

## Books and Things

THAT clean sunlit morning she appeared at the door in youthful white, ready for the garden with a pink parasol. She said good morning in her bell-like mezzo-soprano, and I stood up with my finger in my book.

She was a wonderful woman, I thought, a wonderful creation, and I ventured to speculate as to her age. Her hair was still dark, her cheek faintly tinged with color, but how long her cheeks had been tinged, how long her hair dark, I did not dare to guess. In all the capitals of Europe, as they put it, she had been at home for a generation, her eyes a swift look-out, her nose a cleaving prow, her tongue a keen blade. Various ambitions for this world she had sown and reaped. Her cheek was finely furrowed like a harvested field. Her presence in the white doorway made me uncomfortable. I wished to return to my book.

It is only by accident that such people as ourselves came together—mainly the accident of living in a land where guardian railings are uncommon, where it is not the fashion to have walls ivied, and hospitable with broken glass. But the accident was chiefly my secret, one which her tilted telescope could not take in.

She did not know me. That is to say, she was a person of high preoccupations and while I had swum before her vision she had never had occasion to identify me or to suppose that I could have any significance worth her while. This morning, indeed, I arrested her attention, but largely because her eye roved too incautiously into the room off the verandah, and the human body is opaque. In this fact, had I remembered it, was my protection. I had only to remain politely mute to go on being inconsequential. In her eyes I was matter but not necessarily organic matter—a harmless brick, probably, in the path of her four-in-hand tour. But I did not remember I was a brick. I fancied I was human, and I fancied I was generating a current of attention which it was my instant, impulsive object to divert. Why I should have feared her attention I do not know, but I did fear it, and, standing helpless before her, I instinctively raised my book.

She gathered, simple soul, that I wished to bring her notice to it. Being timid and therefore ready for any convenient insincerity I at once pretended to myself that I had wished it to find her notice.

"Have you ever read it?" I asked eagerly.

Age may be circumvented in other people's eyes. It takes liberties with one's own. She had not her glasses, and she could not read the title.

"What is it?" she inquired, as if the pleasure of imparting the title must be mine.

A sudden sense of incongruity came to me. It was incongruous, in the first place, that I should be reading this book. It was not my habit. It did not represent me. This, as I guessed, could make no difference to her. She would not care if, away from her presence, I stood on my head. But even more incongruous was it to ask her if she had read it. I did not suppose she had. I did not really care, either. But the embarrassment of our encounter had plunged me into a senseless question and I had to go on.

"It is," I said brightly, "the 'Imitation of Christ.'"

Had it been Admiral Mahan or the memories of an indiscreet Duchess or the history of the Florentines she would have understood. But Thomas à Kempis, presumably, was no friend of hers. Her manner, however, betrayed nothing. She may have had a thought. I do not believe she did. She did not pause for an instant. She felt nothing perceptible, no incongruity, no discordancy.

"Oh, yes," she rose to the occasion. "Isn't it charming?"

In all the capitals of Europe she had, as I said, pursued a career sufficiently proud. She belonged to the great world and she was a power in it, a power in personal relations through her vigorous and unscrupulous will, a power through her people in most of the affairs that count. She was an oligarch, an insider. Wherever a strip of red carpet intersected the sidewalk her motor would naturally stop of its own volition, and if the heavens were at that moment raining on the just and the unjust alike an umbrella would spring up by the side of her limousine, like a magic mushroom, and she would go up the steps as unconscious of the machinery of her class as a baby is unconscious of the milk problem. In all the conversation beyond those steps, on politics, on dominion, on character, on art, on style, on *entourage*, on the sultry affairs of men and women, her mezzo-soprano would be heard resonant and amusing, with enough friendliness in it to win attention to her and enough danger to make herself felt. I had never seen her in action, but even a warship in bunting cannot belie its long predacious guns. She would be heard from in action, and when the smoke cleared away, the effusions of the effort, there would be a gash in the other fellow's hide.

Supposing that she was like this, letting one's fancy play about her, there was an unexpected pleasure in her reaction on my morning's book. Charming! She could not invent it. Her tone had that perfect surface which only comes with long practice in intercourse. It was not deferential. It was not glib. It was not heartfelt. It was simple, authoritative, complete. When she said that the "Imitation of Christ" was charming, there was no more for anyone to say. It was not impatient or perfunctory. It was, as she held it, adequate. But it closed the door on the subject impartially, without fury or furtiveness. It quite politely let Christ out.

Had such a one been to call, had she actually met and known him, I do not believe it would have been in any way different. In her set, very likely, the opinions about him would rapidly have been canvassed. There would have been glowing, excited young women, disturbed elderly women, angry wives of men downtown, a few thin, ascetic, unmarried women in whose dark eyes the experience would be deep. It would have come up at tea, "What do you think of him? What sort of impression did he make on you?" and everyone would have gone into the discussion, one of those discussions which are the human equivalent of multitudinous twitterings in the sky. But she, bell-voiced, wrinkled, hawk-eyed, she would have no trouble about accounting for him. It would not occur to her to repel him or discountenance him. If he fluttered the world she lived in, that fluttering she would regard with keen malice, without disturbance or alarm. On such a matter she would have equanimity, so long as he did not throw bombs or destroy governments. And she would appreciate his sincerity. "Isn't he charming?" It might readily be conceived.

As she left me to my book, to walk among the early flowers in the gracious garden, it seemed to me a deity had left me, one who was beyond my good and evil, a creature from another sphere. All the vertebrates, says a big tome, are obviously reducible to one style of architecture—and she and I are both vertebrates. But I was incapable of resolving our style. Is it necessary to attempt such things? Is it necessary to make human nature congruous? The struggle, if necessary, passes beyond my power. I was content just to watch her making friends with her quick grandchild down the garden, and see them *en rapport* among the flowers.

F. H.

## After the Play

IN ordinary cases it is easy enough to congratulate anybody upon anything, yet at the present moment, when I have just returned from a visit of congratulation to my old friend Colonel Bannard, I am far from certain that he found my best wishes satisfactory. Two years ago Colonel Bannard, who isn't far from fifty, married Nan Southard, who isn't much over twenty. Nan was not at all keen about marrying him. She was more or less in love with young Ellsworth, a lieutenant living at the same post with Nan and her father and Colonel Bannard. After her father had been stabbed by a Mexican he uttered what was practically a prayer for the marriage of Colonel Bannard and Nan. She allowed herself to be influenced, unduly according to my notion, by her father's dying words.

Colonel Bannard, in spite of his having a heart of gold, was not the right companion for a wife so much younger. He was always an inexpressive man. Nan was lonely. She saw more and more that her only escape from miserable loneliness was by way of young Ellsworth, who had always, as they say, loved her. He sometimes told his love, and Nan sometimes listened. At length they became lover and mistress. This irregular relation of theirs became known to a disreputable orderly with a German name, Bill Hecht. This wretch had long desired Nan. He thought his knowledge of her guilty secret put her in his power. When she refused to submit to his detestable caresses he kissed her against her will. A fortunate accident alone prevented the accomplishment of his other and yet more hellish purpose, and Hecht ran away, leaving Nan in a faint on the floor.

I ought to have said that before Hecht's act of violence Nan had broken with young Ellsworth. She felt that her betrayal of her noble elderly husband was base. She was a woman stricken by remorse. After she had told Ellsworth that she thought Bill Hecht knew their story, and after Ellsworth became certain that this was so and realized that Hecht would likely tell Colonel Bannard all about it, Ellsworth committed suicide by shooting himself through the head.

Colonel Bannard had never had a suspicion. Nan's confession was of course a terrible shock. He first verified what she told him about Bill Hecht, spy and ruffian, and then shot Hecht dead. Immediately thereafter he forgave Nan. He and she are now convinced that she always really loved him.

My business, you see, was to congratulate Colonel Bannard upon being reunited to his wife, and upon reaching after such a stormy voyage a haven of happiness. Somehow I could not do this with a whole heart. Doubts would and will obtrude themselves. Young Ellsworth's suicide does render impossible a renewal of the intrigue which Mrs. Bannard had voluntarily broken off, but neither Ellsworth's suicide nor the killing of Bill Hecht has lessened the difference between Bannard's years and his wife's. Neither event has made the gallant colonel a gayer and more exhilarating companion for a woman half his age. When I hear that she has always really loved him I realize that these are vague words. And I can't help wondering how he will take the publicity which is sure to beat upon him and Nan, most pitilessly, when the authorities have investigated the killing of Bill Hecht. My doubts about the happiness of Colonel and Mrs. Bannard throughout the rest of their married life are all the graver because he does not appear to have any doubt at all.

My feeling would be a question mark if Colonel Bannard were really a friend of mine, and my feeling after seeing Augustus Thomas's "Rio Grande," of which I have just told the story, is not very different. But Mr. Thomas himself, so far as I can guess, offers "Rio Grande" to us at the Empire as a play with a happy ending in forgiveness.

Years ago I sometimes thought of American playwrights as belonging to the class of "those miserable males who sniff at vice, and, daring not to snap, do therefore" seem unreal in their work. I used to think that American plays dealing with adultery would be more real if it were committed instead of being merely talked about and planned and prevented. Adultery, I said to myself, is a weapon with which American playwrights are willing to wound and yet afraid to strike.

Thoughts not unlike these strayed about my head when I first saw Mr. Thomas's "Arizona," in which a young woman, married to a colonel much older than herself, and living mostly at a lonely army post, contemplates adultery, is frustrated, loves her husband all the time, and is by him forgiven after the prospective adulterer has been killed by a Mexican by whose fiancée he has had a child.

Well, I was quite wrong. The adultery which in "Arizona" was only a plan is a fact in "Rio Grande," yet there has been little gain in reality in the later play. From neither play do we get any insight into the nature of guilty passion or the psychology of forgiveness. Forgiveness follows sin, provided the husband be sufficiently noble, and happiness, provided the wife really loved her husband all the time, follows forgiveness. For the mind of a grown person this is pretty thin food.

Nothing herein contained, however, shall be taken as an assertion that from "Arizona" to "Rio Grande" there has been no change in Mr. Thomas's moral attitude. Whereas in "Arizona" he seemed to imply that the lover of a married woman is always a low hound, he seems to admit in "Rio Grande" that there may be extenuating circumstances. Young Ellsworth is offered to us not as a hissing villain, but as a youngster unhappy and erring. I had a rather kindly feeling for him until he spoke these words to his mistress: "You angelic, delectable baby, God made you the Paradise men fight for."

Although there is no other speech to match this in "Rio Grande" or elsewhere, so far as I know, in Mr. Thomas's work, yet his weakest side is habitually shown in love scenes. Wherever poetry is needed he is likely to give us sentimental rhetoric, just as he gives us rhetoric whenever his characters aspire to be loftily reflective. I wish he would try to keep women off his stage. The worst things his men say are said to women.

When they are alone their speech is genuinely American. It consists partly of such sentences as are actually spoken by soldiers, gamblers, brokers, lawyers, partly of sentences which are Mr. Thomas's specialty, and for which his recipe is to take things such men might say and to give them neatness and point and force and humor and often wit. "Prejudice, my dear Helen, prejudice," answers the professional gambler in "The Witching Hour" to the woman who has said his material possessions are a monument to the worst side of him. "You might say that if I'd earned these things in some respectable combination that starved out all its little competitors. But I've simply furnished a fairly expensive entertainment—to eminent citizens—looking for rest."

I have not the slightest idea who is the foremost American dramatist, but my guess is that if everybody voted a majority would vote for Mr. Thomas. His stories never