

## HEROINES OF THE PERIOD.

There are fashions in heroines, as in bonnets and bric-a-brac, and they come and go according to some queer occult logic which is one of the mysteries of the act of fiction. The novelists themselves do not know why they vary the prevailing type in different periods. It is a process of evolution that produces changing results, that substitutes one style for another, with curious effects of contrast and surprise. But there is method in it, notwithstanding, and its relation to the general alterations of thought and taste in the world is no less certain than it is interesting and significant. The successive heroines, that is to say, have a meaning apart from the stories in which they figure. They stand in a sense for contemporary intellectual and moral conditions, and correspond in a readily perceptible degree to familiar opinions and tendencies. There is always a reason for their being, it is easy to see, if we look at them in the proper light. The elements that enter into their composition are not drawn from remote or imaginary sources, but from the life of the time. They may be wanting in definite fidelity to nature, in detailed accuracy of resemblance to people whom we meet; but so far as their basic properties are concerned, we can account for them by deduction or inference from existing circumstances.

The heroines of the present period are unlike those of any former one. They are not of uniform pattern, to be sure, in their individual caprices and idiosyncracies, but they are all the same in general scope and suggestion. To distinguish them from preceding ones, they may be called neurotic. They are at the mercy of their nerves. Some of them are quite intelligent, most of them are handsome and a few of them are influenced by sane and creditable motives. As a rule, however, they are light-minded, eccentric, and more or less demoralized. They have extravagant views, they are consecrated to missions, they pride themselves upon their independence, when they are only audacious and hysterical. They are mostly presented by women writers: and singularly enough, they mostly turn out to be failures, unless they are saved by sacrificing their cherished sentiments and purposes to old-fashioned ideas of the duties and opportunities of their sex. Not one of them succeeds in living up to her peculiar philosophy, or remaining true to her boasted emancipation from conventional shackles of belief or behavior. In every instance there is a final collapse of the original structure, and the pretty heroine is humbled by the irony of fate.

Mrs. Ward's Marcella Boyce is above the average in mental equipment and moral character, but she is not different from the rest in the matter of vanity of opinion, mistaken conceptions of life and ultimate surrender to the influences that she strives for years to overcome. She is absorbed in a dream of reform without knowing how to bring it true. Her mind is warped by wrong education and association, and the emotional currents of her nature are diverted from straight and wholesome channels into crooked and morbid ones. She accepts an animal and worthy man, not because she loves him, but because he has wealth and position, and she hopes thus to gain power for the promotion of her crude designs of charity and philanthropy. This does not bring her happiness, but disaster. In a fit of anger over the refusal of her prospective husband to sign a petition for the pardon of a murderer in whom she has taken sympathetic interest, she breaks the engagement, flees from home, and becomes a nurse in a London hospital. Experience teaches her the folly of her course, the weakness of her supposed wisdom, and she returns with her dream dispelled, to the arms of her waiting and forgiving lover, and to adopt the mission of a wife and mother as the best service and highest blessing of womanhood.

Another spoiled darling of society is Dodo Vane in the story that has her first name for a title. She is handsome, dashing, heartless, with a habit of dramatizing everything, as well of shocking people with her blunt and bitter cynicism. It is her delight to scoff at serious matters, and to proclaim that she is disillusioned and unromantic. "Morals don't come into the question of social intercourse at all," she says; "I particularly dislike some of the cardinal virtues—and the only reason for associating with anybody is that one takes pleasure in their company." Lord Chesterford proposes to her, and she accepts him—for his title and his estates. "I don't elevate matrimony into a sacrament," she tells one of her companions; "it is a contract for mutual advantage. The husband gives wealth, position, and all that, and the wife gives him a housekeeper

and heirs to his property. Think of all the people who marry for love and get eternally tired of each other afterward; they can't keep it up, you know." She soon tires of wedded life, even without love, and plans an elopement with a former suitor; but the husband conveniently dies, and she becomes engaged to the man with whom she was going to run away. He soon objects to her receiving visits from a certain Russian prince, whereupon she informs him that she will do as she pleases; and the next time he calls to see her he ascertains that she has gone to Paris, presumably with the prince—and there the story leaves her.

The heroine of "A Yellow Aster," Gwendolen Waring, is a girl of robust physical health and a diseased and distorted mind. When lovers are attracted to her by her beauty and brightness she says they are only botanists yearning for a rare flower. "Love is such a mere name to me," she declares; "It seems such a collapsible bubbly thing, to put to such feeble uses." In the course of time she marries Sir Humphrey Strange, telling him plainly that she is doing it as an experiment. "I like new sensations, I am curious," she informs him. The experiment proves to be a doleful disappointment, which reaches a climax of mockery and self-reproach when she discovers that she is soon to become a mother. "It is ghastly, it is degradation," she exclaims, "feeling as I do towards Humphrey. Talk of the shame of women who have children out of the pale of marriage; it's nothing to the shame of those who have children and don't love. Nothing—not God's law nor man's—makes marriage sacred but perfect love." A separation ensues; and then, after the child is born there comes the reconciliation. Maternity teaches the heroine what love is, and she kneels at her husband's feet in humble confession of evil done in ignorance, but leading up through great tribulations into unutterable joy—and the prattling lips of a little child decree that henceforth and forever these two shall be one flesh.

Turning to the "Ships That Pass in the Night," we meet Bernardine Holme, who has tubercles on her lungs and several crotchets in her brain, including to write a book. Life has always been a solemn thing with her, a discipline of study, toil, lonesomeness and lovelessness. She is self-reliant, somewhat conceited, with a thin and pale visage and very bright eyes that seem to be burning themselves away. At the health resort where she is stopping she falls in with a sort of a melancholy Jaques who is known as "the disagreeable man," and their morbid conversations make up most of the story. They talk of various things—always in a pessimistic style, with occasional flashes of sardonic humor—and their general conclusion is that the present life is a failure, and the future life a fancy that may or may not be worth entertaining. "We go on building our bridge between life and death, each for himself," the girl says. When we see that it is not strong enough, we break it down and build another. We watch other people building their bridges, and we imitate; or criticise, or condemn them. But as the time goes on, we learn not to interfere, that one bridge is probably as good as another, and the greatest value of them all is in the building of them." The boon of love comes to this peculiar couple at last, but neither acknowledges it to the other; and the girl dies, and the man goes to the mountains, taking her photograph with him, to continue his bridge building, "as we all do, whether consciously or unconsciously, and meanwhile the years pass."

It is easy to say of these different heroines that their exact counter parts are not to be found in actual life; but the materials out of which they are made can be found there. They are the embodiment of random energies, floating emotions, rife opinions and proclivities that are plainly visible in the current proceedings of society. We are living in an age of exceptional nervousness, and the interests and processes of culture, reform and progress are saturated with hysteria, hypochondria and neurasthenia. It is a period of unprecedented mental activity, of daring investigation and analysis, of spreading dissent and incredulity with regard to established theories and institutions. All the achievements of the past are being put to new tests, and nothing escapes the arrows of criticism with which the old light are darkened. It is the fashion to be skeptical, to pick flaws in the systems of faith and practice, to insist upon the necessity of rectification and re-adjustment in every direction and relation. The virtue of restraint and repose, once considered an essential part of wisdom, is now practically unknown, and in place of it we have a feverish curiosity and audacity that sees nothing fit to be venerated and preserved, but demands changes so numerous and so radical that they imply in the aggregate a complete impeachment of the philosophy of civilization.

HENRY KING.