

RELIGION IN RECENT AMERICAN NOVELS.

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Though the matter of religion is one of the most powerful elements in personal life, it is exceedingly difficult to handle in fiction. If treated in a bungling fashion it is first cousin to cant—if handled lightly it smacks of irreverence; yet, since it is, whether one realizes it or not, the controlling motive in life, it should have a larger place in our novels. George Eliot, free-thinker as she was, appreciated the tremendous possibilities of the spiritual life as literary material and wrote of religious experiences as few writers have ever done. She builded better than she knew and we look past her own blind doubt to the unfaltering faith of Dinah Morris or the selfless service of Daniel Deronda and others of her Christian characters.

Of late men are coming to have a truer conception of their duty to God and to man and this deepening note is echoed in the fiction that is being written in America to-day. This keener moral consciousness makes us more eager to know what God wishes of us and to do His will. Our novels deal less with creeds than with deeds, which, after all, are the best expression of faith. By that it is meant that there is little denominational recrimination, but an effort to illustrate by life what the Bible really teaches. We see indeed that the Kingdom of Heaven is within us and that a man's religion may not be separated from his life.

This sense of deeper moral consciousness is admirably and realistically depicted in many of the short stories of the present day in America. Thomas Nelson Page has a whole volume of such typical and suggestive narratives collected under the title, *The Land of the*

Spirit; David Grayson's *Adventures in Friendship* and *Adventures in Contentment* are little sermons on the bringing of religion into daily life. Henry Van Dyke's short stories are essentially religious. Margaret Deland in her tales centering round Old Chester and the beloved old minister, Dr. Lavendar, teaches many truths of moral power. Her *Many Waters* depicts the supreme struggle that takes place in a man's soul as to whether he shall preserve his reputation or his character. He has committed a great wrong, has stolen trust funds left in his care and perjured himself in denial of the crime, so that the time comes when he must either confess and make restitution or blight his soul by continued falsehood. Through the love of his wife, who would rather that her husband should go to prison if need be than that he should stultify his soul, he conquers himself and follows the right. Many other examples might be mentioned, but it is in the novel that the most pronounced religious material is found at the present time.

The Inside of the Cup, by Winston Churchill, is an interesting and complex study of modern church life and might be called an American version of *Robert Elsmere*. It takes its title from the Bible,—“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter but within they are full of extortion and excess.” The book relates the experiences of the Reverend John Hodder, Episcopal minister, rector of a fashionable and ultra-conservative city church, and deals chiefly with the marked changes which his religious beliefs undergo. It has been severely denounced by some as destructive to faith, and lauded by others as a courageous expression of modern freedom of religious thought. The work undoubtedly contains much that is sincere and true, but also much that is too radical and extreme for those who believe in the Bible to accept.

Baptists will agree with John Hodder in rejecting the idea that the church on earth has external and imposed

authority over the souls of men, with power to forgive sin, and will sympathize with his feeling that the proof of Apostolic Succession is not really vital to Christian life. Baptists will have no difficulty in appreciating his refusal to condone the extortions and excesses of his church-members, even of wealthy vestry-men. For a leader in the church to own and lease property for vicious purposes then lay his ill-gotten gains on the altar is unthinkable, and John Hodder does right to forbid it. Baptists will likewise endorse the young pastor's wish to have the pews in his church free of rent, to welcome the strangers, and to admit the poor on the same basis as the rich. And his ambition that the church of Christ should be a democratic organization where every member has a voice in the control of affairs, sounds very Baptist. Likewise his conviction that infant baptism and confirmation do not of themselves constitute salvation, that many church members are unregenerate because they have not felt the personal change of heart necessary to redemption, is doctrine quite familiar and reasonable. His burning belief that the church should go actively out to where the poor, the neglected, the sinful and the despised are living in ignorance of God and seek to bring them to Him, and that religion should be made a vital fact in man's life, is worthy of high praise. In many respects John Hodder has the true shepherd-heart and he seems sincere, though his beliefs sometimes go far afield.

In his zeal to be abreast of the times in thought the young pastor throws over-board many of the fundamental truths of the Bible. One cannot see the logic—despite his long and agitated arguments—of his sudden loss of faith in the Virgin birth of Christ, the actual inspiration of the Bible, the validity of miracles, Christ's Resurrection and the Atonement, as set forth in the Scriptures. He comes to believe in divorce and thinks remarriage permissible. He is lax in certain points in

his own conduct, as for instance on one occasion he is seen in a restaurant of doubtful character, drinking champagne with a young woman whose reputation, is alas, *not* doubtful. True, he is seeking to save her soul—but why the champagne? And in another instance when he is indulging in an ecstasy concerning the woman he loves, the author says: “Never had his experience known such communion. What need of religion, of faith in an unseen order, when *this* existed? To have this woman in the midst of chaos would be enough!”

The character of John Hodder is a problematic one and his religious philosophy is such a curious mixture of sincerity and pseudo-scientific theorizing that one cannot safely follow him far in belief, though there is much that is admirable in his creed and in his deeds. The author, Winston Churchill, tells his readers that Mr. Hodder’s solution of religion coincides with his own, *so far as he has been able to work one out.*

The theme of *A Certain Rich Man*, by William Allen White, is that of gains and losses. It is really a sermon from the text “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” John Barclay is a man whose life centers round the greed for money and power. He covets power because it brings him more money, and longs for money because it brings him more power. He organizes trusts, ruthlessly ruins his competitors, be they friends or foes, corrupts legislation and buys senators and judges as if they were cattle. He betrays his boyhood chum for a few thousand dollars; he sells the sister of his dead sweetheart into a loveless marriage to save her old father from imprisonment for *forgery he has made him commit*; he sees the friends of his childhood suffer from poverty when he has uncounted millions at his disposal. By a trick of graft he forces a poisoned water-supply upon his town and his own wife dies of typhoid fever, while he compels his daughter to

give up the man she loved because he will not perjure himself to save her father from just indictment.

Yet he has, somewhere in his make-up, what passes for a heart, and finally he counts up the balance and sees the empty gain, the piteous loss of his life. The old mother, whose heart has been wrung by his life of greed comes to him in this crisis and says, "The time has come when we must talk this thing out soul to soul. Why don't you let Him in, John?"

"Let who in?" asks her son.

"You know Whom, John Barclay. You know, my boy! Don't you remember me bending over the town wash-tub when you were a child, Johnnie? Don't you remember the old song I used to sing as I rubbed the clothes on the board: *Let Him in, He is your friend; He will keep you to the end—let Him in!* Of course you remember it, boy, and you have been fighting Him with all your might. The fight is driving you crazy.

"What a tower of Babel, an industrial Babel, you are building, John, you and your kind. The last century gave us Schopenhauers and Kants, all denying God, and this one gives us its Iron Kings and Railroad Kings and Wheat Kings, all by their works proclaiming that Mammon has the power and the glory and the kingdom.

"Oh, my little boy that I nursed on my breast, let Him in! He is your friend."

In this struggle between the material and the spiritual "the eternal *yes* rushes through his reason like a great wind." He opens the doors of his heart and God's pardon and peace encompass him. For years he has been unable to shed a tear, save in anger, but now he weeps unrestrainedly, and lifting his wet face upward he cries, "Oh, Mother! I feel like a little child!"

And in that spirit he begins to make restitution for a life-time of greed.

The conflict between right and wrong is waged in other hearts besides John Barclay's. Neal Ward must

give testimony against the father of the girl he loves and thereby lose her or turn coward and run away or perjure himself. His father says to him, "Oh, little boy, little boy, can't you see that the same God who has put this trial upon you will see you through it? And that if you fail in this your soul will be crippled for life? No matter what you get in return for your soul you will lose in the bargain? Can't you see it, Nealie, can't you see it? All my life I have been trying to live that way and I have tried to make you see it so that you would be ready for some trial like this!"

The young man fights the thing out in his own soul and wins, writing to the girl he loves, giving her up. "By all the faith I have been taught in a God, I am forced to do this thing. If I loved you less I would take you for this life alone and sell my soul for you. But I want you for an eternity and in that eternity I want to bring you an unsoiled soul. And so,—good-bye."

In gracious contrast to John Barclay is Dr. V. Vivian, the central figure in Henry Sydnor Harrison's new novel, *V. V.'s Eyes*. This book is one of the strongest American novels of recent years. Dr. Vivian is not the hero of conventional romance,—no predatory plutocrat is he, no swash-buckling knight, no amorous swain coveting his neighbor's wife, no self-seeking politician. Quite the contrary. He is a little, obscure, lame doctor, with a Christ-like conception of the relative values of life and an uncomfortable belief that people ought to do the right thing even though it is hard.

He looks upon the world with eyes saddened by the suffering he sees, yet shining with the unconquerable faith that "everybody is good" and would do the right if his duty were made plain to him. When he sees the factory-owners housing their workers in death-traps, he asks himself what John the Baptist would say, and then he becomes a voice crying in the slums for industrial and social repentance. Yet in spite of his fierce fervor he is

really all love, so selfless that he gives his days and nights to service without pay—nay, often supplying the needs of his patients from his own slender purse and taking the clothes off his back to give to a drunken tramp. His eyes, ever wistful that one should do right, trustingly pleading that in spite of obstacles and hardships one will do the honest, the just thing, stab through and through the self-seeking and pride of others and strangely win them to their own best selves. As the tramp says of him, “D’you think there’s any way to preach to man, like just being better than he is?”

And when, in helping others he loses his life, we see how blessedly he has saved it. He has asked for nothing for himself, not even love, yet see, “a great company, men and women, old and young, silent beneath a window; and somewhere among them the sound of persistent weeping. He was much loved because he loved much. Cally turned her veiled face toward Pond and spoke indistinctly, ‘All these * * * Are they all * * * his friends?’

There sprang a light into the Director’s hawk-like eyes, changing his whole look wonderfully.

‘They are his mother,’ he said, ‘and his brothers and his sisters.’”

The Calling of Dan Matthews, by Harold Bell Wright, is a novel which is in essence a satire against the church, her membership, her methods and her motives. It is understood that Mr. Wright was at one time a minister in the Christian (or Campbellite) Church and one wonders if this book is to be regarded as an *Apologia pro Vita Sua*, his excuse for leaving the ministry. The satire in the book is of a narrow and prejudiced type which sneers while it condemns and offers no constructive suggestion of helpfulness or reform. According to this novel, we are to consider the church an organization composed of fawning sycophants or selfish hypocrites, the ministry made up of men who dare not call their souls their own, and who spend their time laboring for their own ad-

vancement rather than for the cause of Christ. It is not a case where the hungry sheep look up and are not fed, but the pews as well as the pulpit are filled with ravening wolves. An honest man who has entered the ministry through ignorance can save his manhood only by escaping at the earliest opportunity.

Dan Matthews, though saying that he feels that God has called him to preach the gospel, becomes discouraged because of obstacles and difficulties and leaves the church to take up the noble work of developing a mine. Was it in such spirit that Mr. Wright quit preaching to produce best-sellers? It is to wonder.

According to this book, the Ally, alias the Devil, hovers near the church and is present at every meeting. He delights in the fairs and bazaars which the women hold in the name of religion, he smiles upon the dishonest deacon who loudly leads in prayer and he is in the front of every religious convention. The characters in the book with whom the writer shows sympathy are, save for the accidental minister, those who openly sneer at the church. The author does not seem to see that his model young renegade minister is guilty of complicity by shielding the deacon who has robbed a widow of her home and perjured himself, when he allows such a man to continue his leadership in the church, while he steps out. In his farewell sermon Reverend Matthews affirms that any aspect of life is as sacred as the church, any work as holy as that of the ministry. There is such a caustic, bitter satire pervading the book that one feels there must be some personal animus behind it all.

The Redemption of Kenneth Galt, by Will N. Harbin, is an interesting story of a soul's struggles toward God, out of skepticism and materialistic philosophy. Kenneth Galt has convinced himself that there is no such thing as a soul, no immortality, nothing beyond man's short material life. In contrast to him is Stephen Whipple, a rich man who holds his wealth at God's command and is a

man in business for God. As his minister says of him, "We often meet a converted person, but we don't often run across individuals who are leading lives that convert." This man makes his religion his law of life and will let an important business matter stand waiting while he talks with a wayward boy in his office and prays with him.

Wynn Dearing is likewise a manly, virile Christian who seeks to lead Galt to understand the reality of God. He says, "Let a man constantly argue to himself that life ends here on earth and he will wither away physically as he has spiritually. For what would be the incentive to live if life ends all?"

Through the crucible of sin and suffering Kenneth Galt has to pass before he can realize what life means. On the brink of suicide he hesitates. "Kill himself? How absurd the thought! He might dash his bleeding, lifeless body on the rocks below but he himself would remain a deathless witness to the fact. Nothing in the shape of matter, no force known to science, could possibly put out of existence the yearning for atonement within him. Nothing so divine as that could die. Such a thing was from the Eternity that had created Eternity.

'Eternity! Eternity!' he whispers in reverential awe. 'Now I see—the scales have fallen from my eyes. Thank God I see! I understand. Oh, God, have mercy! Show me, a sinner, a way out of the darkness of my damnation!'

And into his soul there comes a hope and faith that illumine his life.

The Miller of Old Church, by Ellen Glasgow, shows a number of interesting types of religious conception. Sarah Revercomb thinks it is religion to be able to say the Bible backward and to know accurately the number of cubits in the temple curtains while she is harsh and unsympathetic in her daily life. "The inflexible logic of Calvinism had passed into her fibre until it became an in-

stinct with her to tread softly lest God should hear. She thought that human happiness must be paid for with the materials of salvation."

The young Episcopal minister, Reverend Mullen, can preach eloquently on the duty of woman and can win adherents, mostly feminine, from other churches, yet he lacks the real heart of religion. He feels a contempt for an old clergyman who believes that the Golden Rule should be literally applied to daily life and whose heart is full of simple love and faith toward God and man. Reverend Mullen regards him with the active suspicion with which he views all living examples of Christian charity and speaks of him as a man of "impractical ideas." The young minister is himself described by a girl as "like one of Mrs. Bottom's air-plants that grow without any roots." To which her grandfather charitably remonstrates, "Well, he's young yet and his soul struts a little. But wait till he's turned fifty and he'll begin to be as good a Christian as he is a parson. It's a good mould but he congealed a bit too stiff when he was poured into it."

Old Mr. Reuben Merriweather cannot repeat the Bible backwards but he can and does reflect in his life the lessons of forgiveness, of unselfishness and love that Christ taught two thousand years ago. And that is the real religion.

No American writer since Hawthorne has shown a stronger sense of moral power than is manifest in the works of Margaret Deland. *The Awakening of Helena Richie* is the story of a woman whose conception of life has been that of the pursuit of happiness, and this has led her into grievous wrong. Her soul has been untouched by any sense of the enormity of her sin or of her responsibility toward any one else. She comes to live in Old Chester, concealing her past and thinking that since she says nothing of her neighbors her life cannot possibly concern them. But she has to learn that no man liveth

to himself alone and that whatever touches the moral health of one person affects the whole social tissue. She takes a little child, David, into her home and through her unselfish service for him she wakes to a sense of moral values and rises to a height of sublime sacrifice. So she, through shame and conviction of sin, faces her own soul and realizes God.

In *The Iron Woman* this same Helena Richie makes still another stupendous sacrifice when she uncovers the shame of her long-buried past to save David, now a man, from yielding to wrong. She is willing to have him lose his love, even his respect for her rather than that he should sin. And her spiritual crucifixion is not in vain, for David reels shuddering back from the abyss into which he is about to fall and from his soul he thanks her for his escape.

The Way Home, by Basil King, represents the age-old struggle between spiritualism and materialism, between earthly ambition and the heart of faith. The story begins with the packing of a missionary box in the rectory of St. David's when the rector's small son surreptitiously slips an old wig into the box. The rector is a man with the grand manner, who reads the Bible as if he were rendering a scene from Shakespeare, and he has scant patience with his assistant who, according to him, holds ideas too democratic for an old, conservative church like St. David's. The sexton loudly complains of the assistant: "He's bringing in all the rag-tag and bob-tail in town into the church! I don't hold with Parson LeGrand at all. I tell you there's people I have to show to their seats on Sunday that I wouldn't want to sweep out with a broom." The rector himself says concerning the matter, "It worries me. It's something I hardly know what to do about. It isn't that the poor aren't welcome in God's house. Not at all. Of course it couldn't be that. Only, we have provided the Mission Chapel on purpose for the poorer people."

Charles, the rector's son, reluctantly consents to be confirmed, only because his father wishes it and not from any desire to be in the church or from any change of heart. Likewise, he considers entering the ministry because his dead mother has wished it. Yet, when a certain sense of wrong comes into his life he questions the reality of religion. "What does it all mean? Can these dry bones live? Is this formalism worship?" He answers these questions in the negative and turns his back on religion. He makes worldly success his aim and subordinates every nobler aim to that. He becomes rich, marries the woman he loves, has established social position—and yet—hear him confess to the unworldly assistant of his childhood days: "My God, how I am suffering! I am suffering from a sense of inner disgrace!"

He asks for spiritual light and receives it. "Very well, Charlie, I'll tell you." LeGrand paused for a moment while a kind of illumination came into his long, ascetic face. "It'll sound strange to you, I dare say, because now you're not used to this sort of phraseology. Jesus Christ said *I am the Door!*"

But Charlie, in an agony of remorse calls himself "the damndest hound unhung" and protests that there could be no mercy for him.

"You've been a great sinner, Charlie. Don't let's balk at the word since it expresses what we both mean. You've been a great sinner. But wouldn't it be fair that you should have an Advocate to speak in your defense? Do you know what you make me think of, Charlie?" looking tenderly into the sick, sad eyes, "It's of the young man of whom we are told that Christ, beholding him, loved him and said unto him, *One thing thou lackest*. It seems to be that you lack but one thing and that you'll find it."

But Charlie wrenches his hand away and is gone.

As later he sits in the church at the funeral of his childhood's friend, the crabbed old sexton, knowing that

he soon must die—he hears again the Voice, the Call, “singling him out as if it were addressed to him alone.” At the words: “*Death is swallowed up in victory* he seems walking with something new and unconquerable in his heart—walking as along a Way—a Way leading to a Glory—a Glory that seemed to be a Door.”

The Story of Waitstill Baxter, by Kate Douglas Wiggin, relates the effect of a peculiar movement among Free Will Baptists known as the Cochrane craze. Cochrane seems to have been a man with extraordinarily magnetic influence who swayed whole communities by his religious exhortations and led his followers to accept his startling views on various questions. People who, for years, had thought themselves Christians suddenly became convinced that they had never known God and in a frenzy of religious exaltation forsook home and duties to follow Cochrane, thinking that he alone had the light. He claimed to have inspirations and visions and revelations startling to erstwhile orthodox church members, but which many of them blindly accepted as God's truth after his preaching. He claimed to have the divine word that his disciples were to renounce their marriage vows if they so desired and seek for themselves “spiritual consorts” chosen according to Cochrane's advice or of their own volition.

The main events of the story occur years after the emotional outburst has spent its force and show the effects of the incidents on various people.

Foxwell Baxter is a deacon in the church but so pronounced a miser that when he passes the collection plate the members—far from expecting him to contribute anything—are relieved that he does not abstract something from the offering. He is such a domestic tyrant that three wives have died to escape the necessity of living longer with him. As the family physician surmised, “The ladies were all members of the church and had presumably made their peace with God, but their pleasure

in joining the angels was mild compared to their relief at parting with the Deacon."

His daughter, Waitstill, has managed to keep her soul clean and sweet in spite of the bitter trials of her home and is unconquerably cheerful and unselfish. "She had no idea of bringing a poor weak, draggled soul to her Maker at the last day, saying, 'Here is all I have managed to save out of what you gave me.'" And Lois Boynton, whose husband has deserted her and her little son to follow after Cochrane and his spiritual consort, hides his shame in her heart and when she hears that he is dead and has left a little, nameless, motherless child, she goes after it and takes it for her own. So we see throughout the book the antithesis of false and true ideals of serving Christ.

The books of Norman Duncan have a striking religious turn and introduce as their principal theme the regenerating power of Christ's simple gospel as preached and lived by big-hearted, unselfish men. *Doctor Luke of the Labrador* is not, as has been mistakenly supposed, a literal description of the life of Dr. Grenfell, but it is based on his experience, and is an inspiring account of what a man can do for Christ. In a more recent book, *The Measure of a Man*, Mr. Duncan weaves many of the incidents of the missionary work of Reverend Francis Higgins of Minnesota into the story, yet cautions the readers that it is not to be supposed that he is giving events and characters altogether as they occurred.

The central person in this book is a reformed drunkard, converted at a service of the Jerry McAuley Mission, who comes into a lumber camp to try to lead others to Christ. He is at first refused ordination by the Presbyterian Superior Body, because of his lack of education. But he is a militant Christian among lumber-men, courageous, unselfish and with a heart full of love. He cares for the sick, buries the dead, pleads with each man to give God a chance in his life and wins the respect of all.

He follows "Billy the Beast" into a saloon to keep him from selling his soul for whiskey, and an extraordinarily dramatic scene ensues. The young fellow, instead of drinking from the uplifted glass, stares aghast at the ceiling and cries "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" And in that place of hell he finds God.

Pale Peter, the saloon-keeper, who has led scores of men to ruin, comes to see the horror of his life. He has been in the business to make money for his little son, but the child has come under the influence of the minister and silently rebukes his father for his sin. While the boy lies at the point of death, and oppressed with a sense of sharing his father's guilt, the father closes the bar forever. The deserted saloon is given over to the preacher to use as a place of helpfulness and Pale Peter disappears.

The rough lumber-jacks love their preacher and are ambitious that he be ordained. So to please them he appears again before the Superior Body and after a graphic account of his ministry he is given their official approval.

Besides these more important novels there are many recent works of less power which have made religion an important if not the controlling motive of the book. They have been popular and widely read and have undoubtedly wielded great influence.

A study of current fiction in general is enough to convince one, notwithstanding a certain amount of erotic and putrid material seemingly ever present, that there is a moral awakening in America that means much. Such emotional crises as conviction of sin and definite conversion are taking their place in literature as in life and are proving in themselves as dramatic and stirring as any of the great passions that have long been regarded as the exclusive source of power in fiction. Stories of

war and murder and unhallowed love will gradually give way to no less dramatic records of moral conflicts and the novelists will have their share in the ushering in of the Kingdom.

Among the points brought out in recent American novels that are most interesting to Baptists and significant as revealing the truth of principles for which Baptists have long contended, are the democratic ideal of church government, the independence of the soul in matters of faith and the necessity for personal regeneration in Christian life. The latter element is stressed most strongly and is exceedingly significant in this age of certain tendencies toward formalism on the one hand and vague theorizing concerning religion on the other. To have this clear note sounded in our novels where the man who is least interested in religious discussions must perforce find it means much.

The spiritual crises through which the men and women in these books pass are dramatically told and have tremendous power. Yet they are nothing new,—merely modern instances of the old-fashioned conversion. We see in the experiences of the various characters the typical sense of sin, particular, as well as general, the conviction that brings to repentance and restitution where that need be, and the saving faith in a personal God, through Jesus Christ. No sermon could make these things clearer or more effective than they appear as shown in these cross-sections of human life. In *Thirty Pieces of Silver*, *The Way Home*, *The Redemption of Kenneth Galt*, *A Certain Rich man*, *The Inside of the Cup*, *V. V.'s Eyes*, *The Awakening of Helena Rihcie*, *The Measure of a Man*, and many others, we see depicted the definite spiritual change that we know as conversion, a real and actual change of heart and life. These vital experiences of the soul are taking their rightful place in literature as in life and banishing the erotic and putrid fiction that has long poisoned our moral atmosphere.