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111 Cass Street

An Ingenuous Critic

By HARRY VAN AMBERG

At college my essays were always selected to be read before the class, and I was made editor of the university magazine. This led me to choose literature for my profession. I naturally looked to the author whose works were at that time considered the acme of literary method as my guide, and nothing less than the field he occupied would satisfy me. There must be no plot. Plots were for dime novels. There must be nothing demonstrative, for I and the school I proposed to enter considered that the type to be gush and fit only for those who cannot appreciate what is high bred. What I aimed at was delineation of character, proposing to take my heroes and heroines apart, examine them through a microscope and put them together again, stamping them with my own imprint, just as an eminent chemist will give a certificate for a brand of soap.

I had written several novels in this vein and had attracted the attention of the critics and persons of refined literary taste. Unfortunately I had no fortune, and I found it unprofitable to write for the few. But I would not lower my standard. As to my characters, they must needs be high bred persons, for I met no others. Not one of those I met in society would show any feeling, and I found myself depicting those who were moving about on life's stage, not as human beings but as social automatons. Nevertheless the critics and my clientele stood by me, and I was pleased, though finally it didn't pay.

One day while traveling on a rail road train I noticed a young girl in the seat before me. She could not have been more than seventeen years old, was plainly dressed and appeared to be a model of simplicity. What was my astonishment to see her take from her satchel a copy of my last novel and begin to read it. I wondered how a person so low in the human scale could be interested in the philosophic deductions she would find in my work. I leaned forward and asked:

"Can you recommend the book you are reading?"

"I? Recommend it? It's everything to me."

"How is that?"

"I'm in the story."

"You?"

"Yes. I don't know how the author got hold of my case, but he did some how or other. He's given it perfectly, only he gives a great many reasons for my doing things that I never did, at all. I suppose he made them up, I skip them."

"Oh, you do? What causes you to think that the author gives your own story?"

"Why, it's as plain-as-day. There's Mrs. Jarvis. She's my stepmother. Papa does what he can for me to make her treat me nice. But she won't, and sometimes he looks so tired and worn when she snaps at me—just like Mr. Jarvis in the story—that I put my arms about him and kiss him and say, like Marjory in the book, 'Never mind me, mama, dear, so long as she don't scold you!'"

I was interested. Of all my stories this one was the most human. I had been told by my admirers that in it I had not done myself justice.

"Have you read any of the author's other novels?" I asked.

"I've tried to. After I read my own story in this one I got the books out of the library, one after another, but they were all Greek to me. I suppose I like this one because it is my own story."

"What else is there about you in the book?"

"Well, for one thing I know Edith Ellingham. She's just like Edith in the book—a society girl—always going about with her nose in the air. She talks just such unintelligible things as Miss Ellingham. She's never going to marry, she says, but devote herself to some high moral purpose—you know, the girl in the book is going to do that—but she can't find a purpose high enough for her, so she only talks about it with young men of a superior type. That's like Miss Ellingham too."

"Who is your favorite author?" I asked the girl.

"Mr. Dickens."

I remembered that Mr. Dickens had not in all his books drawn the character of more than two or three persons in high life. I had reversed the order. I had not drawn but one character out of high life, the one this little girl had assumed to be herself. I wondered what would become of my literary fame when my hundredth birthday would come round.

The train was approaching my station, and as I gathered my belongings I said to the admirer of my story:

"Thank you very much for telling me all about the book. I know the author intimately. I shall tell him if you've said about it, advise him in future to write about all kinds of persons, to leave out the parts you skip and not to spend his time on the aspirations of such high bred girls as Miss Ellingham. Heroines like you are far more satisfactory."

"Goodby sir," she said as the train was slowing up. "Would you mind asking him how he got hold of my case and write me about it? My address is—oh, dear, I wish I had a pencil or something!"

Those were the last words I heard, for I left the car and the only critic to whom I have ever been indebted for criticism of any value.

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