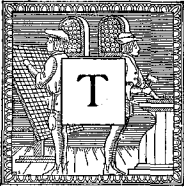


MINE OWN PEOPLE AND SOME RECENT BOOKS*



THE proportions of novels with a foreign setting have increased so notably in recent months that a brief discussion of the underlying principles in accordance with which a novelist is or is not justified in going outside of his own environment seems to be not only timely but needful. And for a full understanding of these principles it is necessary to begin by recognising that the part played by the novelist is always that of an interpreter. He stands, as it were, to borrow Kipling's familiar phrase, as mediator between Mine Own People and the general public. In other words, the novelist who has a story worth the telling should possess some special knowledge about some class or section or community of human beings, more personal and intimate than that possessed by the majority of his readers; and at the same time he must have a sympathetic understanding of the particular public that he hopes to reach, which will enable him to express this special knowledge in terms commensurate with their own experience. It matters not whether the writer is a Mrs. Wilkins-Freeman, interpreting the New England farmer's wife to her American sisters, or Giovanni Verga, revealing the Sicilian peasant to the rest of Italy, or Rudyard Kipling, opening the heart of India to the whole Anglo-Saxon world—the underlying principle remains

*Anne of Tréboul. By Marie Louise Goetchius. New York: The Century Company.

A Village of Vagabonds. By F. Berkeley Smith. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

The Undesirable Governess. By Marion Crawford. New York: The Macmillan Company.

The Twisted Foot. By Henry Milner Rideout. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.

The Pursuit. By Frank Savage. Boston and New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Indian Dust. By Otto Rothfeld. New York: The John Lane Company.

Fortune. By J. C. Snaith. New York: Moffat, Yard and Company.

precisely the same. A native Hindoo who had never been outside his own village, never come in contact with Englishmen, could presumably write an accurate story of his own people, full of intimate truths and vivid colour—but it could not possibly grip our attention after the manner of *Kim*, because its point of view, its outlook upon life, would be one that we could not possibly share. And, on the other hand, an American who had never been outside the limits of Sioux Falls or Council Bluffs could not, by any burning of the midnight oil, write a story of modern India that would carry conviction. In other words, the novelist is like the actor; in order to succeed he must know not only his lines but his audience.

It follows, then, as a first general principle, that without some special structural reason so strong as to become imperative the wise novelist never uses what, from his point of view, is a foreign setting. It may be foreign to you and to me—but that makes no difference; that is no exception to the rule, so long as the writer himself is in a position to think of his characters as Mine Own People. We feel, for instance, no aloofness, no sense of being shut out when we read the Saracinesca novels of Mr. Crawford. Here, indeed, is an ideal illustration of the principle involved. By education and environment and, in later years, by deliberate choice, he was an Italian among Italians, speaking their language, sharing their habits and very largely thinking their thoughts. But because he was American, Mr. Crawford was able in a subtle and unobtrusive way so to translate and explain the words and deeds of his characters that our first thought of Corona d'Astradente, of the old Prince of Saracinesca, or of the melancholy Spica, is not that they are foreigners, but simply fellow human beings.

And this brings us to a second important principle: namely, that an author who is interpreting between his characters and his audience, when they are relatively foreign to each other, must view his story

not through the eyes of the characters themselves, but from a detached outside standpoint. What people do is comparatively easy to understand when you are allowed to see them do it, even though the motives behind the deed are obscure. When Alfio in *Cavalleria Rusticana* seizes Turiddu's ear between his teeth by way of challenge, any American audience grasps the purport of the act, though the general history of the custom, and the special line of reasoning in this individual case are not revealed to them. If you think a moment you will realise that the really successful novels that deal with people widely separated from us by language or religion or social or mental planes are seldom, if ever, of the psychological type; they are written simply and frankly from the outside. An *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, seen wholly through the narrow angle of Uncle Tom's own eyes, interpreted only by the slow and defective processes of an aged slave's brain, would have been too soporific ever to fan the flames of a Civil War. An epic of modern India, coming to us transmuted through the biased brain of a Brahmin or Mohammedan, would be infinitely bore-some. And that is why the great interpreters of psychological fiction wisely confine themselves to the men and women of culture and refinement, people fairly near our own sphere of life, who think and speak and act as we would do under the same circumstances, and therefore need a minimum of interpretation. Some powerful and, as it happens, rather gruesome stories have been written about homicidal apes. But both the *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and Kipling's *Bimi* are purely objective in the method of telling—nor is it conceivable that any profit could have resulted from attempting to follow the convolutions of an orang-outang's brain.

The question naturally arises: If an author should confine himself to interpreting the people whom he knows best, and if, by so doing, he will accomplish his best work, how is it that many novels of recognised ability are apparently transgressions of this rule? There is Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*; there is the famous Waterloo episode in *Vanity Fair*; there is the whole series of Henry James's

novels from *Roderick Hudson* onward, to mention only a few cases at haphazard. And, from time to time, there have been conspicuous popular successes due beyond doubt to their foreign setting; such, for instance, as Marion Crawford's *Mr. Isaacs*, Du Maurier's *Tribby*, Ouida's *Under Two Flags*, and more recently, Robert Hichens's *Garden of Allah* and *The Lady of the Decoration*, by Frances Little. But a moment's consideration will show that these are really not exceptions to the rule but illustrations of one phase of it. What these various authors have been interested in studying is not merely the atmosphere of India or Italy or Paris or Algiers or Japan, nor the manners and customs of these countries. In all the cases cited and in a host of others like them, the underlying purpose is the more complex one of studying cosmopolitanism; of seeing an alien civilisation through the eyes of an Anglo-Saxon, interpreting it to the extent of his understanding of it and studying its effects upon his temperament and his life. For Robert Hichens to attempt to write a novel of native Bedouins, or for Frances Little to try to give us a romance peopled only by Japanese would seem the height of folly. But the books they actually wrote remain within the rule because they are studies of women of our own race exposed, for the time being, to unusual experiences in strange climes.

Now and then it may happen that a novelist hits upon a theme the nature of which necessarily localises it. A Mormon novel could not conceivably be laid in London or New York; a novel hinging on the illegality of marriage with a deceased wife's sister must be English by its very essence. To all intents and purposes, Harriet Beecher Stowe, born and bred in New England, was a foreigner to the people and the life of New Orleans; yet, if she must write a novel of slavery, she must perforce lay her scene either in the South or in some other part of the globe even remoter in point of time and space. And in like manner, many another novel with themes less momentous perhaps, yet well worth serious workmanship, has forced its author to undertake a patient study of some foreign environment, some alien people, and consciously handicap

himself at the start by the additional difficulty of working with unfamiliar material. And although success in this type of work makes the book not one whit bigger than if the scene had been laid in the author's own back yard or his neighbour's front parlour, yet he does deserve from the critic an additional word of praise for the sheer work accomplished, the extra resistance that has been overcome.

Anne of Tréboul, by Marie Louise Goetchius, is one of those exceptional volumes in which the foreign setting justifies itself. Not that the theme of the story belongs solely and inevitably to the life of a Breton fishing village, for it deals with simple fundamental truths of life, and the tale is one that in its main outline has re-enacted itself a thousand times the world over. But the value of Mrs. Goetchius's story lies not so much in her central theme as in her quite unusual sense of artistic proportion, the nice balance that she strikes between action and character, between the moods of her people and the colour and atmosphere of their environment. From the opening paragraph, one gets an all pervading sense of greyness that harmonises with the patient fatalism of a primitive fisher folk—the greyness of sky and sea and mist-laden air, from which you can fairly feel the scattering raindrops that presage a coming storm. The whole book is keyed to this same note. The central figure, Anne, is a hunchback, who looks out with wistful eyes on the hopeless years ahead of her. Love and marriage and joy are so obviously not her portion that one day when the fishing boats come in and the biggest, strongest, handsomest of all the young fishermen of the village singles her out for a special greeting, walks home with her, begs her to go with him to the big religious fête that takes place on the morrow, she can scarcely believe her great good fortune. She does not understand, as the rest of the village do, that his notice of her is only meant as vengeance upon the village belle who has openly favoured his rival. To pass her by with indifference and publicly give preference to the crippled Anne is the

most cutting way that he can find for scorning her. But Anne, knowing nothing of this, goes with him to the fête—and between the exaltation of the church services, and the dancing and merriment and plentiful good red wine, even the man, as they loiter homeward, believes for the time being his promises and protestations—and the deeper greyness of night shuts down and there is no voice heard but the monotonous beat of the waters, and the first chapter of Anne's tragedy is closed. But all too soon the fact is driven home to Anne that in spite of his promises he does not love her, that his heart belongs to the other girl who has the beauty that fate has denied to Anne. She is strong with the spirit of martyrdom, but there is one thing that she refuses to bear, and that is marriage to a man who has no love to give her. So, although her mother is vociferous with shrill abuse and the kind-hearted and scandalised old priest points out that she is bringing shame upon herself and her child after her, and the young man himself has come in contrition to take her as his wife, she refuses to marry him. Whatever sufferings her mistake entails she will bear as best she may, but he belongs to the other girl, and doggedly she sends him back to her. Years roll away through the same monotonous greyness of fisher life, the waves yielding their annual toll of fish and taking their annual toll of men. Indifferent outwardly to scorn and isolation, Anne has found comfort and solace in the boy who has shot up, strong and sturdy, a miniature copy of his father. The latter, long since married to Anne's rival, has but one other child, a sickly, spoiled little sneak, a liar and a coward like his mother. It is small wonder that the father finds no joy at home, that in sheer loneliness and disgust he sometimes drinks more than is good for him, and that finally seeing Anne's boy growing up so big and strong, he feels a mighty craving to have some share in the lad, who after all by rights belongs to him. Now, throughout all the sorrow and suffering the years have brought to Anne there is one unspoken dread mightier than the rest: she fears the day when the hereditary instinct of the born fisherman will assert itself and the boy will go from

her to the sea. And that, of course, is what does happen. When the boy's father makes himself known, the boy hesitates, for his mother's love weighs heavily on one side of the scale. But after all a father has much to give which even a mother's love cannot replace; and then besides to choose his father means also to choose the sea. So the man and the boy sail out one grey morning into the mist and the woman is left alone, praying dumbly and straining her eyes as she peers out over the leaden waters. The whole volume is a remarkable example of the power that lies in simplicity—the simplicity of style and of colouring and of basic primitive emotions. It shows a great forward stride beyond any of the work that this young author has hitherto made public. There is in it only one false note, and that is the suggestion that in letting her son choose the sea, Anne is making her great sacrifice for his welfare. This way of looking at it is, of course, mere sentimentalism. One feels that quite regardless of Anne, the sea is the boy's destiny. If he does not go this year, he will go the next or the year after, and although it may please Anne to think that she is deciding for him, she is really only yielding to the inevitable.

A Village of Vagabonds, by F. Berkeley Smith, affords a suggestive contrast to the foregoing book, because of its similarity of setting and its radically different style of treatment. The village which this author chooses to picture is an almost forgotten little community on the coast of Normandy, not far from the Belgium frontier. The point of view is frankly that of an American artist who, for his own pleasure, has temporarily buried himself alive in this primitive environment and is extracting an infinite enjoyment in a quiet way from his study of the quaint and curious local types. No two books could be conceived of so close in subject-matter and so wide apart in mood. *Anne of Tréboul* was tragedy, sustained and unrelieved. *A Village of Vagabonds* skims the surface of life's joys and sorrows with a certain whimsical sympathy, blended with an artist's inborn appreciation of the values of light and shade. The book is

not a novel; it is a collection of what are scarcely short stories, if judged by the strict rules of technique. Yet there is a marvellous amount of human nature of the better sort packed away in them. There is, for instance, the history of Marianne, "the old hag with clear blue eyes, who walks with the stride of a man, and who looks at you squarely, at times disdainfully—even when drunk"—an inveterate thief, whom even Monsieur le Curé cannot reform, and who nevertheless is the best mother in the village and famed for her charitable deeds to the unfortunate. Then, too, there is the story of how Monsieur le Curé was arrested for theft because he had taken the fifteen hundred francs raised for new bells for his little church and had spent them during a hard winter to relieve poverty and suffering.

They came to me, little children—mothers ill, with little children and not a sou in the house and none to be earned fishing. Old men crying for bread for those whom they loved. I grew to hate the very thought of the bells; they seemed to me a needless luxury among so much misery.

And there are a score of other pictures equally vivid, equally pervaded with the fine and deep understanding of human nature; and blended with them lighter touches, flashes of the sunshine of youth and romance—such as the pervasive presence of Suzette, the author's maid who "sang all the day," and whose incomparable coffee rises like a redolent incense from the pages.

The late Marion Crawford possessed that enviable cosmopolitanism which enabled him to write as "The Undesirable Governess" though talking of Mine Own People in whatever corner of the globe he might happen to lay his scene. But somehow in the latest of his posthumous volumes, *The Undesirable Governess*, one feels that Mr. Crawford was not, even by any indulgent stretching of the term, picturing people whom he thought of as his own. Here, as in more than one of his later volumes, the characters lack vitality. They are puppets, moved at will upon a miniature stage, pawns in a careless half-hour game of make-believe. This is not said in a spirit of disparagement. The

marvel about Mr. Crawford's work was that he could be so prolific, and at the same time take his characters with such uniform seriousness. And even here, in this frankly inferior story, he still shows himself a good craftsman. Supposing we were to set the task as a competition open to all novelists to make a novel out of the following material: a British matron, knowing the susceptibility of her husband and sons, advertises for a governess for her two unmanageable daughters, specifying that the applicant must be devoid of all physical attraction. One of the sons has already secretly engaged himself to a young woman who, although beautiful, has no fortune; and this young woman, foreseeing family opposition, wishes to win the approval of her future mother-in-law before the engagement is announced; so, by the help of an ingenious makeup, a small pillow under her left shoulder and a triple sole on her right shoe, she manages to come up to the specifications of the advertisement. Here and there, perhaps, a clever writer might convert this into an acceptable short story—but even Mr. Crawford's matchless fertility of resource has been unable to spin it out to the dimensions of a novel excepting at the cost of an obvious and painful tenuity.

A couple of volumes which may conveniently be discussed together are *The Twisted Foot*, by Henry Milner Rideout, and *The Pursuit*, by Frank Savage. The former is defined in its sub-title as "A Thrilling Malay Mystery"; the latter might similarly have been labelled "A Thrilling Mystery of Tangiers." In neither book do we get the impression that the author ever once thought of the native characters as standing to him in the relation of Mine Own People. They are simply so many stage properties, things to juggle with, matters of light and colour and scenic effect, like a painted pagoda or a cardboard crocodile. Mr. Rideout's tale is of the two rather better managed. It opens with the narrator's discovery of a white man living alone in a bungalow on an isolated island somewhere near the Philippines—a mysterious exile who is apparently engaged in smuggling, and who has serious cause

for fearing an attack from the natives. As it happens, the narrator overhears, though he is too late to witness or to prevent, the other man's brutal murder by some unknown savage, who leaves behind him only one mark for identification—a bloody footprint showing the large toe projecting at right angles. The dead man also leaves but one thing by which to identify him, the portrait of a very beautiful American girl. The purpose of the rest of the story is twofold: to discover the identity of the girl and to run down and wreak vengeance upon the man with the twisted toe—and both of these purposes Mr. Rideout accomplishes with a maximum of suspense and impending dangers.

The Pursuit, by Frank Savage, is an even greater tax upon the reader's credulity. The opening situation is this: the daughter of an American millionaire, unhappily married to an English scoundrel, has obtained, through the divorce courts, her freedom and the custody of her little son, on condition that she does not take him to America. Because of the child's weak lungs, however, the courts decree that he shall spend the winter months in North Africa; and here the hero of the story first encounters the boy, his American grandfather, and his young and charming aunt. Incidentally, it develops that the mother, having broken down under her trials, is in a private insane asylum. The significance of the title, *The Pursuit*, lies in the fact that the unscrupulous father is determined, regardless of the law, to get his son back again; and he is unconsciously aided in this by the headstrong little boy's bad habit of running away. The hero, knowing nothing of all this and meeting these people for the first time, is instrumental at the start in rescuing the small boy and restoring him to the fascinating young aunt; and shortly afterward he again has the good luck to save the boy from the tusks of a wild boar, and thus further place himself in the young woman's debt. It happens, however, that the hero is own cousin to the scoundrelly Englishman who is trying to kidnap the boy. And when his plot finally succeeds, it is very difficult to make the young

"The Pursuit"

woman believe that the two men are not in league together. To convince her of his good intentions and to be instrumental in restoring the kidnapped boy are the two purposes which animate the hero throughout the book. It must be confessed that, as a hero, he hardly rises to the heights expected of him, since his best planned efforts are always being frustrated and it takes nothing less than a hurricane, a shipwreck, a tidal wave and the earthquake at Messina to make virtue triumphant and villainy defeated. And even then, when the arch villain is shown to us, dragged from under tons of brick and mortar, bleeding and broken, and his eyes burned from their sockets by quicklime—even then it takes the united efforts of half a dozen *carabinieri* to save the valiant hero from his last attack. The book is really melodrama, an orgy of it.

Indian Dust, by Otto Rothfeld, deserves a few words of very cordial praise.

“Indian
Dust”

The author, who records upon the title page that he is or has been of the Indian Civil Service, has brought together in this modest volume a group of native stories that have the unmistakable flavour and redolence of the native life. They are not stories that lend themselves readily to a brief retelling—they depend too much upon the quality of their phrasing, the light and shadow of some single word. To some readers, they will seem almost too foreign, too remote in their mood and point of view to be sympathetic; yet, if you take the trouble to get beneath the surface you find yourself curiously swayed by strange, unwonted emotions, a certain new and fantastic outlook upon life. It is hard to choose between these stories: the very titles, “A Bhil Idyl,” “A Rajput Lady,” “Behind the Pardah,” “From Sudden Death,” one after another invoke strange memories of smouldering passions and hatreds, lurking vengeance, grim fatalism, the peace that comes from fulfilling one’s duty according to one’s lights. The author lacks the compelling vigour of Kipling, but that does not alter the fact that he has much to say about India which is well worth heeding and that in his quiet way he says it extremely well.

Mr. J. C. Snaith is without question the

man of most unique achievement and sanguine promise among the younger generation of English novelists. He seems temperamentally unable to produce a new volume without darting off upon a line so radically new as to produce a startling surprise. It would be hard to find—with the single exception of Alfred Ollivant’s *Bob, Son of Battle, Redcoat Captain*, and *The Gentleman*—any three volumes by a contemporary English writer of greater versatility than *Broke of Covenden*, *William Jordan, Jr.*, and *Araminta*. And now, once again, he upsets all our expectations by the production of *Fortune*—a most amazing volume which

“Fortune”

one discusses gingerly, apologetically, not quite sure to what extent it is written in sober earnest and how far it may be a travesty upon the picaresque type, a *Don Quixote* from the modern standpoint. One would conjecture that it was written in very much the same mental attitude as Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*—that the author had started in to scoff, to indite a parody, and suddenly had fallen under the spell of his own burlesque characters, become enamoured of them, glorified them. Be this guess a happy one or not, it is a correct statement of the mental process through which the reader moves despite himself. He accepts the opening chapter with reluctance. Surely, this braggadocio Spaniard, this conceited young ignoramus, who thinks his native town the centre of the world, who can conceive of nothing outside the frontiers of Spain, is not to be taken seriously. And when, shortly, he meets with the colossal and grotesque English giant, Sir Richard Pendragon, fights his bizarre duel, is vanquished, humiliated and stripped of all his possessions, the reader rubs his eyes and gasps and questions helplessly, if this be literature or a scene from out a Gilbert and Sullivan opera. Here is a brief passage which fairly gives the flavour of the story:

While awaiting with as much composure as I could summon that stroke which was to put me out of life, there happened a strange thing. There had come into the room, unobserved by us both, the tap-wench to the inn. And in a moment, seeing what was toward, this brave

little creature, not much bigger than a stool, and as handsome and flashing a queen as I ever saw, ran between me and the sword of my adversary.

"Hold, you bloody foreign man!" she cried imperiously.

"Nay, hold yourself, you neat imp," said the Englishman, catching her around the middle by his right arm, and lightly hoisting her a dozen paces as though she had been a sack of feathers. Yet he had made but a poor reckoning if he thought he could thus dispose of this fearless thing. For his wine cup, half full of sherry, which had been set in the chimney-place out of the way of hap, was to her hand. She picked it up and hurled the pot and its contents full in the face of the giant.

"Take it, you wicked piece of villainy!" she cried.

The story, when fairly developed, turns out to be a chronicle of the efforts of three bizarre soldiers of fortune, the pre-

tentious and ignorant Spaniard, the bombastic Richard Pendragon, "in whose veins flowed the blood of kings," and the Comte de Nullepart, unacknowledged son of the French sovereign, to rescue, on behalf of the Duke of Montesina's daughter, her family estates from the greed of John of Castille. Burlesque or not, the amazing audacity of the tale sweeps you along in spite of yourself. In a way, the production of such a book in these opening years of the twentieth century is in the nature of an anachronism. It proves that there is still the possibility of writing genuine, old-fashioned, virile romance with real brawn and muscle in it—a possibility which the modern flabby, weak-kneed swash-buckler type of fiction has long taught us to despair of. For this reason, all hail to Mr. Snaith's latest and most unique achievement.

Frederic Taber Cooper.

THE BOOKMAN'S LETTER BOX

I

There is some snap in the following letter from New York City, subscribed with the initials "T. B. M."

How many rejection slips does it take to prove that their recipient cannot write? I wish that you would make haste with your book and not stop to compile vegetarian bibliographies for the idle epicureans. It doesn't matter what they eat and it *does* matter whether we starve. Will you get at the book?

We reply hastily that we are intending to get at the book at a very early date; because the letters that we have received show that it is greatly needed. It will not be theoretical but wholly practical, with all sorts of vivid, yet not generally known, truths about editors, authors, publishers, manuscript readers, and all the mysteries of what Mr. James Ford once called The Literary Shop. He never got beyond the humorous aspect of it, but we are going down to hard-pan.

II

A letter from what would seem to be the impossible town of Richibucto in New Brunswick, is too long to print. It says some pleasant things about THE BOOKMAN, but it thinks that the author of *The New Baedeker* does not know what he is talking about when he refers to Canada. Incidentally the writer twits us for our attitude toward England at the time of the Boer War. We must ask her (she signs herself Canadienne) to go back over our files. She will find that our great cause of offence to Englishmen and Canadians at that time was the fact that we jeered at the military blunders of General Buller. At first all Englishmen regarded Buller as a second Napoleon. We perceived from the first that he was making a mess of his campaign, and we said so. Later on he was disgraced by the British War Office, retired from service, and has passed into history as "the Ferryman of the Modder River." After this came about, there was a great hush up in