

PATIENT WORKERS IN FAR-AWAY LANDS

PICTURES FROM OUTLOOK READERS



From R. Hitchcock, New York City

JAPANESE WOMAN PREPARING COTTON FOR SPINNING



From Lillian E. Zeh, Middletown, R. I.

SIBERIAN NATIVES PLOWING—A TYPICAL SCENE IN SOUTH CENTRAL SIBERIA

The primitive plow, made of sapling birchwood and drawn by the slow-moving ox, is guided by the woman, while the man turns under the sod

THE BOOK TABLE

THE DISCOURSE OF THE ELDERS

BY LLOYD R. MORRIS

A GENERATION'S opinions of its predecessors have the quality of revealing, if only by implication, the direction of its own aims and the scope of its ideals. Mr. Van Doren's stimulating volume,¹ which is "meant to serve as a chapter in the history of the American imagination" and by intention is "a record of the National imagination as exhibited in the progress of native fiction," besides possessing the æsthetic and philosophic values which so delightful a critical programme would suggest, reflects obliquely something of the temper and imagination of our contemporary iconoclasts.

Specifically "The American Novel" covers the field of fiction in the United States from the first American novel, "The Power of Sympathy," published in Boston in 1789, to the beginnings of the movement toward naturalism inaugurated by writers many of whom are still contemporary. Mr. Van Doren takes up in succession the beginnings of fiction, finding in the Revolution, the settlement, and the frontier the three "matters" of American romance; Cooper, whose intensity of imagination, resourcefulness of invention, and intimate knowledge of his "setting" make him easily the outstanding figure in American romance; the romances of adventure which continued the tradition fixed by Cooper, especially those of Herman Melville; Hawthorne; the novels of sentimentalism which preceded the Civil War; Howells and the genesis of realism, Mark Twain and Henry James; the extraordinarily productive decade of the eighties; and, finally, the forces of "reaction"—the rococo romance of the Spanish War period—and "progress"—the inception of the drift toward naturalism.

This brief outline of the content of Mr. Van Doren's book would be at best unjust were it not added that its emphasis is not on the work of a few eminent personalities, but upon the development of an art as an expression of the National life. This programme, if it is to be truly realized, demands not only a critical perspective having its roots in enlightened scholarship, but a philosophy sufficient for the purposes of interpretation. Mr. Van Doren has brought to his task scholarship and insight, and his book is therefore both an excellent history of the development of one department of our literature and an illuminating analysis of the ways in which the American imagination has realized American life.

It is perhaps from this latter aspect, and more particularly as an interpretation of the interaction of life and im-

agination in the work of an earlier generation with its implications of the programme of the present, that "The American Novel" will appeal to the reader. And from that point of view Mr. Van Doren's comment upon Howells, James, Mark Twain, Marion Crawford, the romanticists of the nineties, and the innovators of naturalism is especially illuminating.

Howells, "as an author so prolific during the sixty years between his earliest book and his latest that he amounts almost to a library in himself, as editor and critic so influential that he amounts almost to a literary movement," performed innumerable services for the American imagination. Among the greatest were his unceasing effort to direct it toward the actualities of American life and character, and his service as a transmitter of European culture. His devotion to the evenness of normal life, his "passionate love for the simple truth of human life, and a suspicion, a quiet scorn for those romantic dreams and exaggerations by which less contented lovers of life try to escape it," together with the methods of realism which Continental literature taught him, made him pre-eminently the transcriber of the manners and customs of American life in an age when life, as he viewed it, was still well-bred. "Not without some complaint," says Mr. Van Doren, "he nevertheless accepted the fate of writing largely for women—Boston women; he came to the decision that 'the more smiling aspects of life are the more American.' A subsequent critical generation has accused him of thus vitiating his practice while contending for a realistic precept. He dared for the sake of truthfulness to represent human beings in their 'habitual moods of vacancy and tiresomeness,' but was not willing to represent them in the hardly less habitual moods which make mankind so often illicit or savage or sordid. As a matter of fact he never consciously compromised, for he held that the lawless moods of men belong to those 'heroic or occasional phases' which he left to the romancers. His novels in effect pay an extraordinary compliment to civilization on its success with mankind." "His America," Mr. Van Doren says elsewhere, "transcribed so fully as it is, is still an America of the smooth surfaces. Great peaks of drama do not rise upon it; passion does not burrow into it nor adventure run over it with exciting speed. Not quite as a Puritan or pedant, Howells none the less employed a selective, a respectable, an official realism. He chose his subjects as a sage chooses his conversation, decently. To state these limitations is, however, to accuse Howells of nothing

worse than the uncommon sin of too much gentleness."

Between the light-hearted, crystalline Howells, dedicated to the transcription of gentility from its many gleaming facets, and the boisterous, somber, unconventional Mark Twain existed the gulf that lies between cultivated literary taste and personal energy spending itself largely in improvisation. Twain was by training a journalistic humorist of the sixties, which meant 'to make fun as fantastically as one liked, but never to rise to beauty; to be intensely shrewd but never profound; to touch pathos at intervals but never tragedy.' Twain faced "the contention in himself between his original nature, lyrical, explosive, boisterous, and the restraints which he accepted without much question from his fastidious wife and the classical-minded Howells. Between them the two contrived to repress some of his tendencies, those toward blasphemy, profanity, the wilder sorts of impossibility, and also toward satire and plain-speaking. How far he was shorn of real powers no one can say; one can say, however, that under these intenerating censors he moved from the methods which produced 'The Innocents Abroad' to those which produced 'Huckleberry Finn' and 'Joan of Arc.' In the last analysis Mr. Van Doren, although he implies a deficiency of both ideas and art, finds Mark Twain "easily chief of those who have worked with native materials in native ways."

In Henry James America had her most conscientious artist. If Howells was the apostle of realism exercised upon a life of which the outstanding quality was gentility, and Mark Twain the realistic interpreter of the dramatic aspects of American life in terms of the public taste of his day, James was, as Mr. Van Doren observes, "the laureate of leisure," the realist of a cosmopolitan society so exquisitely civilized, so delicately poised on an accepted decorum, so thoroughly integrated in a tradition of culture and art, as to be remote from reality as it is normally conceived. "James's essential limitation may rather accurately be expressed by saying that he attempted, in a democratic age, to write courtly romances." His work, says Mr. Van Doren, "suffers from the sensitiveness to national differences which kept him concerned too much with them and too little with the universal human likenesses which transcend nationality." His books lack the interest "of that kind of fiction which shows men and women making some kind of way in the world—except the interest which can be taken in the arts by which the penniless creep into the golden favor of the rich or the socially unrivaled wriggle into an envied caste." His is "the creator of a world immensely beautiful in its own right: a world of international proportions, peopled by

¹The American Novel. By Carl Van Doren. The Macmillan Company, New York. \$2.