

ELSIE DINSMORE: A STUDY IN PERFECTION

or HOW FUNDAMENTALISM CAME TO DIXIE

By Ruth Suckow

MANY years ago there was born in a remote corner of our land a little girl-child endowed by the angels and Martha Finley with every qualification for a perfect heroine of fiction. Charm, beauty, background, complexes — all were hers. But we doubt if even the angels hovering that night over the snowy mansion could have foretold for the newborn babe the long life and longer influence that were to be hers. She was entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1868, but in 1927 she is still to be found in flourishing state and new bindings, while she will never cease to haunt the minds of millions of women. The name of the child was Elsie Dinsmore.

There can be no comprehension of Elsie without some knowledge of the background whence she sprang. Although Congress was not aware of her until 1868, her childhood was passed in those halcyon days befo' de wah. Her home was the Sunny South — the precise spot we are not told and no shaft of purest marble marks the holy ground, for thus does America in its hurly-burly pass by those who have helped to make its history; but situated in such wise that her own little sitting-room opened out upon "a grassy lawn . . . and beyond, far away in the distance, rolled the blue sea". It was that South which has ever furnished to American fiction the most saintly and brilliant of its heroines: Little Eva, Edna Earl, the Little Colonel and the Hard-Boiled Virgin. It was the South of pillared mansions, mint juleps, banjoes, jasmine, mammies, goatees and Colonels, highbred gallants and horses, and faithful old black Catos crying "I'se comin', Massa!" wid de misery in de back. Yet we are told that it was but a worldly region where the young folk danced in the evening, rode out for pleasure on the Sabbath, read secular newspapers, and engaged in worldly

conversation before the coming of the little Elsie.

To cast no hint of shadow upon the auspicious entrance of the child into fiction, the mother died upon giving her birth. This mother's name she bore; and so closely did the little Elsie resemble the departed Elsie that the heart of the father was often troubled when he gazed upon her and a deep sigh escaped his lips; while around her neck she was thus privileged to wear a miniature set in gold and diamonds which she frequently drew from her breast at crucial moments and raised to her lips. Of the father, Mr. Travilla once fittingly said: "Were I asked to describe his character in a few words, I should say he is a man of indomitable will". His honor was unstained. Yet he was proud and worldly, seeing himself "not for what he really was in the sight of God, a guilty, hell-deserving sinner — lost, ruined and undone, but as quite deserving of the prosperity with which he had been blessed in the affairs of this world, and just as likely as anyone to be happy in the next"! In a word, a Southern gentleman. Horace Dinsmore — for such was his name — on his part acted well the rôle of ideal male parent of our heroine. Blaming the innocent child for the mother's death, he hastened instantly to Europe there to wander many years, perhaps in company with St. Elmo and those other Southern heroes whose hearts were but ruined fanes, leaving the small Elsie in the custody of others and granting her no place in his proud but passionate heart. Thus he paved the way for one of those complexes vitally necessary to the interpretation of any really great character: a sense of inferiority. The passionate adoration of the love-starved little heart for the unknown father supplied the other with splendid largesse. Of it we may say:

O Complex thou wert great!

And Electra was thy name.

But Elsie possessed likewise all of those more material things necessary to the childhood of the Victorian heroine: male and female persecutors, a pony, a mammy, blots in her copybook, a worn Bible, glossy curls, and an aching heart.

But another quality set Elsie apart as peculiarly destined to be a messenger to her time and place. She was a professing Christian. Miss Rose Allison, a young lady from the North visiting among the Dinsmores, and destined some day to stand in a nearer and dearer relation to the little Elsie herself, had been "greatly pained by the utter disregard of the family in which she was sojourning for the teachings of God's word". That typical Southern family was to be led one by one to the cross through the persuasion and example of Elsie and the avenging wrath of Martha Finley.

As for Elsie herself, let her tell the story in her own words: "It was dear old mammy who first told me how He suffered and died on the cross for us". There was, moreover, a pious Scotchwoman, unable to open her lips without letting the *ains* and *aulds* tumble out, once a housekeeper in the home of the Dinsmores, who had early told the child of her total depravity and given her the blessed comfort of the tidings. Thus among the lowest began those teachings destined to spread through the example of our heroine to the highest reaches of the haughty and aristocratic Southern society and to bring it later to complete repudiation of the vile doctrine that men are descended from monkeys.

II

But to begin our story. For we have forty volumes before us.

Now I shall point out to my readers the early workings of that golden complex from which Elsie drew that "ornament of a meek and quiet spirit" which has placed her upon the shelves of thousands of Sunday School libraries. It is a bonny day when our story opens. The Dinsmore children are gathered in the schoolroom at Roselands. There are the proud Louise, the high-spirited Lora, the



From "Elsie's Friends at Woodburn"

impertinent Enna, the profligate Arthur; while apart from the others sits the one professing Christian, their step-niece the little eight-year-old Elsie. Of Miss Day, the governess, we have this significant description: "She was always more severe with Elsie than with any of her other pupils". All the while that Elsie is "bent over her writing, taking great pains", the profligate Arthur stands "jogging her elbow in such a way" that her fair copybook is ruined. Then we see all the others riding off gaily to the fair, leaving Elsie "weeping and sobbing" and taking out a small pocket Bible. Her inferiority is established.

But think not that the superior Dinsmores enjoy forever the fruits of their worldly scorn! You reckon not with the just spirit of Martha Finley. Let us take a peep into the future, for so the biographer is privileged to do. One by one we see the oppressors driven to repentance or hell. To Adelaide Dinsmore, always more gentle to the little



From "Elsie's Kith and Kin"

Elsie, God and the author are kind. They do but take away from her that one who was her all, thus enabling her to hearken to the comforting words of Elsie: "Perhaps He saw that you loved your friend too well, and would never give your heart to Jesus unless He took him away". With Lora, too, the avenging hand is mild. She is merely brought to the edge of eternity by runaway horses, after which she is glad to receive the consolations of Elsie interspersed with appropriate texts. But what of those others? We see the profligate Arthur slain in battle; the saucy Enna deserted by the scoundrel whom she had wilfully married; while apoplexy strikes the proud Louise in her prime and she must die without the blessed hope of a glorious eternity. Nor is the unjust governess forgotten by either Martha or God. Many volumes have passed. We see the rude structure of a log hut built in a wild spot

and evidently the abode of pinching poverty. An invalid, blind and on the edge of the grave, reclines in a rude chair. It is Miss Day. But there is a still greater affliction. This wretched woman, we are told, had loved that very man now wedded to the little Elsie, and "there had been a time when she would almost have given her hopes of heaven for a return of her affection". What wonder that the *ci-devant* governess is ready now to receive from Elsie appropriate texts and tempting viands!

III

But modern psychology opens up to us the dawn of another complex.

The wanderer is returning. Elsie's thoughts are all of that father. "Oh! *Will* he love me? My own papa! will he let me love him? will he take me in his arms and call me his own darling child?" Weak would that complex be, and imperfect the character of our heroine, did Horace Dinsmore love his child upon sight. He greets her coldly. Many chapters are to pass before the father takes his child upon his knee, and an enormous amount of weeping and sobbing and Bible perusal accomplished by the little Elsie.

Meanwhile, the keen eye of the modern biographer is able to discern beneath passing events the meaning of the whole. In the great pattern of existence, the life of Elsie Dinsmore shows a two-fold purpose of its creator. One branch of this purpose is the ideal perfection of the character of our heroine herself; the other is the salvation by her of Dixie impersonated in the proud and worldly Horace Dinsmore.

For we are told many times that our little Elsie is "not yet perfect". And without that second, more than golden — that diamond! — complex, so beneficently bestowed upon her by a far-seeing creator and now brought to light for the first time by an all-seeing biographer, it is plain that later generations would never have heard the name of Elsie Dinsmore. Elsie's life hereafter is but a cheerful carrying-out of the great commandment: Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land. Immediate, unquestioning obedi-

ence is demanded by Mr. Dinsmore. Many are the tests to which the little girl must submit through the long pages to determine the perfect subordination of her will to his. Our readers will recall them. Meat, hot cakes, sweetmeats and coffee — the most tempting viands of the South — are taken away from the unprotesting child and dry bread and water frequently substituted. She is separated from her little companions, forbidden to play jack-stones, sent away from the merry-making to keep an early bedtime, and sits at the table in perfect silence eating whatever her father sees fit to put upon her plate. She is never allowed to ask why. "All you have to do is obey. Papa knows best." Under these highly favorable conditions, love for her father waxes stronger and stronger until it almost fills the little breast.

But in spite of her cheerful, unquestioning obedience, we must remember that our heroine is "not yet perfect". In fact, she stands in the greatest spiritual peril. It is all too likely that in her absorbing complex she will forget her Heavenly Father in submission to the earthly one. "Do you love Jesus?" the father wonderingly asks her. "Oh! yes, sir; very very much; even better than I love you, my own dear papa." But more and still severer tests must be visited upon our Elsie in all loving-kindness until the thesis of the biographer has been proved.

We may pass over the less agonizing of these ordeals until we come to that awful crisis forgotten by no disciple of the little heroine, and serving as well to bring upon the scene in his true importance one of whom we shall hear much hereafter: Mr. Travilla.

It is the Sabbath. At Roselands a goodly company is gathered. But ah, what a scene! "They were nearly all gentlemen, and were now collected in the drawing-room laughing, jesting, talking politics, and conversing with each other and the ladies upon various worldly topics, apparently quite forgetful that it was the Lord's day." One of the gentlemen has received a glowing account of the precocious musical talent of the little Elsie, and has now conceived a great desire to hear her play and sing. "I shall be most happy to gratify you," replies the proud

young father. And he pulled the bell-rope. Ere she obeyed the call, Elsie "knelt down for a moment and prayed earnestly for strength to do right". For as luck would have it, it was a secular piece of music which the father had chosen for her display.

"Dear papa, you know this is the holy Sabbath day."

"Well, my daughter, and what of that? I consider this song perfectly proper to be sung today, and that ought to satisfy you."

"Dear papa, I *cannot* break the Sabbath."

It has been evident all along that Horace Dinsmore is one of those typical men who are stern but kind. He is now not even kind. He speaks in thundering tones:

"Elsie, you shall sit there until you obey me, though it shall be until tomorrow morning."

Hours passed. One by one the guests came in kindly mood to beg the child to obey her earthly father and commit the more deadly sin of disobeying that father who is in heaven. She answered with appropriate texts. Day passes into night. The child is alone — when suddenly, to the gentlemen conversing in the portico, there comes a sound as of something falling! It is Mr. Travilla who rushes into the drawing-room, raises the unconscious child in his arms, with her fair face, her curls, and her white dress all dabbled in blood, while he addresses to Mr. Dinsmore those thrilling words that have rung down the ages:

"Dinsmore, you're a brute!"

IV

Surely it has been proved that the little Elsie loves her Heavenly Father! Mr. Dinsmore was made to tremble with fear that the gentle spirit had taken its flight; and while nothing could break his indomitable will, she was not forced to play the song until the dawn of a secular week-day. But do not forget that we are viewing this life, not merely from a single, but from a double viewpoint! Horace Dinsmore must be brought to his knees.

Well into the second volume, when he has grown dearly to love his little daughter, often passing his hand caressingly over the

glossy curls and holding her for hours upon his knee, the insidious process begins unseen by any but the biographer. Mr. Dinsmore falls ill of a low fever. Ah, these were happy days for the little Elsie! And she proved a capital nurse, so that her father grew almost to reciprocate the violence of the complex. But there are breakers ahead. Our author warns us with appropriate texts and quotations from the poets.

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy,"

and again:

"The storm of grief bears hard upon her youth,

And bends her, like a drooping flower, to earth."

That dreadful Sabbath rolls 'round again. Mr. Dinsmore, his feverish mind weary at last of appropriate texts even when read by that sweet voice, bids Elsie bring the book that she was reading yesterday. Oh, now we are approaching a catastrophe even more awful than the fall from the piano stool! For as luck would have it, this book was "simply a fictitious moral tale, without a particle of religious truth in it, and, Elsie's conscience told her, entirely unfit for Sabbath reading". Now must our little Southern beauty be tested sure enough!

"Oh, papa, please do not ask me to read that book today."

"Elsie, I do not *ask* you to read that book, I *command* you to do it, and what is more, I *intend to be obeyed*."

The italics are Martha Finley's.

In every way the child is tested. "Why, my daughter," the father says in gentler mood, "I have seen ministers reading worse books than that on the Sabbath." Even that does not move her. She is banished from the presence of her suffering father, to see him no more until she comes ready to offer cheerful, instant, implicit obedience to *his word*. Elsie had never before got through such a quantity of weeping and sobbing, while her little Bible was well-nigh worn to shreds. But Mr. Dinsmore's word was as the laws of the Medes and Persians, his indomitable will remained unbroken, he refused to come to the Saviour; and even when

he was brought to death's door by the shock of his child's disobedience, her meek and gentle spirit did not yield. At length he decided to leave her. Once more he would try to forget his sorrow by European wanderings. He left without one kiss.

"When thus left alone the little Elsie fell upon her knees, weeping and sobbing." From that day she pined. Still the tests came thicker and thicker upon her. Some were in the nature of worldly temptations. For Elsie was not yet perfect. She was led through the rooms of a splendid mansion, fitted with every elegance that could be supplied by taste, money and the advantages of foreign travel, and told that if she would but yield she might live there by her father's side. Finally came the awful news that if she remained obdurate, her father had determined to send her to a convent.

Then the overburdened little heart broke indeed.

"Save me! Tell papa I would rather he would kill me at once than send me to such a place."

For even before the organization of the first knights of the pillowslip, the horrors of such abodes of wickedness were well known. Although Elsie might not peruse novels, we are told that "much of her reading had been on the subject of Popery and Papal institutions; she had pored over histories of the terrible tortures of the Inquisition, and stories of martyrs and captive nuns". Her views on the subject, indeed, have quite a modern ring.

"They will try to make me go to mass, and pray to the Virgin, and bow down to the crucifixes; and when I refuse, they will put me in a dungeon and torture me. They will hide me from papa when he comes, and tell him that I want to take the veil, and refuse to see him; or else they will say that I am dead and buried."

To those familiar with the processes of fiction, it will be no astonishment to learn that ere morning Elsie had fallen into a raving fit of brain fever; that her glossy curls were all severed; and that when the agonized father at last returned, he found his daughter tossing and raving in the wildest delirium, now shrieking with fear, now laughing an

unnatural hysterical laugh, with the soft light in her eyes changed to the glare of insanity. The father paced his room like a caged lion. But still he did not acknowledge his Saviour. Then Martha Finley decided upon a stroke so daring that none but a genius might venture its use. Since the indomitable will of the Southern gentleman refused to break when his child tottered on the brink of the grave, Martha would push her over! We see the doctor turning to his fellow-watchers with a look there was no mistaking. We hear others than Elsie weeping and sobbing. And the father? What of him? Ah, glorious tidings! For when a little packet was thrust into his hand, containing the worn Bible and a glossy curl from his lost darling, his indomitable will *broke* and he acknowledged the loving-kindness of his Saviour! . . . Even better than that, to the human heart of the reader, are the tidings that "it was his turn now to long, with an *unutterable* longing, for one caress".

"Quick! quick! Aunt Chloe, throw open that shutter wide. I thought I felt a little warmth about the heart, and — yes! yes! there is a slight quivering of the eyelid. She may live yet!"

When the father next saw his darling, he told her welcome news.

"I have learned to look upon you now, not as absolutely my own, but as belonging first to Him, and only lent to me for a time; and I know that I will have to give an account of my stewardship. And now, dear one, we are travelling the same road at last."

V

Ah, these were happy days for the little Elsie! Her father promised her to bring the servants together every morning and evening for family worship. We are told that the two were more like lovers than like father and daughter. One complex answered another. And even when the father took to wife that sincere professing Christian, Miss Rose Allison, the little Elsie did not lose first place in his heart. He lavished upon her pearl necklaces, two or three gold watches, and a dear little pony. But Elsie was now indeed perfect. Still her father exacted



From "Christmas With Grandmother Elsie"

immediate, implicit, unquestioning obedience; but only as a steward.

And Elsie's Heavenly Father likewise was stern but kind. A few minor trials for the Dinsmores are scattered through the next thirty-eight volumes, but I doubt if ever a typical Southern family has been so blessed. Elsie's hair returned in ringlets. As she grew, she received many offers of marriage from the neighboring planters. But, as her father told her while he folded her to his heart: "My darling, you are mine. You belong entirely to me". While Elsie returned "Yes, papa", looking up with the same loving smile. Once a villain wooed her. But to her papa's stern commands she yielded only immediate, implicit, unquestioning obedience. And that "papa knew best" was justified when she discovered that the wretch to whom she had all but yielded the treasure of her lips "had been tried for

man-slaughter and forgery, found guilty on both charges, and sentenced to the State's Prison". Mr. Dinsmore took his daughter abroad where counts, lords and dukes hung upon her smiles and threw their coronets at her feet. But her heart was reserved for the one who had in secret loved her for years. "Oh, my darling — could you, is it — can it be — " It was. Ah, these were sad days for Mr. Dinsmore! "My precious one, I don't know how to resign you to another." But do not fear the introduction of sex into the story of our perfect heroine. This is a biography for Boston. We are told that there was "indeed nothing sentimental" in the conduct of the lovers; "their courtship was disturbed by no feverish heat of passion". The fortunate lover? Oh — Mr. Travilla!

Ever after, Martha Finley watches over the Dinsmores. When Civil War hits the South, they are fortunately embarked upon a long stay in Europe, their fortunes invested in foreign bonds, and their mansion set back from the road to escape the eyes of Yankee marauders. Elsie passes many years with her loved ones at the home of Mr. Travilla. She seems to grow younger with each passing page; and so gloriously has the inspiration of her complexes stood her in stead, that upon her fiftieth birthday we are told with great particularity that there are no silver threads in her hair and no lines in her forehead or about the mouth or eyes — she is still worthy to be loved. Many happy times are in store for the family which increases rapidly volume by volume. Elsie yachted, Elsie visited Nantucket, Elsie journeyed on inland waters, Elsie went to the World's Fair.

Nor was she fated always to be separated from dear papa's side. Mr. Travilla, ever kind and generous, and lacking only the indomitable will to be also a perfect Southern gentleman, chivalrously relinquished his claim. Sorrowfully we reach a volume entitled "Elsie's Widowhood".

Ah, these were happy days for the little Elsie! She had dear papa forever by her side and was privileged to yield him the most cheerful obedience. Once again Grandmother Elsie sat upon his knee while he

passed his hand caressingly over the glossy curls. "My own! Was ever father blessed with so sweet a daughter?" And when she thought of Mr. Travilla, she had the ineffable consolation of knowing how well it was with him.

Still the volumes pass. Infinite now are the little Horaces and the little Elsies. Still the days of our heroine are long in the land. Sad? Ah, you forget the well-worn Bible. Proud of her riches? Still the golden sense of inferiority glitters above that other gold. Widowed? But it is so well with him! Does she think with sorrow of the long unbroken obedience of her life? Not when she looks into the mirror and sees not one line of care upon her youthful brow. Does she regret, perchance, that she has never known the worldly pleasures of dancing, Sunday travelling and the like? Not when she glances around her and sees relatives, friends and even chance acquaintances all brought to the cross; rich, but counting themselves only as stewards; and the old secular conversation exchanged for merry discourses on "the claims of Home and Foreign Missions, the perils threatening their country from illiteracy, anarchy, heathenism, Mormonism, Popery, Infidelity &c. — anxious first of all for the advancement of God's kingdom and secondly for the welfare and prosperity of the dear land of their birth, the glorious old Union transmitted to us by our revolutionary fathers"! The worldly Dixie is no more.

VI

And Martha Finley? She has told us, with appropriate texts, all that we need to know of God. But what of her? There is the long labor of her lifetime to attest her fundamental doctrines and her emotional complexes. Her teachings are plain. To both the earthly and the heavenly fathers, immediate, cheerful, implicit, unquestioning obedience. A woman craves a master. But much as Elsie loved dear papa, did a few softer dreams hover about the figure of Mr. Travilla? Still we hear his sweet whisper: "Marry me, my darling, and you shall do as you please for the rest of your life". Still

his "brute" rings in our ears. Once or twice, before Elsie was yet perfect, a shadow of rebellion swelled her gentle breast. Did it never heave also the womanly, Christian bosom of Martha Finley? Seemingly not. And yet . . .

There are two occasions: slight, yet yielding a wealth of subtle suggestion to the keen insight of the biographer. We remember that moment when a friend, congratulating Elsie upon the noble partner of her choice,

let fall the murmur: "A man should be considerably older than his wife, that she may find it easier to look up to him". And there may have been just a tinge of vicarious tartness in the post-marital speech of Mr. Travilla when, refusing gallantly to avail himself of his privilege to command, he said: "I sometimes think, my darling, that you have had enough of obeying to last you the rest of your life".

The rest is silence.



MAN ABOUT TOWN

By Ernest Boyd

HIS town, of course, is New York, but he was not born there, and none will ever know from what place he started, or how he reached Manhattan. His own account of the matter is unconvincing and has even aroused the suspicion that he is as English as his name. One prefers to believe that he sprang up mysteriously in the city itself in order to fulfil its need for a personality epitomising the virtues and vices of New York. To discover that the facts concerning him in "Who's Who" are true would be as disconcerting as to ascertain his age, which remains permanently and appropriately about forty-five. His retentive memory and omnivorous experience of people and events betray a knowledge incompatible with this official chronology. But that merely adds to the charm of this contemporary Dorian Gray.

No sinister connotations are intended by that allusion, for whenever he dies — he will die at a party — the portrait of the real man will reveal the benign and almost cherub-like features of a good father and a good friend. Once, in a moment of inadvertence, he seems to have plunged into that domesticity for which his kindly and hospitable nature may have intended him, but he soon realized that the married state was thwarting his manifest destiny. He could never be even a relatively good husband and at the same time embody the ideal of the Man About Town. But he bears with him some subtle mark of his previous condition which defines him as a different species from the authentic celibate.

His manner of existence is regular and well-ordered in its disorder, yet nothing could conceivably be further removed from the state of blessed domestication. His apartment is not by any means that of a typical bachelor. There has always been about it the specious air of home which is supposed to reveal the touch of a woman, a wife, as distinct from a paid housekeeper. He has no

housekeeper, and within his walls woman in her time has played many parts, but never that associated with the hand that rocks the cradle. His world is ruled by other hands. It is he himself who preserves those evidences of domestic neatness which are so surprising in that man-made world of his — for he is his own housekeeper. His new chintzes and cretonnes, his well stocked ice-box are as much the fruits of his own endeavors as his assortment of liquors and pornography.

Not that pornography looms unduly large in his library. The latter, it so happens, is probably the last remaining example of a collection of books which "no gentleman's library should be without". The walls are lined with handsome and dignified tomes, mostly bearing English imprints, and restricted to the more serious branches of literature. Batik bindings and popular fiction find no place here, but rather the solemn and decorous volumes which are standard works in the fields of history, biography, folk-lore and *belles lettres*. Many an honest chorus girl, fresh from her reading of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce (and Michael Arlen), has been stunned by this imposing parade of scholarly taste, this array of books which the well dressed man is not reading. Before she recovers, the worst has happened: she has surrendered to the multiple talents of the Man About Town.

It has never yet been decided whether his recipes for drinks are more numerous than his unparalleled list of telephone numbers, all of them good, each in its — or rather her — own way. His cocktail glasses are beakers, and by their effects ye shall know them. Their contents are chosen to suit the company and the nature of the entertainment anticipated. Débutantes and ladies of the evening, accompanied by unattached or semi-detached males, can be accommodated, both as to strength and capacity, as easily as more conventional callers. The Man About Town