

ELLEN GLASGOW'S ARROW

By Grant Overton

With a Portrait by Bertrand Zadig

SINCE 1865, Ellen Glasgow is the only writer to break through the sentimental tradition of the south. To understand the work of this novelist, you have to know, besides that work, a city and a house as well. The city is Richmond, the capital of the Confederacy, and the house, which is in Richmond, is Number One West Main Street.

I wish, in writing about Miss Glasgow, to avoid epigrams. Witty half truths may interpenetrate, they cannot crumble the sentimental tradition — the southern sentimental tradition, the tradition of Thomas Nelson Page and (as he is generally taken) of James Lane Allen. Mr. Page and Mr. Allen are unlucky exemplars; I could pile up names like a cairn of stones, and stones they would be, given to a people who asked for stones when they needed bread, who would erect their sculptures and their monuments though they went hungry, who, in brief, were and are a proud people, so foolish and so admirable in the pride that is obstinately dear to them.

Do you know the south? I do not, but I know that literary region of houses like Poesque mausoleums or pallid tombs glimmering whitely behind oaks festooned with moss or limp, enormous willows. I know that literary style which, perhaps, began with the tintinnabulation of the bells and advanced with the rhetoric of Henry Clay and has reached the flood tide of its eloquence in the pages of H. L.

Mencken's favorite periodical, the "Congressional Record". I know, I know. So do you. . . .

Well, that is the tradition, and like a parasitic growth it has strangled everything within its reach. To take the case of Virginia and the instances of living writers, there are, besides Ellen Glasgow, two of generally conceded distinction and national importance. Mary Johnston began by writing historical romances which eluded the sentimental tradition by going two centuries behind it; she has lived to write another and loftier kind of romance, but she still writes on her own terms and not under terms imposed by her environment. James Branch Cabell escaped in another direction. Since he is of an old Virginia family, the sentimental tradition would perhaps have fastened upon him firmly, hopelessly, had he not put on his vanishing cap to reappear only in Poictesme. But the point is that both Miss Johnston and Mr. Cabell escaped; Miss Glasgow didn't. She didn't even try to. At eighteen, after years of girlish scribbling, she completed a first novel, "The Descendant", well characterized as "an exposition of the development and life of an intellectual hybrid, the offspring of a low woman and a highly intellectual man". As finished, the first quarter of the book showed the crudeness of inexperience, and on the advice of Walter Hines Page the part was rewritten. But this done, the book had a quality that stands

very well the test of rereading today.

It is strongly characteristic of Ellen Glasgow's work that it does weather well. She is one of a few American writers whose twenty year old fiction has this substantial character, which is the principal reason why she is already picked for a collected or definitive edition. But to revert to the point: Miss Glasgow, as much as Mr. Cabell by birth and upbringing, as much as Miss Johnston by that femininity which then implied susceptibility and a meek dependence, was marked out to be a sacrifice to sentiment and to pride. And from her teens, she has cheerfully refused to be sacrificed; from her very first novel, she has dealt with the actual Virginia she lives in and the actual people she has lived among as no one else has ventured to do — as they are, black and white, always the penny plain, never the twopenny colored.

She said, laughing heartily, in Richmond a few weeks ago:

"What the south needs now is — blood and irony!"

She is right, of course. It is not permitted to a non-southerner to suggest that the south of the literary sentimental tradition is anæmic, diabetic. But a southerner, I take it, may say so — especially when, by her works, she has shown that she knows what she is talking about.

The city of an old repose that seats itself on the high bank away from the James River, like a beautiful woman whose hair has whitened and whose gaiety is deep within her, has certain streets — Main, Franklin, and Grace — that are like the lines of a face. Grace Street is very smart with fine shops and stores, Franklin has still its houses as handsome as Lee in his grey uniform, and Main is the deeper line, the wrinkle of the things one has wit-

nessed and lived with. It is a city of contours, seven hills like Rome's, the Capitol throned on the handsomest and flanked on one side by the residence of governors, a house so beautiful that all America owes it something. Far out at the other end of the city Lee rides his horse at the top of a tall shaft, new homes line Monument Avenue, and all is prosperously correct. The new Broad Street station and the Country Club are all that they should be but they really are not essential. They have no special significance — the kind of significance, for example, that attaches to the waving fields of broomsedge, to the fat plantations still to be found on the city's outskirts, or to the square, old fashioned house that stands at One West Main Street.

The house, which is about one hundred years old, stands now in what Miss Glasgow calls rather harshly a slum. It is scarcely that, but certainly it is not any longer debatable ground. All her old neighbors have surrendered unconditionally to business, and even the church across the street from Number One has become more eclectic than religious. But Miss Glasgow, quitting New York where she had resided for four years, came back to Richmond to possess and inhabit the house; not only is it hers but she keeps it in its old and finest estate. Already this spring the yellow forsythia bushes have blossomed in the front yard, overhanging the short path between iron fences. A flight of steps leads to a square porch between two tapered columns, and a polished knocker juts from the door.

Within, a wide hall running the depth of the house. The stairway at the back goes straight up to a landing, turns upon itself and continues to the upper floor. Down these stairs briskly, with an air combining welcome



Bethrand Lee

Ellen Glasgow

and business, come the Sealyham, Jeremy (named for Hugh Walpole's youngster), and the white, slightly wistful poodle, Jeremy's protégé.

The house downstairs is divided without pretensions into four square rooms. Each room has its fireplace and grate and in each, if the season is right, a kind of lignite, something half wood and half coal, burns with cheerful flames and seems positively to thrive on inattention.

Upstairs the same sensible division into rooms is preserved. The huge guest chamber, at the back of the house, overlooks a delightful private garden, where flagstones curve a path through the grass. A front room, with fireplace and grate and walls cased in books, is the study. There is scarcely room on the walls for the books, and the collection, like that of every writer, is partly processional. Those that are to go on their way do not include the contents of one large cabinet, consisting of inscribed copies. Of these one of the most interesting is an English copy of "The Old Wives' Tale" with the most flattering inscription by Arnold Bennett that I have ever seen. Hugh Walpole, who was once Miss Glasgow's guest for three weeks and who has described One West Main Street as his American home, is represented with inscribed copies of all his books.

And Miss Glasgow herself? Of good height, though not tall, with wavy dark hair and lively brown eyes, she is the kindest person in the world, the perfect hostess, and a gay friend. She finds life agreeable and amusing; it is so easy to see her imaginatively as a Richmond belle, if her mind had been as vacuous as that of a belle must be. She suffers from a degree of deafness which, to anyone else, would be a serious barrier from life; refusing either

to disguise it or to let it handicap her, she is a part of everything that goes on and is that rare thing, a woman with whom you can really hold a conversation. No contrast could be greater than between Miss Glasgow and James Branch Cabell. She enters into talk, dismissing all difficulties; he, unimpeded from easy hearing, often does not talk at all.

I have perhaps said enough to suggest the secret of Miss Glasgow's life and work. Of course it lies, as such a secret must lie, in the solution of a problem of personality. In attacking the sentimental tradition singlehanded she would have failed disastrously if she herself were another kind of person. If there were about her any touch of the crusader or reformer, any suggestion of the stern moralist, she could not have survived, let alone have succeeded. But, as a person, she is all that her society demands, and so without effort or assumption, wholly by inheritance and temperament. In a word, it is natural to her—just as natural as that life of the mind in which she pierces through the legend to the truth of the south.

She is as merry as she is uncompromising and as uncompromising as she is merry. In the lot of inscribed books there is "The Man of Property" written in by John Galsworthy; but when Mr. Galsworthy began to be sentimental Ellen Glasgow did not hesitate, in a statement for publication, to dissent. Away back in 1916 (as it now seems) she came out with a public statement on current American fiction which provoked comment from most well known American writers. Contemporary English fiction, said Miss Glasgow, was superior to the American output because Americans were demanding from their writers, as from

their politicians, an "evasive idealism" and the "cheapest sort of sham optimism"; were wanting "a sugary philosophy, utterly without any basis in logic or human experience".

Such remarks are not customarily made in Gath, nor are they published daily in the newspapers of Ascalon. They represent a real point of view — and who else ever had a point of view on American fiction? They were, if you like, the utterance of an aristocrat. One cannot imagine such words from the deprecating lips of William Dean Howells or the curved lips of Owen Wister or the slightly pouted lips of Mr. Cabell, whose later books are filled with *mots* on American literature. The shrewd good humor and calm of that comment were what made some contemporaries squirm.

But she has always had this gift for plain speaking. You may remember that novel of Miss Glasgow's which has for some years been her own favorite, "Virginia" — the study of the helpless southern woman. "Virginia's education, like that of every well-bred Southern woman of her day, was designed to paralyze her reasoning faculties and to eliminate all danger of mental unsettling. She was the passive and helpless victim of the ideal of feminine self-sacrifice." Very well, here are some sentences from that novel:

Having lived through the brief illumination of romance, she had come at last into that steady glow which encompasses the commonplace.

"You know how Abby is about men."
"Yes, I know, and it's just the way men are about Abby."

"How on earth could she go out sewing by the day if she didn't have her religious convictions?"

"Anybody who has mixed with beggars oughtn't to turn up his nose at a respectable bank." "But he says that it's because the bank is so respectable that he doesn't think he could stand it."

Trenchant; the word describes a quality of her writing; if it were not unusual it would not stand out from the pages, and if it were alone I should not be writing this article. There is not only the love of words and the gift of choosing words, there is the constant exercise of the senses, of smell, taste, touch; the distinct feeling for color and that special access to the quality of sounds which the deaf — even the very mildly deaf, like myself — have vouchsafed to them. And as to the characters of style apart from the verbal, Miss Glasgow has always at her command the tempo of a novel, so indescribable and so perceptibly different from the rubato of short story writing. I speak of these things first because they are all subordinate to a writer's emotion and the way in which that emotion communicates itself. It is in this crucial region that her gift is most strongly developed. Endowed with a keen sense of drama, she wrote with great effectiveness the strong scenes of such a novel (among the early ones) as "The Deliverance". But the final test of a novelist in some fields is the power to arrest dramatic action and keep it in the background, to stimulate the reader until his brain is the true theatre, so that the words taken in by his eyes merely light the action going forward on the curtainless stage of his mind. Miss Glasgow seems to me to meet this test with honors in her new novel, "Barren Ground".

This book, on which she has spent the last two and a half years, is a rival of "Main Street" and "The Old Wives' Tale" for length, and deals with the life of a woman from the age of twenty until she is fifty. Dorinda is one of a family living on those Virginia farms whose soil has been almost hopelessly impoverished. She is of the

Scotch-Irish breed, of what the Virginians themselves call "good people" as distinguished from "good family". She is a normal person of rather more than ordinary intelligence. And her life is presented with what must, I think, be called absolute veracity; there is only such elimination as a natural perspective effects.

Well, in the book there is a scene where Dorinda's brother is confronted by the sheriff. Rufus is loud in denials:

His words and his tone struck with a chill against Dorinda's heart. Why couldn't the boy be silent? Why was he obliged, through some obliquity of nature, invariably to appear as a braggart and a bully? While she stood there listening to his furious denial of guilt, she was as positive that he had killed Peter Kittery as if she had been on the spot.

The mother intervenes, telling a lie on the boy's behalf:

Mother love was a wonderful thing, she reflected, a wonderful and a ruinous thing! It was mother love that had helped to make Rufus the moral failure that he was, and it was mother love that was now accepting as a sacrifice the results of that failure. Mrs. Oakly was a pious and God-fearing woman . . . yet she had deliberately perjured herself in order that a worthless boy might escape the punishment which she knew he deserved.

"I'm not like that", thought Dorinda. "I couldn't have done it." At the bottom of her heart, in spite of her kinship to Rufus, there was an outraged sense, not so much of justice as of economy. The lie appeared to her less sinful than wasted.

And a moment later her reflections have turned back to her own bitter experience:

"I suppose I'm different from other women", she meditated. "I may have lost feeling, or else it was left out of me when I was born. Some women would have gone on loving Jason no matter how he treated them, but I'm not made that way. There's something deep down in me

that I value more than love or happiness or anything outside of myself. It may be only pride, but it comes first of all."

But let me drop back a few pages to that reencounter with the man himself:

"If you only knew what I've suffered."

She was looking at him now with merciless eyes. For this thing she had ruined her life. Then before the thought had left her mind, she realized that in his presence, with her eyes on his face, she was farther away from him than she had been in New York. Yesterday he had had power over her senses; tomorrow he might have power again over her memory; but at this instant, while they stood there, so close together that she could almost feel his breath on her face, her senses and her memory alike were delivered from the old torment of love.

It would be superfluous for me to comment on that last sentence which has compressed in it so much that is profoundly true of the physiological and psychological nature of women.

To labor with adjectives seems to me a poor way to attract readers to a book; I shan't say more about "Barren Ground", which, after all, is simply the completely told story of a woman of whom we read, on the last page: "At middle age she faced the future without romantic glamor, but she faced it with integrity of vision."

Bibliography

- 1897 *The Descendant*
- 1898 *Phases of an Inferior Planet*
- 1900 *The Voice of the People*
- 1902 *The Freeman and Other Poems*
- 1902 *The Battleground*
- 1904 *The Deliverance*
- 1906 *The Wheel of Life*
- 1908 *The Ancient Law*
- 1909 *The Romance of a Plain Man*
- 1911 *The Miller of Old Church*
- 1913 *Virginia*
- 1916 *Life and Gabriella*
- 1919 *The Builders*
- 1922 *One Man in His Time*
- 1925 *Barren Ground*

CULTURE IN CALIFORNIA

By Richard Burton

OFTEN have I sat on a ferry boat plying between Oakland and San Francisco and studied the faces of the thronging occupants, comparing them with those familiar to me for a lifetime on the ferries between New York and Jersey City or Brooklyn. The difference, I felt, was definite and striking. The Californians were far livelier, more alert and elate in expression; in a word, they looked happier. And their talk, their bodily motions, their whole bearing, carried out the impression. No observer who has been visiting the coast for so long a period as myself can have failed to notice this characteristic. In all their contacts with life, Californians, set beside easterners, exhibit what might be called an innocent paganism. They believe in happiness as a daily mood and product, and are able to extract it as they go along. The refrain of the d...rky song is their motto:

I's going to live anyhow till I die, die, die.

They have what one would be tempted to call a Continental vivacity and gaiety — were it not that one fails mostly to find it in like measure abroad. The only European city I have seen that is a rival of San Francisco for what seems the pleasure mood, is Stockholm. It is entirely missing in Berlin or Paris, and, of course, in London.

In truth, why should not California give this effect of insouciance and good cheer? Her climate (all the rest is weather, says Mark Twain), with nature a seeming friend the year around and the sun soaking one's body through

with genial content — surely, this is enough to account for it. Throw in a scenic backdrop so high colored and picturesque as to suggest the stage metaphor, and add for good measure an appealingly romantic history, with its involvements of Spanish and Indians, the chromatic spectacle of types blent of Occident and Orient, and reason sufficient is given.

It all reminds you of how true it is that climate explains man; all his developments, in whatever direction, root in the soil and the diurnal changes of nature. Imagine Calvinism born and bred on the Pacific coast! You can't; it is a contradiction in terms; and for the simple reason that the God of California could never be a wrathful God. Italy, another sun blessed land, uses affectionate diminutives in referring to deity: the language caresses the Virgin and the saints. God's prevailing attitude in California's favored region is symbolized by a smile. Pan and Bacchus seem the natural deities. Prohibition has a peculiar incongruity in grapeland. And this truth applies with increased force as one moves south to Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, and the other coastwise cities. The reason San Francisco can be jauntily light-minded as she dances or goes to business on top of a momentarily quiescent upheaval of the earth is that a little thing like that is not sufficient to detach a native from the conviction that the sun god is on his side. A Berkeley friend of mine across the Bay, to whose house I went on a day when a slight