

THE PASSING SHOW

The other day I saw an elevator boy intently perusing a work of literature. I glanced at it and saw that it was Ouida's "Under Two Flags." I could remember when I first met that book and read it quite as intently as the elevator boy was doing, and I was inclined to be patient with him when he took me to the wrong floor, for I knew that he was envying Bertie Cecil his beautiful boots or that he was pondering upon the peaches of great price that Bertie used to throw at the swans to please his sweetheart, and it struck me that it is rather tragic that one of the brightest minds of the last generation should descend to become food for elevator boys. Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it. I think He must do it as a sort of ghastly joke. Really, it would be hard to find a better plot than is in that same "Under Two Flags," and the book contains the rudiments of a great style, and it also contains some of the most drivelling nonsense and mawkish sentimentality and contemptible feminine weakness to be found anywhere. Preachers have cried out against the immorality of "Ouida," and mammas have forbidden their daughters to read her, and gentlemen of the world have pretended to shudder at her cynicism. Now the truth of the matter is that her greatest sins are technical errors, as palpable as bad grammar or bad construction, sins of form and sense. Adjectives and sentimentality ran away with her, as they do with most women's pens. And then she lacked all sense of humor and will never know how magnificently ridiculous her melancholy heroes and suffering women are. Its a terrible curse to lack a sense of humor, for it reacts on one and makes one gratify the humor of every other living creature. Ouida is Nordau's "degenerate" incarnate.

And the worst of it is that the woman really had great talent. No less a person than John Ruskin advised all his art students to read "A Village Commune" and said it was the saddest and most perfect picture of peasant life in Modern Italy ever made in English. There is poetry enough in "Pascarel" for a dozen novels. There is some wonderful work of mythology and historical association in "Ariadne." There is some matchless description in "Wanda." There are great passages in "Friendship," but in them all there is not one sane, normal, possible man or woman. I hate to read them. I hate to see the pitiable waste and shameful weaknesses in them. They fill me with the same sense of disgust that Oscar Wilde's books do. They are one rank morass of misguided genius and wasted power. They are sinful, not for what they do, but for what they do not do. They are the work of a brilliant mind that never matured, of hectic emotions that never settled into simplicity and naturalness. They are the product of one who was too early old, too long young. Of one who was misled into thinking that words were life, who was tempted by the alluring mazes of melodrama.

Of a life that only imagined and strained after effects, that never lived at all; that never laughed with children, tolled with men or wept with women; of a lying, artificial, abnormal existence. Ink and paper are so rigidly exacting. One may lie to one's self, lie to the world, lie to God, even, but to one's pen one cannot lie. You may talk brilliantly and still be very much of a fool. But when one comes to write, ah, that is different! Every artificial aid falls you. All that you have been taught leaves you, all that you have stolen lies discovered. You are then a translator, without a lexicon, without notes, and you are to translate, God. You have then to give voice to the hearts of men, and you can do it only so far as you have known them, loved them. It is a solemn and terrible thing to write a novel. I wish there were a tax levied on every novel published. We would have fewer ones and better.

I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable. They are so limited to one string and they lie so about that. They are so few, the ones who really did anything worth while; there were the great Georges, George Eliot and George Sand, and they were anything but women, and there was Miss Bronte who kept her sentimentality under control, and there was Jane Austin who certainly had more common sense than any of them and was in some respects the greatest of them all. Women are so horribly subjective and they have such scorn for the healthy common place. When a woman writes a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, a manly battle yarn, anything without wine women and love, then I will begin to hope for something great from them, not before.

Paris is all agog over the wonderful improvement in Sybil Sanderson's voice. She made her season's debut in Paris a few weeks ago in "Romeo et Juliette" and they say that she never sang with half such feeling, she is quite another woman. I should think twins might be conducive to feeling, and if they have really improved Sanderson's voice so much, I can almost pardon them their appearance.

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growing time.

That boy!—  
A little lad, all fun.  
A little chap, all coat.  
A round cipher, not knowing whether the stroke will go up and make him six, or down, and make him nine.  
It's growing time with him.

He is burning up fat. This fat must be in as constant supply as the air he breathes.

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