to pieces with whips of hippopotamus hide, Miss Simonton simply wishes to convey one object lesson among many of colonial rule on the African West Coast. This is not a novel to be indiscriminately recommended; but to the thinking class, who are not afraid of blunt phrasing, and who wish to be told the truth, it will furnish food for thought.

## SIX BOOKS OF THE MONTH

### I

G. K. CHESTERTON'S "A MISCELLANY OF MEN"\*

Mr. Chesterton never wearies of attacking the superstitions of the modern "practical" man. We put the word in quotation marks because Mr. Chesterton would uproariously insist that the people generally accounted practical are in reality not practical at all. He would have no difficulty in proving that a poet or a pillar saint is a practical, hard-headed person, and that a politician or "captain of industry" is a dreamer, hopelessly cut off from the realities of life. Mr. Chesterton's premises are perfectly simple and ought to be familiar. If any reader has lost for the moment the key to his argument, he may find it again by turning to the *New Testament*. A few chapters of that neglected work will throw more light on many of the so-

called paradoxes of Mr. G. K. Chesterton than the whole mass of criticism and commentary that his writings have called forth. For the source of a large part of Mr. Chesterton's incongruities is quite obviously his Christian faith. Faith itself is a social incongruity. It is absurd, therefore, to blame him for his sort of topsy-turviness, when to the eye of faith society is always upside down. Of course, all this is familiar to the plain, simple, straightforward folk who have no difficulty with the elemental. But to the complex, sophisticated, book-stuffed inebriates of literary criticism he is a problem, or a force, or a congeries of twelve contemporary tendencies, or a mere jester, or an ingenious and audacious mountebank—everything and anything but what he essentially is, namely, a man of simple faiths, great talents and very disorderly mental habits, acquired perhaps, and at all events strengthened, under the journalistic demand. His intellect is an unweeded garden, the horror of tidy minds, but at least it is a garden,

\*A Miscellany of Men. By G. K. Chesterton. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company. 1912. Pp. 314.