

Humor and Sentiment

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LEFT to itself, the irresponsible spirit of levity, obviously individualistic, however contagious, inevitably honeycombs our seriousness—itself not generically suggestive of the "high seriousness" preached (at one epoch) to subsequent societies by Greek example. The Puritans and Plato differed temperamentally. And since the day of the Puritans, who individually often, and as "herd" on such occasions as meeting-house raisings, had plenty of the leaven of pure jollity, we have certainly not been prone to solemnity—save perhaps in the varieties of "solemn farce" which our frivolity is as prompt to produce as it is both quick to detect and ready to deride. Mockery of seriousness, indeed, is the staple basis of much of the humor in which—not too humorously, though in the language of "Shakespeare, our contemporary," as Stuart Sherman calls him—we "tell the world" we altogether excel it. Often the world's reply is practically in the austere words of Queen Victoria: "We are not amused." Occasionally, of course, our humorists do amuse it. When our pervasive, preponderant, national, and volatile humor is condensed, and—not to put too fine a point upon it—personified in an occasional personality, it indubitably "gets across" in the land of our ancestry, though, so far as I know, it has not yet invaded North Britain. But, except for its incarnation in these fortunate individuals with whose identity it so happily merges, the impression it leaves on the uncomprehending foreigner—not unnaturally indifferent to us as civilized, by reason of possessing and preferring a civilization of his own, and hence only interested in our exceptional "cases"—is more of a lack of solidity of character, a lack of seriousness of aim and temper, than of the kind of humor consistent with these qualities.

Those of us, in a word, whom foreigners can find "great fun" are generously appreciated—Artemus Ward in the London of his day, Mark Twain in the Oxford of ours—but, in the main, they are apathetic and no doubt sceptical as to the potential seriousness out of which the "great fun" they savor has issued. They would probably agree with Mr. Will Rogers declaring that he writes "for grown-ups with the child-mind," and assure him that in this respect he has among his countrymen no monopoly of the practice. In general, it is unfair to expect spectators to enjoy the game of which they do not know the rules. Nevertheless, national traits ought to be attractive, and, if they are not, those who possess them ought to ponder the fact and the explanation of it. Fitzjames Stephen, who wrote a mordant "examination" of Mill's philosophy with the title "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," a marked book of mid-Victorian polemic, was an ingrained Tory of the kind more easily forgotten than refuted. "We divide on other lines nowadays," as the economists say. But he has this to observe in his section on "Equality," which, at least on the *fas est ab hoste doceri* principle and by way of seeing ourselves as others see us, we might still usefully meditate:

The success of equality in America is due, I think, mainly to the circumstance that a large number of people who were substantially equal in all the more important matters, recognized that fact and did not set up unfounded distinctions. How far they are equal now, and how long they will continue to be equal when the population becomes dense, is quite another question. It is also a question which I cannot do more than glance at in two words in this place, whether the enormous development of equality in America, the rapid production of an immense multitude of commonplace, self-satisfied and essentially slight people is an exploit which the whole world need fall down and worship.

Plainly the Tory mind—that apparent incongruity, as it seems to-day to many—still has its standing in court. But of course I have quoted this passage for the

sake of the "two words" to-day most worth our attention. We can find reasons for self-satisfaction in being multitudinous and even, in Tory eyes and considering the Tory alternative, commonplace. But I confess it is difficult to be pleased with being found "essentially slight." Is it only because we are too touchy that we hesitate to acknowledge the modicum of truth there may be in the words—to exclaim *touchés*, so to speak—with candor equal to our critic's? On the whole, I think not. I think our touchiness itself, which is undeniable, is a mark of the immaturity that distinguishes us from older societies, and that if we seem "slight" it is not because we are essentially but because we are socially so. "Socially slight" we ought, perhaps, to own up to, and recognize the fact as a defect of our quality of individualism. With far more fraternity than some other peoples, is it not true that we get less out of our fraternizing?

A people may be considered happy, even fortunate (since the two so often merge), of which the bond consists in a temper so fundamentally sound as to be constitutionally serene, and so habitually unclouded as to devote much of its self-expression, when expressing itself socially, to running the gamut between good nature and high spirits. This at least saves it from the *accidia* detested of Dante—and the misfortune of having eminent Tories like Stephen. But socially speaking, I suppose the trait with which as a people we are best satisfied—to the point of saturation often—would be the humor least savored by others, save in the case of our star performers. We make, however, a radical mistake in conceiving it as intrinsically a social trait at all. We put it very generally and often very successfully (in the absence of other instruments) to social uses, sometimes indeed leaning on it heavily and working it hard. But if we take, as among the most discerning, the definition of Thackeray, "Humor is wit and love," or that of Anne Evans (not George Eliot, who has, however, admirable pages on the subject), "Thinking in fun while we feel in earnest," it is recognizable as first and most of all a personal matter. Wit, no doubt, is intrinsically social. It requires the reciprocity of others

viewing the subject, if only for the moment, in the same way and perhaps turning on it a new light. Beside it humor is spectacle; the social humorist plays a lone hand. And he is apt to forget Mr. Tarkington's caution: "There is one trouble with unflagging humor: it never flags."

Writing of his former aid in *The Nation* office of early days, John Richard Dennett, a literary critic of unsurpassed quality, the late E. L. Godkin declared: "He was a man to whom the ball of conversation was really a ball and not an anvil or a barrel of flour." That is, he was eminently a wit and, socially gifted, shared what he shone in and what he was, though quite otherwise than that arch-humorist, Falstaff, the cause of in others. However personally imaged and superscribed, wit is intrinsically current coin. Add love to it and it at once acquires the subjective tinge appropriating it to its author. Hence authorship rather than society is its congenial field. Though love be, in itself, one of the most powerful of social forces, alloyed with wit it singularizes and isolates the humorist—sometimes indeed insulating him if addicted to the anvil-and-barrel-of-flour habit, and to that extent disintegrating the social *entente*. Professional or lay, our humor in general is apt to decline into facetiousness, and facetiousness, though a distinct social force, is commonly exerted on a level too lowly to make very powerfully for distinction. Socially a lubricant rather than a factor, it fraternizes genially without much deepening fraternity or elevating the conversation—oftener perhaps versation—it characterizes. It betrays effort as often as it eases the strain it is, rather crudely, designed to relieve. As persiflage it is apt to be stock rather than spontaneous—in which case it is, to use the terms of trade significantly incorporated with our speech, less a social asset than a social liability.

In its broader social aspects humor is fatally devitalized by frivolity, and seriousness even in humor is impossible without depth of sentiment, real enough to be felt if not stressed enough to be salient. Exceptions if any prove the rule. A community whose humor is insipid might better be humorless, and is especially unfortunate if especially addicted to humorless humor. In our own case, though

often enough intellectually frivolous, its lack of seriousness oftenest springs from its lack of sentiment. In avoiding the attitude of the owl, it misses the thrill of the nightingale. The "love" that it adds to wit lacks depth—the quality that subtends nobility as elevation crowns it, and that in itself confers distinction. Molière, the incarnation of Meredith's "comic spirit," had, according to Stendhal, "more depth than other poets." In eschewing sentimentality we do not hesitate to weaken sentiment—and not in humor only, but all along the line of thought and expression. If we gain in truth, in good sense, in the disposition to look the facts in the face, in fortitude—and it is perhaps one of our illusions, because it is too unquestioningly one of our convictions, that we do—nevertheless only sentiment can be relied on to rescue us from the literal, æsthetically one of the intrinsic foes of distinction, as indeed it is of the comic spirit—save as, in Labiche, for instance, supplying this with some of its choicest material.

One of our literary worthies whom with the lapse of time desuetude has, not altogether innocuously, retired to the higher and least molested shelves of the libraries is Washington Irving. Perhaps "The Sketch-Book" is no longer quite adapted for bedside, nor "Knickerbocker" for sociable, reading, and their author properly a classic mainly in accordance with Signor Pococurante's characterization. Nevertheless, as Sainte-Beuve said of Lamartine, "he was important to *us*," and it is a pity that, whatever his vitality, it lacked the force adequate to make it viable, for the link with which he attached us to a great humoristic tradition was so evenly welded of both wit and love as could but have a salutary suggestiveness for the literature that begins with him, and now in Dennett's phrase "remembers" him "as forgotten." But in spite of his failure in permanent influence, the memory of his undeniable distinction, and of how well it served his country in his day, remains all the more salient to the reader who is anything of a bookman, and his distinction is largely due to the blend just noted. I suppose no one ever wrote of him without saying that his works were "distinguished by humor

and sentiment"—meaning substantially Thackeray's more analytical definition. And if his practice had had the force of his procedure it would doubtless have stimulated in many of our jesters the element of seriousness needed to make them "important to us," as well as amusing, by determining our literary taste in the direction of distinction rather than of relaxation. Too much tickling leaves us helpless. Its "irresistibility" paralyzes response to the elementary invitation familiarly expressed in the time-honored formula: "Brace up and have some style about you." The gods, as we know, laughed inextinguishably, but they extended no such Olympian privilege to mortals, for whom, indeed, as a rule, they arranged but meagre occasion for its exercise, feeling no doubt that they would be prone to abuse it.

However, our humorists can hardly be held altogether responsible for the short life and other shortcomings of our humor. Its irresponsibility, in fact, is largely what we find irresistible in it. It is our social immaturity that insists on confining it to shooting as it flies the folly that does not fly far or long without suggesting to more developed taste the wisdom of the poet's further prescription, to "vindicate the ways of God to man." It is the extravagant—the outré, the rococo—taste of the time that, amply repaying this restricted practice, evokes little of stronger wing; save satire which may be as savage, and burlesque which may be as extravagant, as it likes. And if our humor favors the divorce of those classic inseparables, "laughter and tears," wit with us, not content to banish sentiment, shows a marked disposition to burlesque it. The most distinguished example of this is, of course, Mr. Erskine's "The Private Life of Helen of Troy"—material classic enough, one might contend, to claim more strictly humorous alloy; Molière, for example, rather than Meilhac. And even "La Belle Hélène," though deliciously diverting, is less disillusioning in being more irrational. But we deduce rules from masterpieces rather than the other way round. This one is as brilliantly as—if such a thing ever happens—it is unprecedentedly, successful in applying the terminology of one time to the material of another

in order to exhibit our own traits by what Master Penrod Schofield would felicitously call "the main and simple" expedient of emptying a time-honored legend of the sentiment that has heretofore made it august. Is "Helen" satire only, or is it also sense? The author leaves it to us to decide. I wish sometimes he hadn't, but that is precisely the effect he is rubbing his hands over so relentlessly producing. And in any case the result is literature, and, in virtue of its contemporary truth, in spite of its burlesque, must rank as comedy—comedy, besides, showing that burlesque may be exquisite as well as broad. Like all original masterpieces, it seems to establish as well as to invent its type—Shaw without perversity, Gilbert Platonized.

In less distinguished hands, it is true, the type is unlikely to be utilized on the same plane. Variants may conceivably vulgarize it. One such has been thought to, Miss Anita Loos's marvel of gaiety, "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes." Being the self-portrait of a "gold-digger," it may be considered to "sink with its subject," as Arnold considered that in the sense in which "a Dutch painter" did, Homer did not. But if talent is to "catch manners as they rise," to cite Pope once more, it is simply dull to confound the material with the method which in Miss Loos's hands is all the more obviously objective for being ostensibly self-revelation. The type of her heroine is certainly an accredited one from the realistic point of view, and if it is treated too lightly for realistic veraciousness, to exact literal realism of farce is literalism. The aptness of baseness for burlesque may be argued, but here the absurdity of the characters' view of baseness is fundamental, as well as dominant in the treatment. The treatment surely is too light to sink with the subject in any case, and, since it would be idiotic to call it misleading, one may concentrate on it as the sole point of the book, and enjoy in enviable relaxation the art of a truly imaginative talent.

It is to be remarked all the same of this delightfully considered trifle, as of Mr. Erskine's really magisterial performance, that its only dealing with sentiment is to deflate it. Both rank with wit rather than with the humor of which sentiment is as

normal an ingredient as wit, and, whatever our deficiency in sentiment, no one would say that we overdo wit, or that it would not be an excellent thing if such examples as the foregoing were less exceptional with us. In so far as Thackeray's definition of humor holds, wit is as essential to humor as love. It is, as I said, eminently social, but a mark of a mature rather than an undeveloped society, indeed a development rather than a fundamental force of concert. The anchorite may conceivably be witty but only potentially, though he might often yearn for the society he foregoes. It is possible that we are on the verge of a general efflorescence of wit in consequence of denuding our humor of sentiment. But we may perhaps more reasonably hope to experience a renaissance of our native sentiment earlier than the development on any noteworthy scale of an accomplishment that is intrinsically a social plant of slow growth.

Much deeper than the stratum of sentiment associated with either wit or humor, of course, lie the most powerful springs of concerted action. Fundamentally personal as well as human, these have their intimate side and belong in that borderland of thought and feeling where the individual and the social overlap each other. For all their wide-spreading and far-reaching radiation they are, as Thackeray says, "of their nature sacred and secret and not to be spoken of save to Heaven and the one ear alone," the religion, in a word, which is love (and not theology), and the love which is religion (and not Shelley's "sad satiety"). Considered as social forces, they are naturally to be considered strictly as the sentimental springs of action and not in the gross as all the action itself that springs from them; forces to be controlled and utilized to the end of social ideality, and precisely *not* suffered to obsess the individual into the fanatic in the one case, or the sensualist in the other. As such forces they cannot be too intelligently respected. And since we are, as a race, fundamentally and traditionally sentimental, it can hardly be that our sentiment, intelligently reviewed and rationalized, will not ultimately reappear.

Nothing, indeed, marks the present time as a transitional one more than the

circumstance that it so generally minimizes religion out of its pristine potency as a cultural agency, and magnifies love so extravagantly out of recognition as it does so often, to judge by the mass of our fiction and the criticism whose spirit this fiction quite o'ercrows. Active religion, it is true, must have some theology, that of having very little, however, having long since affirmed itself as the wisest; and love rightly conceived as the leaving of self must at least realize the self as left. In fact, under no secular ministrations so much as those of the spirit of society, in so many ways consonant with those of the churches, being essentially hostile to animality as to other barbarian traits, is this latter result in all its manifestations likely to be attained. Enough of one's neighbors if not always producing altruism is bound to impair the sense of superiority. And altruism *à deux* has always been accounted in a sort a religious variant, exaltation in youth and in age consecration. Pursuit of the subject to its sexual fastnesses may with propriety be left to such cheery prophets of Baal as, perhaps convinced that, in the brave words of Henley's *ballade*,

"Fate's a fiddler, life's a dance,"

are apparently quite as much inclined to study its occult origins in those strongholds as to follow it into the open country of its sentimental development, present and historic, where, more highly differentiated, it deserves even more attention, and where the social influences of sentiment may be remarked by the least observant and most inexpert. Sentiment, indeed—in spite of the unsentimental Napoleon's very natural promotion of the imagination to the position and in spite of current coldness to its claims—may still be regarded as, fundamentally, the ruler of the idealistic section of the world. At any rate, more than any other force, it serves to unite the people that inhabit it. "The mass of common men," says one of the most uncommon, "live and move"

"Tricked in disguises, alien to the rest,"

as well as to themselves,

"... and yet
The same heart beats in every human breast."

The misfortune is that so many breasts are inhuman, and for this the humanism breathed by the spirit of social sentiment is plainly a fitting remedy. Its office is to introduce these "aliens" to each other and—oh! especially—to themselves.

Little news nowadays escapes the newspapers. One of the least sensational, weighing Victorian values in the same spirit of catholic comprehension that marks, say, Professor Osborn's attitude toward the men of the Old Stone Age, informs its readers that the Victorians "derived a certain cultural value from their religion independent of its dogmas," adding as of equal moment, "their handwriting may have been similarly an influence toward fine thoughts." Evidently there were enough "fine thoughts" around in those days to need accounting for, and at present the sociologist is abroad. But the "cultural value" that the Victorians admittedly "derived from their religion" is, after all, more memorable than their handwriting. Their religion, it need hardly be recalled, so recent is the Victorian epoch, was the Christian religion, an ancient cultus persisting well into our own day. At least it was but a short time ago that "the Fall of Christianity" was casually referred to as a recent event by the college paper of a secular institution originally devoted to the upholding of that faith as yielding the most desirable of "cultural values." Certainly no antiquarian research is needed to discover the fact that the cultural value of Christianity apart from its dogmas did not await our day to receive quite general recognition.

It inspired, indeed, in the seventies of the last century a general cultural and religious "movement." The most spiritually devoted, if not the most poetically polished or the most intellectually vigorous, of English poets of that era, as well as the soundest and most abidingly significant of its English prose-writers, crowned his career by the exposition, in a remarkable series of books, of precisely this gospel. Of these books the author deemed "Literature and Dogma" the most important he had written. Some years after its publication he issued it in

a cheap edition that it might reach the widest possible public. So clearly did he present and so closely did he argue its attractive thesis as essential at once to the culture and to the religion to the promulgation of which he had devoted his life, that his figure may be regarded as personifying it in the Victorian pantheon. The natural truth of Christianity apart from its formal apologetics, prophetic, miraculous, and metaphysical; the interpretation of the secret and method of its Founder; the disentanglement of its chief apostle from its traditional theology; the religious use and worth of the Bible read as literature, and its rejection as the dogma for which it was in nowise designed; the point of view expressed in his observation that the best part of religion is its unconscious poetry, and his definition of religion as morality touched with emotion—all these tenets of Matthew Arnold's spiritual message to his generation have very largely become the very texture of the religious thinking and feeling of our time. He made his readers feel that to neglect religion was the most fundamental of mistakes, the crudest of blunders, that to be irreligious was not only to lose the finest experiences of which the mind, the heart, the soul were capable, but was also to be secularly uneducated. His religious writings were in fact part, and the culminating part, of the long educational campaign, co-extensive with his mature life, and consecrated, as it were, to the service of culture as an element of civilization.

And they are as timely to-day as ever. For among the ironies of the present time, which conceives civilization in other terms, will perhaps hereafter be accounted the loss of spiritual sentiment that has accompanied the appreciable contraction of Christianity within the confines of its own humanitarianism. Through this concentration the religion of the heart, of the broken and contrite heart, which had once melted the world open to the supreme arraignment that "its heart was stone," seems itself losing its hold on the sensibility it had itself evoked. Suffering this to subside into the practical service it can render to its neighbor, it turns once more to the Gentiles, this time not to convert but to merge with them, to dwell in their tents, worship their gods, and participate

in their mysteries, satisfying the while its own spiritual needs in augmenting their material welfare.

The poets, perhaps more than ever to-day, still sing, or prose or perorate, of their own, so that even outside the churches the tradition of the soul's existence is still kept alive. But its ecstasies are experienced far from what it used to deem its "home," and expressed more and more perfunctorily—save when complicated with physical phases:

"Oh! then a longing like despair
Is to their farthest caverns sent."

And the soul's ascendancy has greatly dwindled. The decline of concern as to its future has quite naturally diminished interest in its fate, but it is not due to the liberalizing of theology so much or so specifically as to the decline of religious sentiment that its nourishment, its development, its ennobling, its elevation are neglected. The God of Love, succeeding to the God of Justice, has had a shorter reign and has certainly less compelled attention. Sociologically, we are enjoying the fruits sprung from the seed of its stimulus, but as society in general we know less and less that spiritual communion with the Source which renews through sentiment the sense of duty, the strength of will, the serenity of soul that mark the inner life—the sentiment of a supreme attachment to the good, which vitalizes truth and beauty and which, however mysteriously it steals into the breast, once there and fairly tested, approves itself as the acme of salutary inspiration.

For this communion, as natural and accessible to-day as ever to any reflective mind, one would say that the tradition of Oriental, literary, approximative, poetic terminology might still serve without unduly taxing the powers of the normal imagination, or arousing the hostility of the literal-minded. The text-books of the churches are still usable—by the liberal as well as the literary. Creeds are, very likely, as Sir Leslie Stephen remarked, "expiring of explanation," but why should their associated sentiment vanish with them? What is not expiring is Christianity, which has had a long experience in surviving creeds. Emerson hardily avers,

"One accent of the Holy Ghost,
The heedless world hath never lost."

Creeds that had expired, of explanation or of anything else, said perhaps as little to Stephen's father-in-law as to himself. Yet who can find artificiality or excess in the sentiment recorded by Doctor John Brown in describing a walk near Edinburgh taken by Thackeray with two friends one winter evening at sunset?

"Corstorphine Hill with its trees and rocks," he says, "lay in the heart of this pure radiance; and there a wooden crane, used in the granary below, was so placed as to assume the figure of a cross; there it was, unmistakable, lifted up against the crystalline sky. All three gazed at it silently. As they gazed Thackeray gave utterance in a tremulous, gentle, and rapid voice to what all were feeling, in the word 'Calvary.' The friends walked on in silence, and then turned to other things. All that evening he was very gentle and serious, speaking, as he seldom did, of divine things—of death, of sin, of eternity, of salvation, expressing his simple faith in God and in his Saviour."

Of course speaking of "divine things" upon such slight provocation as that, or of those particular divine things at all, would occur to few artists in the "finer art" of our modern fiction. They concern very remotely some of the "beautiful happenings" of which, inferentially, Mr. Cabell declares it to be the true artist's ambition "to write perfectly." Thackeray, to be sure, wrote perfectly in the opinion of Carlyle, who wrote otherwise often enough to be deemed an impartial judge. But his feeling for divine things, though he certainly wrote about others, would no doubt have prevented him from following lovingly in the footsteps of the Jurgens of romance, adding, like the wife of the Arabian genie with her string of rings, tokens of beautiful happenings one after the other, till the reader of the perfectly written record becomes haunted by a sense of coming doom, and describes in the distance the avenging figure of the original old crone incompatible with any more beautiful happenings. Thackeray's sentiment, however, even his religious sentiment—not vulgarized, as Doctor John Brown intimates, by being worn on his sleeve—undoubtedly tinges his fiction, and illustrates, one would say, not only the serviceability of sentiment, even the sentiment of divine things, to the art that is in any vital sense "criticism of life" (rather

than the circumscribed topography of its Gin Lanes and other fairer though, even realistically considered, scarcely more promising regions), but also the compatibility of this powerful agent of distinction with emancipation from creeds that can be called expiring. As to historicity problems, their history is strewn with failures from failing to recognize what Stuart Sherman sums up in a sentence, pointing out that for every one to-day the Founder of Christianity is "as a spiritual force what 'the Christian ages' have made him."

Why, to recur to our anecdote, need taking the "exemplary" rather than either the "sacrificial" or a "scientific" view of the Life that closed on Calvary, impair the sentiment which unites those who feel its force? What better serves the cause of distinction in common than the fervor that inspires action from the point of view of action at its best? All right conduct, in fact,—in "scientific fact," indeed, if psychology is still a science according to which the will is energized only by the susceptibility—is dependent upon sentiment. And, in the vivid and veracious words of Froude, "the moral life of man is like the flight of a bird in the air. He is sustained only by effort and when he ceases to exert himself he falls." Does he no longer "fall"? Does he no longer know, or sense, what "falling" is? Has the point of view, on which in all fields so much depends as to be practically everything, shifted radically, fundamentally? Has the counsel to sinners "not to look too much at their own sins," much in vogue with exponents of the "miracle of grace," proved imprudent? Is all such elementary spiritual enlightenment bound up with belief in Mosaic cosmology and the legendary element in Christian apologetics? Does the eternally repeated failure of mankind to systematize the phenomena of man's clearest consciousness, his highest thought and deepest feeling, impeach the phenomena themselves as unreal?

At all events the ineradicable sentiment, the enduring power of which is amply attested by these successive, however unsuccessful, efforts themselves, is too profound an influence, too prodigious a power, to be at the mercy of the phases of speculation, metaphysical or scientific,

regarding its historic dogma and doctrine. The inexperienced in the things of the spirit, unsteeped in the elevated tradition in which spiritual things are involved—and which they endue with a special dignity among the elements of universal history—may break with the tradition's substance as they come to perceive the unsoundness of its incrustations. But only a mind empty and swept, no doubt, and quite ready for the seven other devils worse than the first, but surely not garnished in the best of taste, could contest the supremacy of the soul; an Italian old master has painted Santa Maria dei Pazzi with a convincing countenance, in which the vacant mind in nowise veils the shining saintliness of the saint. Why should culture cool toward the essence of the Christian tradition, and civilization forego its cementing power, because its formularies are discovered to have been perforce figuration? There is nothing figurative, it is true, about science, but if some day it gives us the new God that it has been suggested it possibly may, the more scientific he—or it—proves to be, the more finite he must be also. The infinite can be but one of our adumbrations, but the soul can feel it—has indeed always known it as felt and felt it as real. Miss Rebecca West, whose gospel is inspiringly irenic, thinks that to “let people do what they like” may ultimately result in “saving the next Christ from crucifixion.” “The next Christ” will doubtless in common gratitude take advantage of the system which is to spare him Calvary to avoid Gethsemane also, as well as much else in the experience of the Predecessor assigned him. He will hardly echo Emerson's belief that

“’Tis man's perdition to be safe
When for the truth he ought to die,”

but should he follow Emerson's further suggestion for “the crisis of existence,” “See that you hold yourself fast by the intellect,” he will certainly neither speak nor think of himself in the terms of Miss West's characterization. Indeed, if he arrives at his eminence *via* the road she specifies, he will perhaps prove to be the reincarnation of Doctor Pangloss and think unimprovable a world which, able to do what it likes as he finds it, can need

little done for its redemption. Otherwise, he will probably agree with the hard-headed Huxley that, “It is when a man can do as he pleases that his troubles begin,” and may compassionately suggest a few “inhibitions.”

The subsidence of sin in the contemporary consciousness has been noted with professional competence by Dean Inge, as doubtless by others, but is obvious enough to laic observation. The general consciousness is now no longer made cowardly by conscience but vigorously supported by a conviction of self-righteousness deeper if less distressing than the “conviction” experience of the erstwhile camp-meeting victim. But the acquisition of our conscienceless sinlessness must have been attended by a less exacting conception of sinlessness itself. Naturally this would not have been the last to go of our yesterday's ideals so conspicuously flown, automatically leaving confidence in their stead in taking, as alleged, hypocrisy with them. Other ideals must have atrophied one of which the sentiment has been submerged if indeed the idea has not been destroyed: the ideal of perfection “in thought, word, and deed,” sounds now as priggish as it always appeared unattainable—though as an ideal losing none of its sanctions for that, and remaining the “mark” of a “high calling” in which “not failure but low aim is crime.”

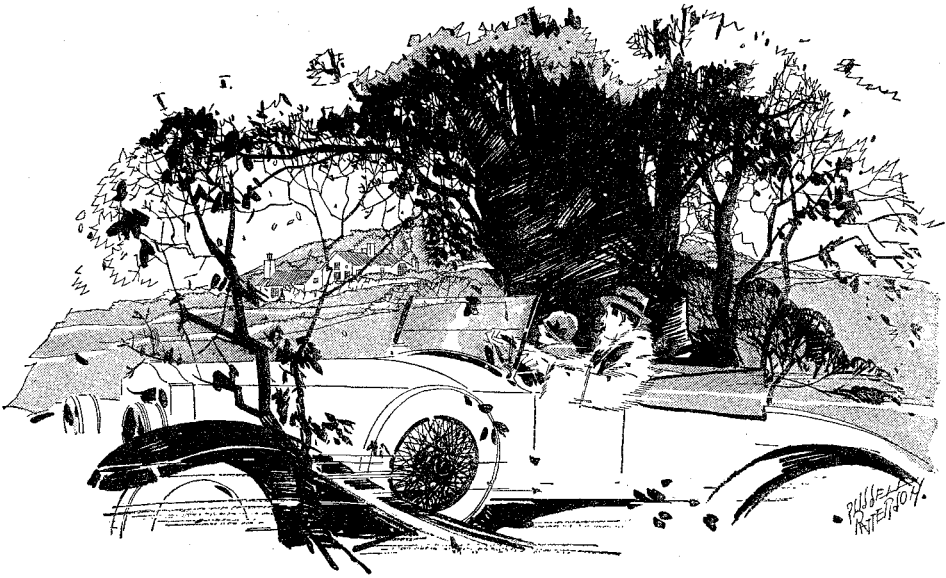
In the secular field, to be sure, its insufficiency in connection with “low aim” was sometimes felt even in Victorian times. A half-century ago the sentimentality of the painter Bouguereau was odious to many, in spite of a technical “pattern” whose “rhythm” should endear it to to-day and may yet place Bouguereau beside the resuscitated Ingres. In a French skit of the time he was prefigured as an applicant at the gate of Paradise, announced by Saint Peter and his name inquired by the Père Eternel. “*Seigneur*,” replied the celestial Cerberus, “he gives no name. He says he is *la perfection même*.” “Oh!” rejoined the Père Eternel, “*ça doit être cet animal de Bouguereau*.” He must come in, I suppose.” But the moral field was felt to have different standards. Smugness there had more misgivings and aroused more

distrust. And if there was more of it than at present, its self-satisfaction was the reward of more of such effort as conformity calls for—at worst even the effort of sustained humbug—and less of feeling superior through no effort at all. “Our fallen human nature” is doubtless at the bottom of both these equivalent states, but the Victorians knew what to do about that. They could depend on “the miracle of grace,” which was no delusion. But it involved a “cleansing” of the heart more drastic than the spontaneous smugness of to-day feels it needful to undertake.

The sense of sin depends ultimately on sentiment—powerfully aided by the intelligence and more specifically by a good memory. Nothing could be more intellectually serious or more deeply serious, more truly “high seriousness.” How the antique world got around its accountability for incurring the divine displeasure which it seems to have confined itself so largely to placating, remains to the Christian a standing if enviable mystery. The sense of sin has been lacking in modern times, too, of course, in very salient examples, though until lately not generally replaced by the sense of righteousness. It is disastrously lacking in Voltaire, for instance, whose intelligence else a miracle, lacking it, led him as a historian to despise without comprehending the one ancient people who eminently possessed it, as well as in his own case to be complacently content with what Scherer, grounded himself in “Hebraism,” calls “a pitiful character.” Were it not for our deficiency in sentiment, it would be curious that even the term sin should be so closely associated with the theology of a former day—curious that morality should have, so to say, lost touch with emotion, elsewhere so much vaunted; that social ethics should have so largely replaced personal morality; and that, accordingly, sin must be transformed into crime to receive the attention it could once so safely count on.

No doubt theology—based on a mythology which, after its primitive fashion, materialized the soul’s experience, as the Greek mythology did that of the mind—

has played a large part in both developing and distorting the sense in question. But it requires no very subtle scrutiny to discern in its terms the expression belonging to their time of truths still to be experientially attested as amply by reflection as heretofore deemed to be by revelation. Such expression, moreover, was manifestly charged with and appealed to that shade of emotion which, become permanent, we call sentiment, and which led the soul to confess its imperfections and feel the need of a forgiveness for its errors that, if fairly fastidious, it found it hard itself to supply. Endless renewals of this alternation kept it, in Goethe’s words, “tenderly unmanned,” and through a continuously exerted force of feeling sustained its level of aspiration as a lasting condition. The theology of the camp-meeting was certainly more sketchy, and the “conviction of sin” that it secured less abiding, largely because the emotion it evoked was not sentiment but ecstasy—now much to the fore in other fields of “life and art.” Excitement is no friend to piety, which, though often called fervent, is eminently not fever. The “Revival of Religion” that President Eliot found in the aftermath of the war probably differs advantageously from many that have preceded it, and one might wish there were more of it, or indeed more evidence of it. On the whole, from the purely secular point of view it is singular that so much religion should have been swept away with the altogether reasonable, even if minimizing, liberalizing of theology; and, fundamentally, it can only be ascribed to the minimizing of sentiment characteristic of a pragmatic age which, thus losing its religion with its theology, relies on custom and wont for its standards of personal morality. Personal morality becomes, accordingly, an affair of conduct guided by such social requirements as, whatever different success they achieve, leave the soul to wither. Such an attitude, moreover, however unimpeachably secular, cannot be described as intelligently detached, save by those sufficiently complacent to be satisfied with a soulless civilization.



She looked across the sweeping pastures to where a long stone house showed through the autumn foliage.
—Page 280.

Man's Estate

BY MORRIS GRAY, JR.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RUSSELL PATTERSON



SMART country costume of green knitted stuff, narrow brown shoes, highly polished, and her hat was right. Nora Wynne regarded her reflection with approval. Sons noticed these things, she knew. They liked to have their mothers well turned out—a credit to them. Smiling, she looked down at the photograph on her dressing-table, a small boy in an Eton collar, with dark curly hair. It had stood there ever since the time, so soon after her husband's death, when she had taken Peter to the school for the first time and left him, with such a horrible empty feeling, to the abstract justice of men and strange hard-eyed little boys. She had been lonely, of course. But he was in the sixth form now. Next year he would be in college and coming home for the week-ends, and perhaps

later they could travel for a year before he settled down to business or the law.

As she looked out at the bright sky above the housetops, Nora Wynne felt very content. Captain of the team, and a perfect day for him—his day, the day of the big game. And they would have a little time together afterward. Jim would not hurry her off. Jim Edgerton. . . . It would be pleasant to motor out with Jim. It was his old school, too, and perhaps for her sake and Peter's he had professed for it a reawakened enthusiasm. He was such a good fellow, Jim, so simple and direct. What a bulwark he had been when Gordon died. And ever since so stanch—always the same. Why couldn't she—? But what was the use of going over that again and again. Simply, she didn't want to.

The bell sounded down-stairs, a loud sharp ring, and Mrs. Wynne gathered up her gloves and a heavy coat. Edger-