

Back to Victoria

The Glass of Fashion, by A Gentleman with a Duster.
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

HAVING reached page 75 of this odd book in a browsing and indifferent mood I suddenly came on a long quotation that seemed to me unduly familiar. It was from a review of Margot's autobiography that appeared last year in a certain journal of opinion. As I read over those stirring and heartfelt words, the author of which is fastidiously not mentioned in *The Glass of Fashion* and equally fastidiously shall not be mentioned here, I thought to myself, "Well, now, is this book so absurd? Why be so critical? It is a bit innocent, perhaps, quite seraphic here and there, but fundamentally, as we say, not so bad. Let me see, this quotation, how does it stand up? It could be worse. He calls it 'perfectly just and contemptuous criticism.' Hear, hear! And he runs on, 'we must infer that there are numbers of educated Americans whose affection for England has been weakened, and who have perhaps ceased to believe that the privileged classes in England have any contribution to make to the higher life of the human race.' Stupendous inference, but, on reflection, let us not deprecate the stupendous. 'Such an effect I regard as deplorable, coming, as it does, at a particularly critical juncture . . . I do not exaggerate in saying that this effect is disastrous.'"

The occasion, as this gentleman evidently sees it, is distinctly interesting. He does not attempt to say that Mrs. Asquith and Colonel Repington do not belong to English society, that Repington is a Cholly Knickerbocker or that Mrs. Asquith is a freak. He is honest enough to admit that both are, in their ambitious way, only too awfully representative. He describes Colonel Repington's qualifications to speak as an insider in terms that the nimblest apologist cannot duck, and while he says that "Mrs. Asquith belongs to that insurgent class of the commercial rich which broke into society soon after the second Reform bill," he does not disguise the actual fact that her "class" did break crashingly in. He insists, indeed, that during King Edward's reign her class "completely overwhelmed" society. And he says, with much discrimination, "she is the more deadly foe to our ancient traditions because her attack is not aimed at the primitive virtues of humanity—those moral outworks of the social organism . . . On the contrary, she is a devoted wife, an exemplary mother, and she believes in God. Her attack is the more fatal, because it is aimed from the cherished centre of domestic life. It is in my view, whether she is conscious of it or not, an attack upon manners."

The object of this book, curious as it may sound, is to rally to the defence of morals and manners in so far as they are impersonated by Fashion. The author does not himself presume to say that he represents Fashion. "My standpoint," he puts it, "explains everything. It is that of the central classes [why not the Grand Central classes?] I regard the summit of Nobility from the middle-distance of the Gentry. It is in the interests of the entire Commonwealth, but from the position of the central classes, that I criticize the set of people who now occupy the summit of our national life and by their manners and morals create that 'climate of opinion' in which we all live."

Is this really absurd? At first, in my lamentable exuberance and in the cocoanut-shying impulse which I

regret to say I still retain, I felt this was definitely absurd. But it isn't in the least absurd. The Gentleman with the Duster is a most significant personage, well worth watching. He sees, quite sharply, that if certain valuable and invaluable equities in the existing English social scheme are to be preserved, the fast and flashy people who damage those equities from the inside are intolerably dangerous and they must, as in the days of Victoria, be suppressed at all costs. The outer world must not be disillusioned about the Nobility. What is more, it must at once be reminded of the real claims that the inheritors of this social scheme possess to gentle and simple consideration, the world over, and while it cannot be argued that the objectionable exponents of Fashion do not "belong," (since the fact that they "belong" creates the problem), it has to be strongly affirmed that those others who do belong, belong in a very different way.

To perform such a task with "modesty, self-effacement, restraint and delicacy"—that is to say, good breeding—is not altogether practicable. It is quite difficult to distribute social brickbats and bouquets without occasional misses as well as hits, and this particular commentator insists on combining high-grade gossip with his altitudinous "spiritual" tone. But insupportable as he may seem to all those who do not realize the immense interests at stake, I think he has had a pretty sound conception of the job he sets out to perform. Admitting the night-clubs, the "monstrous flood of modern animalism," the jazz bands, the meanness of Mr. Balfour to servants, the chorus girl "in the padded recesses of a motor-car," the women who "scream" over a story, the midnight bathing, the "disease of cynicism," "the strumpets of Coventry Street,"—admitting all these dreadful, odious and repulsive things, what is there to set against them for the sake of God and St. George? He answers with great sagacity, Victorianism, simple faith, kind hearts, reverence, restraint and all gentleness.

These "fast" people are not useful. They are not happy. "If we know in our hearts that they have no encouragement to give to moral earnestness, intellectual striving, spiritual aspiration, or even physical effort; if we find them to be the wreckage of the human spirit miserably dragging the chain of their days from the tents of Vanity Fair to the wilderness of disillusion; then, truly, we can do the State great service merely by removing these false captains from the conspicuous van of English civilization."

Out they go, the "fast" set. And what comes in? The noble-minded. "Flippant people, with their tiresome clichés, their incessant giggling, and their little blasphemies, have not the least idea that the highest form of wit and the gayest exercise of good humor are to be found only among the noble-minded." The precise samples of wit that we are given, derived from Mrs. Gladstone, do not strike our degraded taste as very exhilarating, but "the centre of life for people like the Gladstones was moral earnestness," and of this the author speaks with sincere joy. Also he defines, quite passionately, the essence of English manners. "Manners, rightly regarded, are the style of the soul and they can never be genuine, never be anything more than veneer or polish, unless they proceed as naturally as the exhalation of a rose from the inmost beauty of the spirit, that is to say, from humility, tenderness, loving-kindness, and desire of excellence."

A few side-swipes with the famous Duster are offered at Bolshevism and Darwinism, and there is a strangely disproportionate amount of space given to prostitutes, in

whom the Gentleman takes a sorrowful interest; but the gist of the book is that the real English gentleman and the real English lady have manners and morals not in the least represented by the bizarre figure that is Mrs. Asquith's and the thick hide which is Colonel Repington's.

This is undoubtedly true. Manners are the finer part, the essence of civilization, and the manners of nice English people are incomparable. They understand the really exquisite art of human relationships. Henry James gave his genius to showing what a beautiful social instrument, what a beautiful human instrument, a civilized English person becomes, for any life whatever to play on. But this isn't the whole of the story.

If we are to have gentlemen and ladies in a world of the "commercial rich," who is to support them? It comes down more or less to that. Mrs. Asquith "did not know" "Lady Frederick Cavendish, or the beautiful Duchess of Westminster, or any of the Hamiltons, the Spencers, or the Howards. I do not think that she has been an intimate friend of the Portlands, or the Lansdownes, the Cecils, or the Percys." Congratulations! But how long can the Portlands hold together without Portland cement? That is the whole problem of Victorianism over again, the problem of aristocracy needing plutocracy. For my part, I am more interested in Walt Whitman in the military hospital than Lady Harrowby in the military hospital. He seems to me a less expensive spiritual flower, somehow. But when it comes to "government of gentlemen, by gentlemen, for gentlemen"—see Veblen—then I am with this Duster man. Because I like certain nice English people I hope that the noisy privileged will lose and the quiet privileged win.

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Mythical Science

Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend, and Law, by Sir J. G. Frazer. New York: The Macmillan Co.

THERE is a tradition,—which not having seen in print I may designate as folk-lore—that at Oxford, Frazer is recognized as the only Cambridge man who can write well. Without wishing to subscribe to any invidious distinction against Bertrand Russell and others, I may, at the outset, testify to the magical quality of Frazer's way of writing. Only some sort of magic can compel one to read through a three-volume book of over sixteen hundred pages from beginning to end, and this too, despite a most thorough-going dissent from the fundamental ideas and methods at the basis of all of Frazer's anthropologic work.

Following the procedure of his *Golden Bough* a number of passages in the Old Testament are used as pegs on which to hang vast collections of myths, magic rituals, and popular beliefs of "primitive" people, collected from all collocation of biblical themes with primitive superstitions—all done with rather naive humor—produces most charming results. The treatment of the stories about the patriarchs as if they were actual history produces rather broadly humorous results, e. g., when Jacob is spoken of as squeezing a free, even if somewhat uncontrolled, imagination shows itself in the suggestion of how the story of Samson and Delilah must have been told by the Philistines whom that lady freed from the burly free-booter. But perhaps the best illustration of an imaginative liberation from traditional ideology is shown when Frazer views the Deuteronomic reform and the destruction of the local "high places" as similar to the destruction of local or village

churches to compel people to go to town. But though a pupil of Robertson Smith and able to quote many books on the higher criticism, Frazer is entirely devoid of a critical historical sense. There is no sharp difference in his mind between actual fact and the content of popular myths about legendary figures like Moses. Hence, despite the almost unrivalled industry which these three volumes show, there is rather little light thrown on the Old Testament or on the life of the people who produced it. Zeal in the collection of facts cannot compensate for the absence of the critical spirit which is the essence of scientific procedure.

It may seem ungracious, especially after one has derived much innocent pleasure from the book, to quarrel with the author on the score of scientific method. Indeed, in the preface, Frazer explicitly renounces any claim for his general views except as tentative or provisional hypotheses, pigeonholes in which the multitude of facts can be temporarily arranged. But despite this genial prefatory profession of scientific modesty, Frazer cannot be absolved from the gross intellectual confusion at the basis of his unhistoric and indiscriminating use of the comparative method and of the method of interpreting everything as a "survival." The fact that these methods are now almost universally accepted in our popular social science and are supported by the supposed scientific character of the doctrine of social evolution, only serves to make the charm and the imposing bulk of Frazer's book all the more dangerous.

Despite the fact that degeneration is as much a biologic and historic fact as progress, the belief in the universality of the latter is so fashionable that few dare to doubt the pleasant dogma that there are certain necessary stages through which all people must pass and that the savage or lower races of today, represent the stages through which all civilized or higher peoples must at one time have passed. This belief, like the older popular account of the social contract, has the advantage of enabling us to write history a priori. We need not trouble to find the actual facts of the past when our formula can tell us what they must have been. The method of explaining every puzzling social fact as a survival is thus an ingenious device for capitalizing our boundless ignorance of the past and making it an unlimited reservoir of easy explanations.

Those who push this method in the social sciences think themselves scientific because they imagine they are following a method which has triumphed in biology. But apart from the criticism which vague and speculative ideas like evolution have received from modern experimental biologists like Jacques Loeb, there are important differences to be noted. Unlike the social evolutionists biologists take great pains to make sure of their facts before explaining them. The works of the social evolutionists from Spencer to Frazer are indeed monuments of credulity. Printed reports by globe-trotters, missionaries, trained or untrained observers, are all taken for a hundred per cent of their face value. They have no use for the undemocratic question as to the competence of the observer or reporter. Some ing Laban dry as a lemon, and the latter as inferior in the gift of gab as in the finer reaches of cunning.

Without meaning to be in the least irreverent he is certainly piquantly human in his description of the irascible but kindly-hearted deity who indulges in copious curses to ease his feelings (when Adam and Eve disobey him) and who waives scruples at the sin of David's census on the receipt of half a shekel per human head. The value of