



EDITOR'S EASY CHAIR

W. D. HOWELLS

"I SHOULD say," the sage began smilingly, but with the unmistakable air of a man who is going to say something disagreeable for your best good, "that if you are expecting to offer anything about the state of polite learning among us as vital as your friend next door gave us in the September number, you had better be doing it."

"You mean him of The Editor's Study?" we parleyed, though we knew perfectly well whom he meant. Then we noted, "It is not our habit to say vital things; and we wish our neighbor had gone further and applied his philosophy to an inquiry into the nature of the mediocrity which he divined so admirably as the conditioning of our fiction."

"Meaning—?" the sage suggested.

"Meaning that we should have liked him to say how far our mediocrity was native or derivative from the national nature, and how far it might be the expression of contiguity or the result of the manifold alien influences of our adoptive civilizations."

"Do you think it is at all that?" the sage demanded. "Do you think it comes, our sovereign mediocrity, from the Italian, Russian, Polish, Bohemian, Hunnish immigrations of the last thirty years?"

"No, but we should have liked to have him say so, when he was about it. We should have liked to have him make it clear whether this measureless market for the cheap, the tawdry, the flimsy was entirely our own, a demand from our knowing so perfectly what we like and so imperfectly what we ought to like."

"Well, why don't you do it yourself?"

"Because we could not do it so well, and because if we could we should be doing something vital, and the vital, as we have just declared, is not the job of the Easy Chair."

"Very well; but what do you believe?"

"Now you are trying to make us commit ourselves. But we don't mind saying that we think our fiction would be more solid, more admirable, more laudable, if our life were not the social ferment it has become. We need solidification for the purposes of first-class fiction."

"Then you think the fiction of the Germans, notoriously the most solidified of modern peoples, is first-class?"

We almost groaned. "No; it is horribly second-class," we said, with a direful remembrance of the last German novel we had tried to read. "But perhaps it is the exception which proves the rule. Take the instance of another solidified nationality, take the Spanish, and you have first-class modern fiction, easily surpassing the fiction of any other people of our time, now the Russians have ceased to lead."

"Do you call a nationality composed of such deeply differentiated peoples as the Basques, the Galicians, the Catalans, the Aragonese, the Castilians, and the Andalusians a solidified nationality, simply by calling it Spanish?"

"As solidified as the British, with its ingredient English, Scotch, Irish, and Welsh."

"Then why aren't we solidified, with our constituent English, Irish, German, Italian, Russian-Jewish, Polish, Finnish, Magyar, and Bohemian elements?"

We reflected a moment. "The ferment in those other countries took place centuries ago, and ours is still going on."

"Then you have some hopes that in four or five hundred years we shall have simmered down sufficiently to produce a national novel of the quantity and quality of the great Russian, English, and Spanish novels?"

"Something like that."

"Then we must have patience. In the mean time, do you think of any recent English or Russian novel as good as

those American novels which you were bragging up the other month—*The Turmoil* and *The Harbor*?”

“The English and Russians at present seem absorbed in beating and being beaten in battle,” we replied. “But our sister-neutral, Spain, is doing some wonderfully good work in the fiction of Blasco Ibañez.”

Our friend is one of those sages who like to enjoy the praise of knowing everything, even if they have not the facts to support them. But we saw a glimmer of helpless honesty come into his eye, and he said, “Never heard of him.”

This was too much, even for our habitual hypocrisy, and we laughed in owning, “Well, neither had we, a year or two ago, and a month or two ago we had not read anything of him. But he seems to be an author very much known in Spain and all the countries of Europe except England, and there is now even an English version of what is the most famous if not the greatest of his novels, *Sangre y Arena*, a study, mighty, dramatic, of the Spanish nature or national character as expressed in bull-fighting. The French, Italians, Germans, Russians, Portuguese, and the very Danes know some of his other ten or a dozen novels in translation. Besides, he has written travels and short stories.”

“And is he to be compared to those other Spanish novelists, Valdés, Galdós, and Pardo-Bazán, whom you used to make such a fuss about when you belonged in The Study?”

“Not by us,” we quibbled. “We do not believe in ascertaining an artist’s quality by comparing him with other artists. Something comes of that, but not much; it is not very enlightening. What Ibañez has in common with others is the essential of an apparent devotion to getting the likeness of the thing as it is rather than the thing as it isn’t, or as it is in that now justly despised thing called a plot, or the sort of painting that used to be called a composition.”

The sage nodded intelligence. “I see,” he said, “but don’t go off on *that*. How many of his novels do you speak from the knowledge of?”

We laughed again, but this time guiltily, as being forced to the confession.

“Well—two. But,” we hastened to add, “those two are so immeasurably different in several dimensions that we feel as if we might have covered the ground of the author’s whole performance in knowing them. We have read *Sangre y Arena*, which is as wide as all Spain in its portrayal of the national pastime of bull-fighting in every circumstance and incident, but is not so deep as *La Catedral*, which is the analysis and synthesis of the soul of Spain as it has lived from the Middle Ages into ours in its *iglesia primada*, the famous cathedral of Toledo. Before we had read it we should have fearlessly said that there never could be a more comprehensive survey of a civilization than *Sangre y Arena*. Primarily that is the story of a Sevillian boy, good for nothing otherwise, whose passionate ambition is to be a *torero*, and as a *torero* to be nothing less than an *espada*, the sword that in the climax of every bull-fight gives the death-thrust to the bull. Secondarily it is the story of all that he touches in his rise from vagabondage to glory, and then his tragical lapse through the decay of his forces into final defeat and death. It is his portrait and the portrait of the Spanish people, who cannot accuse the novelist of an alien’s injustice in his study of their ruling passion for the *fiesta de toros*. No foreigner of the many who have described the bull-fight has portrayed its horror and loathsomeness as this native novelist has done. But the least of his affair is to portray the bull-fight; that’s merely an incident of the psychological drama of the *torero*’s experience and the persons of it: his old mother, whose despair of his boyish badness turns to pride in the brilliancy of his rapidly successive triumphs in the arena; his simple, good, beautiful wife, who adores his prowess and condones his sins; the “differently beautiful” bad aristocrat, Doña Sol, who does not stop short of possessing him body and soul, and then casts him off as a wicked man of the world might cast off his mistress; the great Sevillian marquis, his first patron, and all the *aficionados* who flock about the *torero* throughout Spain (as if in our civilization he were a supreme prize-fighter), from ranks far above him as well as from the level of his own class;

the bull-fighters who fight beside him in the arena, ranging from types of mere stupid courage in the performance of their day's work to one delightful type of confused moral and social thinking; above them all, the *torero* himself, who is a *torero* of genius, and no more mindful of the formulas and conventions of his art than other great artists, but acting from the inspirations of the moment, and from the instinct of doing unerringly the right thing, and taking his death in the arena rather than confess that years and wounds have disabled him for his last fight. It is a conception of epical dimensions, but with dramatic details of vivid poignancy and a fearlessness in touching the loathsome physical facts which passes the courage of any other novelist we know."

"That must have been a great satisfaction to such a thorough-going realist as yourself," the sage mocked.

"Well," we said, "we could have spared some excesses of his unsparingness, but we felt that it was all very Spanish—as Spanish as the beheadings of the martyrs that the Spanish artists picture or sculpture in the churches. After all, you must say, that is the way the thing really looked."

"You think that a sufficient reason?"

"We would have said so, once."

"But you have changed your mind?"

"Our nerves have weakened. But why turn from the author to his reader? We confess that we satisfied our admiration of this very great novelist at less cost to our sensibilities in *La Catedral* than in *Sangre y Arcana*. We are not sure that *La Catedral* is not the more prodigious feat of the two; it is at least the more original and daring. The action—but there is no action till almost the latest moment—passes entirely in the cathedral and its gardens and bell-towers. Its persons are the *personnel* of the cathedral from the cardinal down to the *perrero*, the functionary whose duty is to keep the building clear of dogs; and from highest to lowest their characters are done with art which lapses into emotion only a little toward the close of the story. As for the story, such as there is on the face, it is that of the consumptive anarchist who comes from his two-years' prison in Barcelona to take refuge

with his brother who has inherited the family employ in the cathedral at Toledo, and who tenderly welcomes the broken agitator home to his native gardens and cloisters. He remembers the dying man as the brilliant student at the seminary where the boy surpassed all the others in his preparation for the priesthood; he has not known of his Carlist campaigns, his wanderings in England and all over the Continent in the renunciation of his vocation, and his arrest and imprisonment as a violent anarchist. He is really a philosophical anarchist of the most peaceful and philanthropical type, and after an interval of repose, in the enjoyment of a sinecure in the cathedral, he cannot help talking his philosophy to his fellow-functionaries—the bell-ringer, the dog-beadle, the gardener, the shoemaker suffered in the sacred precincts, and his own devoted friend and admirer, the chapel-master. His doctrine makes the baser of his listeners realize their misery so intensely that at last, against his protests and entreaties, they attempt to right themselves by robbing the richly jeweled shrine of a favorite Madonna. They escape, but the anarchist is seized as their accomplice, and dies soon after his arrest."

"Not a very cheerful story. Nothing of the musical-comedy, end-well, tired-business-man's sweet restorer there!" the sage mocked with an uncomfortable laugh. "I suppose you enjoyed it all the more on that account."

"Well, no," we said. "We have just told you that our nerves are not what they were. We have to draw the line in the pleasures of realism. What satisfied us better than the horrible logic of the anarchist's fate—he is made a lovable character—is the wonderful inquiry into the nature of historical and actual Spain. No one ought to go to Spain—and everybody ought to go to Spain—without having first read these chapters of his discourse, which adapts itself to the understanding of his simple listeners without losing depth and subtlety. The origins of the people, the rise of the monarchy on the ruins of the earlier democratic forms, and its consolidation by means of the Inquisition, are visioned for these keen, childish minds as we our-

selves have never seen them before, and the mysteries of Spanish greatness and weakness are made open secrets. We should say this part was the heart of the book. But the master who wrote it is able to make its pulsations felt in every part. It abounds in characters, high and low, which have their being in words and acts springing from their natures and not from any plan set for them; they create the story and are not created for it. The whole scheme, which does not seem ruled by the author, is expressive of an understanding compassion unknown to fiction until it became human through truth to life. We should say that no living novelist, now that the incomparable Tolstoy is dead, can be compared to this author, whose triumph in his art is the more sensible through its lapses at moments. But it is at moments only that his overweening pity for misery weakens into sentimentality. The humanity of the whole affair touches every sort and condition with the intelligence that is the only justice. From the cardinal to the cobbler, every character is given a fair chance with the reader, who, so far as he has the mind and heart for so much reality, lives with them in the mighty cathedral. Nothing is forced to fit those dimensions, and the illusion (illusion does not seem the word) is so perfect and so constant that you do not miss the world which you are dimly aware of going on outside, but which penetrates it only in the several types of sight-seeing tourists very sparingly intruded."

The sage laughed sardonically, almost too sardonically for a man of his years. "It must be a great privilege for you to renew the pleasures of your earlier maturity in such wholesale praise. It recalls the halcyon days when you could not say enough of those Russian novelists whom you lauded to the disadvantage of all the others."

"Not the Spanish!" we protested.

"Well, perhaps not. But how many novels of this new man did you say you had read?"

"Have we praised more than two?"

"I fancied there were twenty from the number of the praises. And it is your idea that no such work is possible for us, or predicable of us in the actual simmer-

ing, the bubbling and squeaking, of our social melting-pot?"

"We knew you were going to say melting-pot. You have kept away from it a good while."

"That was because you were doing the talking. And so you think that our fiction is not going to be life-size any more, in the full-grown novel, but is to shrink to the statuette expression of the short story?"

"No, we didn't say that. He of The Study merely suggested that, and he suggested it only of our magazine fiction, which certainly runs to statuettes. But we think there is a great deal in what he suggests. We don't understand that he censures or deplores the past, and probably he reserves a preference for the life-size fiction in book form, rather than in the instalment plan of the serialized magazine novel. For example, Mr. Poole's great novel, *The Harbor*, would not have gained, and it might have lost, by chopping into month-lengths. By the way, the conception of a novel topographically limited in time and place is unconsciously of the nature of a novel architecturally limited. The likeness of the conception is very interesting."

"And you would like such a notion acted upon as a means of utilizing the contents of our melting-pot? Is it to perform the effect of a long passage of time in adapting our racial and social ferment to the purposes of art?"

"We have not said so, and, come to think of it, we do not think so. Besides, now we think of it, the *personnel* of *The Harbor* is almost as quite American as that of *La Catedral* is Spanish."

"You do not seem to abound in luminous ideas to-day," the sage thoughtfully remarked, as he rose to take leave.

"We often have that sort of complaint to make ourselves," we assented. "Still, we think there is something in what we have said."

"Yes. There is what you got from the editor of The Study. You don't suppose he is in, do you?" the sage asked, with an inclination of his head in our neighbor's direction."

"We're quite sure he is," we responded, with the eagerness of one who is willing to part with a guest no matter what happens to others.



HENRY MILLS ALDEN

THE plea for democracy, in literature or life, would be a poor thing if it were a decial of aristocracy. Dealing with realities, we have nothing to do with labels, earmarks, or tell-tale outfits. These belong to the "boards"—as the stage used to be called, to emphasize its unreality—to "part-playing." But we do have to deal with royalties, if not with their toggery, since, literally, the royal is the *real*. In other words, "The king's the thing." To realize is to royalize—to express the kingly quality, the sovereign excellence, that increase of growth which is living authority.

Political history—that is, in its strictly political aspects—does not afford an attractive field for the study of real aristocracy. So far as we have any information as to the life of the ruling classes in western Europe before the fifteenth century, we are impressed by racial traits rather than by social refinements. The feudal lord was no "high-brow," nor was his lady of the type that marks the caste of Vere de Vere. The painter who wishes to reproduce the physiognomy of the nobles of this period does not find true models in their urbanely developed descendants, but in the peasantry of centuries later. The fidelity of Edwin A. Abbey's portraits in his illustrations of Shakespeare is due to his observance of this rule. Individual distinction, such as marked rulers like Alfred and Charlemagne, was exceptional. We think of such men, however closely identified, as in the case of King Alfred, with the destiny of a race, as related to the larger development of humanism. In the Italy of the thirteenth century such examples abound, and the growth of a world-sense would seem likely to dissipate racial traits, but that just here we see the forces at work which counteracted a premature cen-

tralization of either political or ecclesiastical power and created separate centers of national control.

The racial stamp upon a political and social aristocracy seems to bring all classes of a people into close union and purpose. Germany owes to this the integrity of her language at the cost of its impoverishment. On the other hand, England owes to the Norman conquest the long-enduring and persistent interval between its social classes, but also its earlier access to the influences of the Renaissance (as compared with Germany), its more richly diversified language, and its more heroic history.

The destiny of Europe, after the fall of Rome, was committed to the peoples of the North, whose racial traits primarily determined the course of medieval and modern history. But these races received two baptisms—one ecclesiastical, the other humanistic—the latter inevitably, owing to existing conditions, an endowment of the few. In this meeting of a developed past culture with the crude but conquering Goths and Franks we find the beginnings of a new type of aristocracy like that which in Italy was nobly represented by the Medici. Outside of Italy the transformation due to the Renaissance—baffled in its centralizing tendencies, but triumphant in its essentially expansive and cosmopolitan humanism—was the more notable, though gradual in its procedure, because of the rawness of the material it wrought upon. It was a change of physiognomy, of manners, and finally of even sanitary conditions, in western European courts. The virtues and vices of this new civilization, in which the peoples were so inarticulate, are duly recorded in the kind of history which was then written and which consisted mainly of the annals of courts and camps. In the court of Louis XIV. we behold its