

THE SOUTH GROWS UP

by Eudora Ramsay Richardson

THE South is producing at last a literature both indigenous to its soil and expressive of a realism founded upon a major portion of the whole truth about its people and its civilization. The late flowering may now be viewed as a blessing. It has saved the South from cults of extremists that had had their little day before the clatter of Southern typewriters was heard throughout the land, and it has given Southern writers time to unearth the treasures hidden in their native fields.

The South has been in the writing business slightly over half a century. Before the 'sixties we were fighting our political battles and producing statesmen and orators, not imaginative writers. Wealth was confined, when slavery flourished, to a few large planters, while the masses were tenants and small landowners. In reconstruction days the struggle for existence precluded the gentle art of writing. "Literature on a large scale," says Doctor Alphonso Smith, "implies authorship as a profession, and authorship as a profession has never flowered among a poor people. . . . Literary productiveness, in other words, is vitally related to industrial productiveness, both being correlative manifestations of the creative spirit." Eighteen-seventy-five, the birth-year of the new industrialism in the South, was also the birth-year of Southern literature. It was then that Lanier attained national fame. Immediately thereafter other writers loomed upon the horizon where be-

fore only the lonely figures of Poe, Timrod, Hayne, and Father Ryan had been silhouetted.

The Reconstruction Literature of the South, however, which endured well into the twentieth century, was characterized by a nostalgia for the past and a consequent romantic idealism that evaded facts. Writers, glorifying the days that were no more, sought to crystallize in memory a past that had never existed as they portrayed it. Possessing no religious iconoclasm and much spiritual conservatism, literature in the South for thirty years was a static thing, an inaccurate picture of the times it professed to reproduce. Such writers as Thomas Nelson Page, in the delightful inanity of his singing optimism; Cable, who wrote with charm and little reality, with sentiment and no common sense; James Lane Allen, dripping with saccharine sweetness; Thomas Dixon, inciting to wrath and hatred; George Gibbs; with his penchant for mystery and adventure; Charles Egbert Craddock (Mary Murfree) and John Fox, Jr., with mountain settings romantic but scarcely real; Frances Hodgson Burnett, that creator of the impeccable and impossible child; Alice Hegan Rice, whose stories were saved by humor, gave to the world pictures of Southern life that had little basis in fact.

At last, however, many voices are being lifted in the South against those artificial traditions which Southern writers of the past sought to memorialize. Chief among the

Southern novelists who are creating the new literature of protest are, of course, James Branch Cabell and Ellen Glasgow. Having fled to Poictesme, Mr. Cabell sends his iconoclastic shafts against spiritual conservatism and by means of a new romance pierces the old with the cool steel of his inimitable irony. Miss Glasgow, on the other hand, remaining in Virginia, turns the bright light of realism upon the shadowy idealism in which the South was once content to wrap itself.

Mr. Cabell, by the quality of his themes and the essence of loveliness distilled through his books, is set apart not only from other Southern writers but from all the world of writers; yet the South furnished the background for his emergence into the realm of his own making. If the South had produced only James Branch Cabell, the immensity of its contribution to letters would leave the rest of America in its debt. Lichfield—or Richmond—offers too narrow an horizon for the sort of genius that is Mr. Cabell's. In Poictesme, however, there is freedom for the mind that would wander unfettered by the limitations actuality imposes. Here Cabell, the imaginative artist, is able to reveal truth higher than that to be found in realism, and here he may interpret the mind, spirit, and manners of man. Here it is that Manuel the Redeemer is able to study "the secret of preserving that dissatisfaction which is divine where all else falls away with age into the acquiescence of beasts", and where Jurgen, the pawnbroker, may wage his high-hearted, though ineffectual, fight to escape the rule of Koschei, the deathless.

With the perspective Poictesme provides, Cabell ridicules the sentimentality, the orthodoxy, and the unreality of the Philistia in which his predecessors, and alas! most of his contemporaries, dwell in inane but scarcely blissful ignorance. Though Cabell in his heroic iconoclasm will be eternally satisfying to those who make up the aristocracy of the intellect, he writes too far above the average reader's mental level for his interpretations

ever to reach any save the few. Since his mixture of symbolism and factual writing sometimes baffles the constituency rightfully his, it is no wonder that the literal-minded ones are left either perplexed or aghast. Yet in the literature of disillusionment there is no name that may be mentioned with that of James Branch Cabell.

Other writers, however, are presenting the social history of the South with a frank realism that stands in delightful contrast to the pretty idealism that characterized earlier Southern literature. Not only the South that calls itself civilized is being depicted veraciously, but also the sub-strata occupied by the negro, the poor white, and the mountaineer are no longer invested with false glamour.

The novelist who gives the most nearly complete picture of the South is undoubtedly Ellen Glasgow. In order that her literary achievement may be correctly evaluated, Miss Glasgow's work must be viewed in its entirety. Among the eighteen books she has written in thirty-two years there are no failures; there is from book to book a steady growth in grasp of technique and character. When Miss Glasgow began to write, the local-color novel had not yet run its course in America. It had, according to Carl Van Doren, invented few memorable plots, devised no new styles, added few notable characters to fiction, but had contented itself with the creation of types and puppets. Sentimentality was its dominant characteristic. Therefore when she began writing of the Virginia she knew so well Miss Glasgow must have consciously resisted the sentimentalism of her contemporaries. It must have been that strongly ironical vein of hers that saved her. Laughing a bit at Virginia, loving it but knowing it, Ellen Glasgow has given to the world realism touched with whatever there is of romance that rings true. With the pen of a realist this novelist of changing manners has dared to fight sentimentality and has defied a public she knew to be demanding

what she has called "an evasive idealism, a sham optimism, and a sugary philosophy".

Miss Glasgow is the most significant novelist writing of the South today because her canvas is the broadest. She deals not only with the aristocracy that gave birth to her but with the common people whom she has no right to understand so well. There seems to be a popular idea that *Barren Ground* marked the beginning of Miss Glasgow's interest in the epic struggles of the poor whites in the South. Yet in the novels that preceded *Barren Ground*, she frequently ridiculed the traditions and false standards of the upper stratum and wrote understandingly of the common people. The hero of *The Voice of the People* is a "poor white" who rose to be Governor of Virginia. In *The Deliverance*, that great novel of revenge and regeneration, there is throughout a levelling of classes, symbolized finally in the marriage of Maria Fletcher and Christopher Blake. Old Mrs. Blake, physically and mentally blind, who lives in a past that is irrevocable for those around her, typifies the old order that must give place to the new. In *Life and Gabriella* Miss Glasgow permitted her heroine to marry the unlettered Irishman, Ben O'Hara, and sorely offended the sensibilities of many Virginians, as she had already offended them in *The Voice of the People* and *The Miller of Old Church*.

The whole picture of the reconstructed South appears in Miss Glasgow's books sympathetically and understandingly painted. The woman who fought for happiness with her own hands and brain is represented by Gabriella. The passivity of such women as Virginia who remain static in a changing world is sketched with deep pathos. The death agonies of the old order are set down with sympathy but without maudlin sentiment. Miss Glasgow has laughed at the hollow chivalry of the Southern gentleman and at the Age of Pretence that brought forth an Amanda Lightfoot, the woman crystallized into a man's ideal and never harboring a sincere thought or com-

mitting an act untainted by artificiality—and finally in *They Stooped to Folly* she has successfully contrasted the moral codes of three generations of Virginians. With a ruthless accuracy that commends her to the seekers after truth in literature, Miss Glasgow has recorded the social history of the South in transition.

Another Virginian who, like Miss Glasgow, has written through one era and into another is Mary Johnston. Beginning as a romanticist, Miss Johnston grew into realism and finally into mysticism. In her earliest historical novels, however, where she was at her romantic best, Miss Johnston's genius for truthful detail is apparent. From the landing of the women in 1619 through the stirring 'sixties, she has written the story of Virginia with keen feeling for dramatic values and historic verity. Though she has made no effort at "debunking" she has not surrounded her heroes with traditional glamour. Her Stonewall Jackson, in *The Long Roll*, the mad general threatened with the mutiny of his soldiers, was disturbing to the hero-worshippers who demanded that greatness and perfection be considered synonymous. Yet students have been unable to prove that the portrayal was not in accord with the records. In *Hagar* Miss Johnston brings her chronicle up to the present day and then sets out to discover the fourth dimension. Born into the old order, Hagar fights her way into the new. Sympathetically, and yet unsparingly, Miss Johnston treats of a civilization that must give place to modernity. While arguing in behalf of social revolution, she gives with remarkable fairness the case of the plaintiff as well as that of the defendant and truthfully presents Virginia caught in transition.

Henry Sydnor Harrison, whose voice has recently been regrettably silent, presented in *Queed*, *V. V.'s Eyes*, and *Angela's Business* a truthful picture of life in the South, though his method was somewhat reminiscent of the Victorians. His Angela, seated behind the steering wheel of her little Fordette, con-

stantly about her business of pursuing men, was drawn with a scathing irony of which Southern gentlemen had formerly not been guilty. Mr. Harrison's portrayal of Angela may be stretched into a prophesy of Frances Newman's *The Hard-Boiled Virgin*, which finally divested Southern virginity of all its romantic glamour.

As long as writers dealt only with the aristocracy, the social history of the South could not be written. Legend has painted too flattering a picture of the Old South. As a matter of fact the Southern gentleman and lady have not just recently become almost extinct—they have always been almost extinct. The large middle class which has ever outnumbered the aristocracy had to be recognized in fiction before the whole story could be told. General Sherman might have spared himself the unchivalrous remark that he would like to bring all Southern women to the washtub by dwelling happily upon the number that were there even before his calamitous march through Georgia and adjacent territory. In 1860 there were, in Virginia, only one hundred and fourteen families who owned more than a hundred slaves. This number in one state illustrates the smallness of the minority about whom reconstruction novelists did all their writing.

In recognizing the lower classes, other Southern novelists are following Miss Glasgow in a rapidly widening column. One of the first to battle against the inadequate ministrations of a middle-class church to a middle-class people was Corra Harris, who treats of Southern Methodism with a kindly humor which somewhat softens the scathing quality of her indictment. Miss Glasgow's honest portrayal of the common people heralded, if it cannot be said to have instigated, such photographic sketches of poor whites as are to be found in the work of Edith Summers Kelley, and it heralded also those novels which are now giving the truth about two other representatives of Southern peasantry—the negro and the mountaineer.

Though the negro has always played an important rôle in Southern fiction, he was presented until recent years merely as "an accessory to the white man". The household slave and body-servant who appeared in the stories of Thomas Nelson Page and in those of Mr. Page's imitators were the faithful souls the white man yearned to have about him and not the real African of the fields. The negroes, isolated from the whites and continuing their tribal customs among members of their own race, were wholly excluded from the novel. It is true that Joel Chandler Harris did much to preserve for posterity the quaint folk stories of the black man. More recently T. S. Stripling in *Birthright* struck at the heart of a burning racial problem—that of the half-breed fighting against the conflicting forces within his dual nature. Yet until DuBose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, and Paul Green began to write, no one had dealt adequately with the Southern negro in the environment in which slavery placed him.

Mrs. Peterkin and Mr. Heyward have introduced into fiction a character wholly new to the average reader. The negro of their stories is the Gullah negro who lives in the swamps of South Carolina and Georgia. The name is undoubtedly derived from Angola (Africa), whence the tribes were brought to the South Carolinian and Georgian coasts. Gullah dialect differs from that of the Virginian negro, of the Creole negro, and of the inland negro. Uncle Jupiter in Poe's *Goldbug* talks in good Gullah dialect, but Uncle Jupiter is utterly subordinated to the search for the hidden treasure. Gilmore Sims, John Bennett of Charleston, Mrs. Christensen of Beaufort, Doctor Adams in his *Congaree Sketches*, and a few other writers of minor importance, have made use of the Gullah negro. Mrs. Peterkin and Mr. Heyward, however, have lifted him to a high place in literature not only as a character whose dialect and customs are interesting but as a person of dramatic possibilities. For those who know Charleston, Porgy in his goat-cart—a type

as well as an individual—takes his place among the negroes who have been met outside the pages of fiction. Mr. Heyward, in revealing the very soul of the Gullah negro, has resisted what must have been a temptation to sentimentalize concerning the negroes' lot in this white man's land. The characters in *Mamba's Daughters* are not so convincing as the inimitable Porgy, not so appealing, and not so dramatically presented. Yet in fairness it should be said that the second of Mr. Heyward's negro stories suffers chiefly because it must be compared with the first.

Mrs. Peterkin has contributed generously to the peasant literature of the South in her portrayal of the negro's patient struggle against poverty and disaster. The pastoral stories that compose the collection called *Green Thursday* show a grasp of negro character, negro superstitions, and negro folklore which no other writer has achieved. *Black April* shows a deepening of Mrs. Peterkin's understanding of her characters and establishes its author as a master of the technique her sort of novel requires. *Black April* and its successor, *Scarlet Sister Mary*, are dramas of negro life in which not one white character appears to mar the tone of the stories. The gaiety that is an inherent quality of the African is perhaps too much subordinated to the pathos and tragedy of negro life on an isolated plantation. Yet it is to her credit that Mrs. Peterkin has the mind to perceive tragedy and not merely that gaiety which the white man has used as an excuse for his callousness toward his black neighbors' sufferings. Unrestrained by the artificiality and veneer of civilization, the characters are beings who hate, love, "birth", and die with elemental abandon. Mrs. Peterkin has caught human passions in all their naked naturalness. Her creatures of the soil are, therefore, among the most nearly real characters modern fiction presents. *Black April* and *Scarlet Sister Mary* are sketched in proportions almost epic.

Paul Green also has pictured not the light-hearted but the tragic negroes struggling to wrest a living from the soil to which in large numbers they are still bound in slavery. Fighting their losing battle against the odds of poverty, ignorance and race prejudice, Mr. Green's characters stand out in tragic relief. The plays, whether they deal with the problem of the half-breed or that of the blackest of the black starving on land that will not yield sustenance, are executed with artistry. Though presenting characters struggling against innumerable obstacles, they offer no solution for the problems with which they deal. That is not propaganda, but it is art.

In even a cursory discussion of the negro in the literature of the South it would not be fair to omit the contribution to negro folk-lore made by Doctor Newman I. White of Duke University and Doctor Howard W. Odum of the University of North Carolina, each of whom has collected and published a volume of negro folk-songs.

The mountaineer, at last treated honestly in fiction, like the negro, has become an important character in the social chronicles of the South. The long line of romantic feud dramas, initiated by Charles Egbert Craddock (Mary Murfree) and carried on by John Fox, Jr., and other imitators, has given place to such presentations of mountain life as *The Time of Man* by Elizabeth Madox Roberts, *Angel* by DuBose Heyward, and *Teetallow* and *Bright Metal* by T. S. Stribling. *The Time of Man* is a poignant story of futile struggle against the poverty and ugliness of existence where barren fields yield returns disproportionate with the endeavor expended upon them. The drab realities with which Miss Roberts deals are relieved by the poetic handling of her material and by the rich maturity and distinction of her style. Ellen Chesser, striving through the handicaps of ignorance and poverty to realize a beauty that for her must remain unattainable, moving on from tenant farm to tenant farm in the hope of finding "some better country,

our own place maybe, our trees in the orchard, our own land sometime", has within her untutored being the summation of yearnings common to women high and low. Like Julia Peterkin's characters, Ellen Chesser is a primitive creature dominated by the elemental passions which savor strongly of those qualities known as spiritual. Another novel dealing with a primitive woman's struggle to achieve the integrity of her soul is DuBose Heyward's *Angel*. In their feeling for the soil and for the children of the soil, Julia Peterkin, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, DuBose Heyward, and Paul Green are taking their places among the great interpreters of peasant life.

In *Teeftallow* and *Bright Metal* T. S. Stribling contents himself with externals in such a way as to make his novels caricatures of mountain life in the South. Dealing with the hillmen gathered in communities, he gives us graphic and amusing stories, told, however, with an exaggeration Southerners find hard to forgive. Stribling's over-statement in one direction contrasts with Maristan Chapman's over-statement in another. The author of *The Happy Mountain*, in spite of the contribution she has made to knowledge of mountain dialect, idealizes the speech of her characters at the expense of verisimilitude. Hatcher Hughes, when he does not sacrifice truth to comic or tragi-comic effect, succeeds in presenting characters that might have stepped straight from the hills to the stage. For the selective reader, Mr. Stribling, Miss Chapman, and Mr. Hughes are adding important touches to the picture of the Southern mountaineer. With the publication of *Cora Potts*, Ward Green of Atlanta introduces the prostitute as the central character of a Southern novel. The book—Mr. Green's first—should be viewed as a promise rather than an achievement. Though the story holds the reader's interest amazingly well, it fails to convince one who knows the poor whites of the South that Catamount could produce a

Cora Potts, "a simple person who wanted precise things and got them by methods unencumbered by doubts of right or wrong", and whose sins could result in such devastating success!

The seekers after truth in the South are not confined to the realists and to the apostles of naturalism. There are those who are finding in the mystic what seems to them higher truth because it is a truth that is wholly spiritual. Mary Johnston, attempting in her last books to interpret mysticism through fiction, has not yet achieved the artistry that made her the foremost historical novelist of the South. Not yet has she adapted the "increasing awareness" to the demands of fiction; though she is carrying other seekers with her in her gropings to express "the beauty when life is seen as a landscape, heard as a symphony, smelled as a garden, tasted as nectar, dwelt in as a house". Margaret Prescott Montague, because she has chosen the essay rather than the novel as her principal medium, is succeeding rather better than Miss Johnston in her effort to reveal the growth of the spirit into fuller consciousness. While other writers in the South are making their contributions to objective truth, Miss Montague and Miss Johnston are searching for "the key with which to unlock the inner doors of life . . . the key to beauty for the artist, to truth for the philosopher . . . and the key to God for the worshipful heart".

So, in seeking and finding truth, writers of fiction in the South have shaken off the artificiality imposed by lying traditions and false creeds. The best that is being written in the South today is growing from seeds long ago planted in Southern soil. The harvest now being gathered is prophetic of greater harvests yet to be when other writers make use of the material the South provides for those with eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to comprehend, and imaginations to convert reality into that fiction which immortalizes truth.

A LETTER FROM ABROAD

by Rebecca West

The Gumps in England—A tip about those promising youngsters, Evelyn Waugh and Robert Byron—Virginia Woolf braces herself against a harsh wind—"A Room of One's Own", the ablest piece of feminist propaganda yet written—What price war? ask Sassoon, Graves and Hemingway—R. C. Sherriff and Rudyard Kipling—The superb dialogue of "Journey's End"—"Good-bye To All That"—A glimpse of Laura Riding.

London, November.

I HAVE been standing on the terrace of my apartment, under a pale, bright sky which looked as if it would star like thick ice did one throw up a stone at it, discussing with a grave reverend seignior from the market-garden round the corner what flowers I want planted in my ten great tubs for the coming spring and summer. "Give me snowdrops, scillas, crocuses, daffodils, and May-flowering tulips," I said; "and, after that, stocks and, lastly, fuchsias." He answered, with that air of politeness covering a profound impatience at having to consider a woman's wishes which is so characteristic of the Englishman on these occasions, "The bulbs are all right, but, madam, must you have the stocks and the fuchsias? You know how they get blown about so far above ground. Can't I persuade you to let me set you out some nice carpet-bedding in geraniums, marguerites and lobelias?" "No!" I cried decisively, and then again, as one who sees endless trouble bearing down, I wailed, "Oh, no, please, *no!*" For there were invisible literary winds blowing, strong enough to bring endless trouble.

You see, geraniums, marguerites and lobelias are the favorite flowers of the Mr. and Mrs. Andy Gump of England. Drive through

our suburbs in early summer and the landscape is like a Union Jack with the shallow scarlet of geraniums, the opaque, china white of marguerites, the dark yet transparent blue of lobelias. I live, however, not in the suburbs but in Kensington, among those who thank God that they are not as Gumps are. Did I make a Union Jack of my terrace, the retired Colonel who lives next door would mutter as he walked among his standard roses and his yews cut like peacocks, "I always knew the woman was a Gump. These writing people!" I do not know the Bishop's widow who lives underneath me, nor the old doctor who lives above; but their households could inflict effective censure on mine, for during that evening rite when the plump and solemn little dogs of Kensington waddle forth in the twilight to celebrate their only unbroken connection with nature while their white-aproned chaperons gossip on the doorstep, their servants would turn a cold shoulder on my servant. For if it is dishonoring to be a Gump, how much more dishonoring it must be to serve a Gump! Such the effect of geraniums, marguerites and lobelias on the neighborhood, while precisely the contrary (and much more annoying) reaction would be felt by my friends. When I opened my drawing-room door I would find them at my windows,