

REVIEWS - OF - NEW - BOOKS

MRS. WHARTON'S NOVEL OF OLD NEW YORK

MRS. WHARTON'S power as a novelist has long been recognized, and the authority of her writing may lead to unquestioned acceptance of her matter. When novelists depart from pure invention and enter the realm of history they must count with an older inhabitant, who may also perhaps be jealous of his city's good report.

Sophistication has always been the keynote of Mrs. Wharton's work. It is the aspect of life that has always appealed to her, the side she has preferred to portray, and it may account for the jaundiced view she takes of New York society in the early '70's, a period which she sarcastically calls "The Age of Innocence" (Appleton).

The story is trite enough, for it deals with a young New-Yorker of the best position who marries a "nice" girl of his own set, one who measures well up to the standards of those days, and who finds himself in love with a woman who has set tradition at defiance and represents a set of ideas and opinions entirely antagonistic to those to which he is accustomed.

Newland Archer is the typical, well-bred, well-born young man, differing little from his kind of to-day. May Welland is a charming young girl, with the limitations of a careful bringing-up, which seem to excite the author's wrath as being a perversion of the truth. Countess Olenska, the disturbing element in this otherwise happy state of things, is a cousin of May's, who, having spent much of her youth abroad, has married a Pole, a man who led her such a life that, with the aid of his secretary, she managed to escape from him, and after a year spent in Switzerland concluded to return to New York, where she has many relatives. May Welland, her relations, friends, and members of her social circle, represent dullness to Mrs. Wharton, while the Countess, with her cruel husband, her contemplated divorce, her beauty and charm, stand for the larger and more intellectual life of Europe. The fact that she is more than suspected of having spent some months in the company of the young secretary only seems to add to her interest in the eyes of the author, who considers "courage" as one of the greatest virtues, especially when it defies "conventionality."

However, neither Newland nor the Countess seems to possess the requisite firmness of character to elope, and nothing happens, a fact which disturbs the reader but little, as the interest of the story lies, not with the doings of the rather wooden characters of the book, but with the picture it purports to give of New York some fifty years ago. Here the author is clearly at fault in portraying a society of such portentous dullness and also in representing the town as devoid of anything else. Winsett, a clever if unsuccessful journalist, is supposed to be withering away intellectually because he can find no congenial society. And were there ever people of such wonderful social importance as the Van der Luydens? Many years ago the Astors as a family had something granted to them as to position of which no other family could boast, but as New York society expanded to take in the millionaires of every other

city in the Union, such leadership disappeared, never to return.

Those whose memory of New York society takes them back fifty years will hardly agree with Mrs. Wharton as to the stupidity of those who composed it. The Century Club of those days contained men of real social brilliancy; is it to be supposed that only at their club did they find any opportunity for intelligent conversation? Did men like Clarence King, Joseph H. Choate, Judge Howland, and F. F. Marbury creep back from the delights of the house in Fifteenth Street to obscure homes and inferior womenkind?

The truth is that there always has been—there is now—in New York a circle of well-born, well-bred, intelligent people, whose names, tho they convey nothing to the Pittsburgh steel-puddlers and Nevada mine-owners who throng our gates, still stand for much to those who know something of the city's social history. They do not frequent cabarets, their names are seldom in the papers, and tho they exert no visible influence on the fashionable and noisy set, they are still of social importance among the more conservative New-Yorkers. Of course the possession of great wealth may exert a stultifying effect upon the brain. It was one of the best-known society women who asked, many years ago, at an amateur performance of "Alice in Wonderland," why the Mock Turtle was represented with a calf's head, but an entire ignorance of culinary affairs may have been responsible for the question.

The book is full of anachronisms which are so sure to be noticed by old New-Yorkers that we shall only mention one or two. It is claimed that there was no club box in the old Academy of Music; it was considered a distinct innovation when it was introduced, much later, in the new opera-house. Newland and the Countess could not have met at the Metropolitan Museum in the Park, for it was not until the '80's that it was moved from Fourteenth Street. De Maupassant was unknown in the early '70's and Rossetti's "House of Life" was not published until 1881. Joachim never visited America as a violinist.

THE BUSYBODY

A SINGULARLY ill-assorted pair are Sir Julian Rossiter and his wife, owing principally to the keen and unrelenting perception on the part of the former of any form of untruth and insincerity, and the hopeless tendency of the latter to self-deception as to her own motives and actions. The marriage had been the result of a compassionate impulse on the part of Sir Julian, the consequences of which he faces with a cynical stoicism which masks an extreme sensitiveness.

Sir Julian is the founder and benefactor of a commercial college in the southwest of England; his wife is also interested in it, more particularly in the welfare of the staff, whom she regards with a sort of tender patronage, aware of her vast superiority to them, but stooping to their level in order to discover and foster within them some traces of the Divine Spark, a process alluded to by her husband as The Hunting of the Spark. Lady Rossiter's spiritual development is thus described: "Edna Rossiter supposed herself to be a religious

woman because she had, from early girlhood, indulged nightly in five minutes spent on her knees beside her bed, her face pressed against the satin quilt, while she thought about herself. . . . Within the last ten years she had transferred her allegiance from the almighty, *in propria persona*, to God as he is found in Nature. . . . Nature, primarily, meant out-of-doors generally in warm weather, and the sound of the sea two miles off, audible from beside the boudoir fire, in the colder seasons. Lately, however, Nature had also embraced such of humanity as had its place rather lower in the social scale than that of the Rossiters. Edna sought for the Divine Spark in her fellow creatures, and frequently discovered it, with renewed satisfaction to herself and its possessor."

The college is in need of a lady superintendent, and the Board of Directors engages a Miss Marchrose, who is an expert stenographer and typist and holds a diploma for French. As soon as Lady Rossiter hears the news she recalls a plaintive story of her cousin who had been jilted by a girl of that name some years before. He had been engaged to her, much against the wishes of his family, when an accident in the hunting-field resulted in a paralysis that was feared might be permanent. He wrote to the girl, offering her her freedom, an offer which was accepted, and altho Clarence Isbister had long since got over his disappointment and married some one else, his cousin chose to look upon the incident as a tragedy. "There have been women," said Lady Rossiter, with tears in her eyes, and in her voice that peculiar emotional quality which indicates that the general is merely being used to indicate the particular, "there have been women who have waited all their lives long for just such an opportunity of giving."

These three are the principal actors in Miss E. M. Delafield's novel "Tension" (Macmillan), and those to whom the delineation of character appeals and who remember this talented young woman's previous books will welcome this new evidence of her analytical powers. A fourth person shares with these three in the development of the story, and that is Mark Easter, about the only person for whom Sir Julian cares. He is Sir Julian's agent and man of business and also a director in the college, a man whom everybody likes and one of sunny temper in spite of the cloud on his life. He also had made an unfortunate marriage and his wife had been for the past ten years an inmate of an inebriate home, leaving Mark and two unruly children to the well-meaning but incapable efforts of an old servant.

Miss Marchrose arrives, a capable, practical, intelligent woman, ready for any amount of work, expecting good results from her subordinates, and yet liked by them. It is impossible for Lady Rossiter to patronize such a woman. Miss Marchrose is impervious to the studied graciousness of Edna's manner and looks unintelligent when the latter speaks of her "little nature classes, as we call them, for looking into the heart of our West country rather more closely. One week I take my little hand down to the sea, another time up to the woods, sometimes just to study the wonderful color in a Devonshire lane."

Lady Rossiter is not accustomed to his



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