

Idealized New England

"WHAT a terrible book," I said, "what a supremely cruel book!"

"A tragic masterpiece," she contradicted, "a landmark in American literature. Against that iron New England background Mrs. Wharton's few figures have an almost Euripidean quality."

"But the Greeks never made their audiences writhe," I protested. "Could you write choruses to 'Ethan Frome,' melodious choruses to be chanted by tranquil, veiled women and offering some alleviation to the bitter lot of man? No," I went on with heat, "you'll find only jibbering fiends to break Ethan's agony. The story is a fine example of what hate can accomplish as creative inspiration; and of the difference between observation and understanding."

"Come now," she said, "that sounds like local prejudice. You should be sufficiently disaffected by New York and Europe to perceive the depleted side of your native states."

"Have I not seen the industrious Swede and the inscrutable Finn absorbing the land cleared by my ancestors' vitality?"

"Well then! And you care so much for the French classic manner—how can you fail to appreciate the rapidity, the suppressions, the sharp yet delicate shadings of this poignant New England drama?"

"Ah, but that's just why the book wounds me so. My acquired literary sense, which Mrs. Wharton pricks to admiration on every page, here conflicts with something far more real and subconscious—the knowledge I was born with of the kind of people, the kind of place, yes and the kind of drama of weakened will she is so relentlessly describing. And I tell you that in spite of the *vraisemblance* of the surface, she has got them all wrong. She has nowhere dug down into the subsoil."

"You don't mind quarreling with the authorities," she remarked. "Of course you read Mr. Herrick on Mrs. Wharton in *THE NEW REPUBLIC*?"

"Yes, it was precisely that article which sent me back to the sources. No doubt Mrs. Wharton is more psychologist than social historian; no doubt, as he said, her real interest is in the subtler and more universal sort of spiritual conflicts. But I can't admit that the conflict between love and duty in 'Ethan Frome' is less conditioned by special environment, than, for example, Lily Bart's struggle."

"You will grant that men tied to wives older than themselves, ill, ugly and querulous, are doomed in every quarter of the globe to fall in love with girls like blackberries who put red ribbons in their hair."

"Certainly. But Ethan and his wife Zeena, and her young cousin, Mattie Silver, are not generalized types. Would Mr. Herrick accept them as they stand, for Ohio or Illinois? They are New England country people of old stock living in a lonely snowed-in hill town in the Berkshires. Mrs. Wharton's deliberate purpose is to show what life in Starkfield really means to a man who has been there too many winters; to show the grim New England skeleton that the summer resident usually fails to discover during his pleasant months in the elm-shaded village—unless he happens upon a degenerate chore-boy, or sees a poor little girl in short skirts carrying her shame to school under a cape."

"True, and the New England writers have largely ignored the skeleton. The 'idyll' has been done to death, like the conscience. I commend Mrs. Wharton for finding a new subject in an overworked field."

"So do I, but if 'Ethan Frome' is a New England tale in the same sense as Miss Brown's or Mrs. Freeman's

stories or 'The Country of the Pointed Firs'—and this is just the point I am venturing to make against Mr. Herrick—then surely one is justified in asking, as he does about the New York novels, whether the author has been fair to her subject. Do Zeena's false teeth click true, do Ethan and Mattie make love in Starkfield fashion, would they have taken the fatal coast that brought about the intolerable horror of their lives?"

"Ugh," said my friend, "those false teeth—what a sure realistic note! I can never forget the glass by the bed, into which the wife dropped them when she blew out the candle at night in the terrible gray, cold room."

"Of course you can't. Neither could Mrs. Wharton. You both look at Starkfield with the eyes of the sophisticated stranger who arrives there in a blizzard, and stumbles through the drifts into Ethan's run-down 'place.' You notice the superficial things that would make you miserable. Ethan suffered in all sorts of ways, but not from false teeth: he was brought up on them! His mother had them; his cousins and neighbors had them; he probably admired Mattie less because she hadn't 'had her molars out'!"

"Well, I waive the teeth," said she with a shudder. "Let's take the coasting parties and the church sociable. Surely Mrs. Wharton has those in key?"

"In the unconsciously contemptuous key of the person who has a box at the opera. How should cosmopolitans understand what such diversions mean to Starkfield folks? They have all sorts of consolations if you only knew. Even when winter breaks and the teams sink up to their axles in mud, they have things to live for and look for—pussy-willows, for instance. Laugh if you like! Do you remember 'Miss Tempy's Watchers' and the one thorny quince tree she 'kind of expected into bloomin'' every spring?"

"You mean that because of its very repressions, its very barrenness, and physical deprivations, New England life still produces a sort of flower—"

"Pale as snowdrops, hidden in dead leaves like hepaticas and arbutus; yet precious to those who know where to look for it. That is the sort of flower Ethan's and Mattie's love was, but they could never have expressed it to each other."

"Mrs. Wharton lets them express it so little," she objected.

"Ah, but a word, a touch would have spoiled it for them. I think Ethan, dim and weakened descendant of rugged forefathers that he was, would have had the spirit to drive his Mattie to the station when his wife sent her packing. But he would not have dreamed of stopping for that preposterous coast for death. It was just Mrs. Wharton's own sense of the blankness and emptiness, the lack of beauty and passion in Starkfield lives, that made her construct that tremendous fourth act for her lovers and condemn them to its gruesome, long-drawn epilogue."

"You think they would have driven on silently to the station and parted with a dumb handshake and a look?"

"Sustained by something they did not understand, something they half rebelled against and yet could not possibly foreswear."

"Then Ethan's real tragedy would have been that he had nothing real, tangible, to cling to—only an idea, a feeling, a dream to carry him through those slow gray years when Zeena continued to flourish on patent medicines?"

"Exactly. The real New England tragedy, as Mrs. Wharton herself realized at bottom, is not that something happens but that nothing does. Yet if Ethan was tender to Zeena instead of strangling her complaining voice in her lanky throat, it was because when he was out alone in the

pasture lot and heard the hermit thrush singing in the pines he knew he had been right. The image of his girl was warm in his heart then and undefiled, like Martha's memory of her 'lady.'"

"Miss Jewett again! It isn't fair. She had a natural love of light and sun, an aversion to the shadow and cruelty and ugliness of life which Mrs. Wharton has the courage to face and to probe."

"Is that the essential point of difference? I don't think so. There are chapters in Miss Jewett's works—in 'Deephaven' for example—and passages in her letters which show her full knowledge of the shadow even though she did not often linger there. For that matter, almost any of her stories if told from outside in rather than from inside out might be sordid and grim. That's the bearing of our whole argument, isn't it? Take the 'The Queen's Twin.' What was she? To most people a poor, cracked old creature, the victim of a silly delusion. It needed the feeling heart of Mrs. Todd to realize that she was, in fact as in fancy, the sister soul of royalty, a woman with a shining destiny."

"You evidently think the only creative truth is that perceived by love. I believe any strong passion is worth recording."

"Possibly. Indifference could not have written 'Ethan Frome.' But if Mrs. Wharton had realized Ethan as Miss Jewett did the Queen's Twin, as she herself loved and understood her most significant creation, Lily Bart, we should get some shock of those deep-down unwritable things which are the vital parts of novels as they are of human beings. We should get life, not a literary copy of it."

"It's no use," said my friend, "to argue on her own soil with the descendant of a band of hopeless idealists who see the hardest facts in a sort of Platonic glow. I am afraid I must still read and admire 'Ethan Frome.'"

"Wait till you are old. That is a New England counsel, but just wait! Then the 'Queen's Twin,' and the 'Dunnet Shepherdess' will still be full of living human poetry and truth and the salt-sweet scent of high coast pastures, and 'Ethan Frome' will be rotting in his grave."

ELIZABETH SHEPLEY SERGEANT.

Jewish Life in Modern Times

Jewish Life in Modern Times, by Israel Cohen. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. \$3.00 net.

IT is not so long since many good people believed that Judaism had come to an end with the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, and that at best the Jews were an anachronism. There was ample evidence of them during the intervening centuries, but to the average person the Jew himself must have seemed as unreal as his portrayal in literature.

When in the nineteenth century medieval misgovernment occasioned a new exodus, the world awoke to the fact that nineteen centuries after Judaism had been "superseded" there were millions of Jews, virile and productive. And since they were to be found, as a rule, in compact communities, "the gregariousness of the Jews . . . has given them a position of prominence . . . far exceeding that proportionate to their numbers" (p. 6). This has made them a subject for much study and investigation, whose interest is enhanced by the many contrasts Jewish life affords: Jews are fabulously rich yet pitifully poor; cultured yet illiterate; altruistic yet sordid; punctiliously pious yet rabidly heterodox; law-abiding yet unruly; cosmopolitan yet clannish; a racial solidarity yet a communal chaos—to mention but a few characteristics.

Not that misjudgment of the Jew is necessarily wilful. Psychologically, current opinion of the Jew is colored by what Zangwill terms "the dislike for the unlike." And as the average man has neither time nor inclination to delve into statistics or analyze cause and effect, he accepts current opinion. Hence there are many fallacies concerning the Jew, to support or refute which volumes have been written. The most recent, Israel Cohen's "Jewish Life in Modern Times," renders notable service in presenting the Jew as he is, by marshalling a legion of facts to rout the fallacies.

Take, for example, criminality among the Jews. The author contends that "prejudiced critics who visit the sins of the few upon the nation at large" and a "sensational-loving press" give the impression of enormous iniquity. "But the very prominence given to Jewish cases only serves to emphasize their comparative infrequency" (p. 89). This is "the more notable, as the Jews are an urban people, among whom crime is usually more rife" (p. 94). Even so, the bulk of the "crimes" consists of infringing Sunday closing or local traffic laws. As for criminality, the following is typical: "In Germany, arson and theft were committed thrice more by Christians than by Jews, robbery nine times more, injurious assault thrice more and murder seven times more" (p. 97).

The racial purity of the Jew is another mooted question. Our author admits there is no one uniform Jewish type, but rather "a variety of types, each possessing an unmistakable Jewish factor, and yet presenting a certain resemblance to the predominant local type, which results from the unconscious mimicry of muscular movements" (p. 116). He maintains, however, that "the evidence of history supports the view that the Jewish race did not suffer any appreciable influx of alien blood in Europe" (p. 114). Witness that "the bas-reliefs of Hebrew prisoners taken in 973 B.C.E. present a striking resemblance to the predominant Jewish type of the present day" (p. 116).

Most of the book is devoted to the problem of the Jew's future, which we may thus summarize: The most prevalent Jewish experience is oppression; the most available remedy is migration; the most pressing problem, adaptation and survival; the greatest menace, disintegration. Not all of these phases affect all Jews alike. The Western Jews—those in Western Europe and America—are in most respects fortunate. But Eastern Jewry, numerically the greater part, is still in bondage. Without going into detail we may say that "the hostile attitude of the government breeds antagonism in the masses" in whose wake come the most crushing misery and poverty.

"The only avenue of immediate relief is migration." Many have availed themselves of it and their total is appalling. In all almost three million, or more than one-fifth of the world's Jewish population, have permanently transplanted their homes . . . in the last thirty years" (p. 214). This migration involves a monetary value that "has been estimated (for 1912) at seven million dollars, in transportation, head-tax and money-in-hand" (p. 220).

Yet the monetary cost is slight compared with the price the Jew pays in the devastation of his religious and communal life. The emigrant passes from a Jewish to a non-Jewish milieu, which is *ipso facto* inimical to the older religious life. True, the only deliberate attempt to wean the Jew from his religion is the misguided zeal of the conversionist, with his "Christian mission to the Hebrews," and from it the Jew has little to fear. Luther long ago said, "It is just as possible to convert the Jew as to con-