Provincial types in American fiction

Fiske Horace Spencer
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PROVINCIAL TYPES IN AMERICAN FICTION

BY

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PREFACE

The field of American fiction is so wide and so varied that only one phase of it has been touched upon in the present volume,—certain types of American provincial life as studied since the Civil War by authors in New England, the South, the Middle West, and the Far West. The literature of these sections of the country written since the Civil War is so embarrassingly rich that, with one exception, nothing of the flood of very recent fiction is included in the scope of this limited study. The effort of the writer has been to confine himself largely to what is rather indefinitely called "realistic" literature, and to emphasize the truth of characterization found in such fiction as has come to be generally recognized for its special significance and permanent value as a reflection of certain phases of our national life.

The present volume can, of course, be only suggestive, but if it succeeds in stimulating to an appreciative study and enjoyment of the dozen works of fiction considered, it will have largely accomplished its purpose.

In tracing the development of provincial character in any particular novel or story, it has seemed best to give
Preface

as much as possible of the author's individuality of conception and flavor of style, rather than to indulge in long descriptive writing and cumbersome paraphrase,—in the hope that the peculiar charm of the author considered may stir a desire for more intimate acquaintance, and so lead on to a genuine appreciation of what is best in American fiction.

HORACE SPENCER FISKE.

CHICAGO, April, 1903.
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PROVINCIAL TYPES IN NEW ENGLAND

CHAPTER I

A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE FIELD

If, in the fiction written in America since the Civil War, there has not yet appeared the long-looked-for great "American" novel, there has nevertheless been written much that is a true and delightful reflection of genuine American character, particularly of that character as seen in the country and in those sections that have been least affected by the progress of a growing national unity. American literature may, in fact, be said to be made up of an aggregation of sectional literatures—the literatures of New England, the South, the Middle West, and the Far West. This aggregation naturally lacks unity, but it is all American; and perhaps at some time these diverse characteristics may be fused by some masterly writer of fiction into a harmonious whole, which shall, by its vast variety yet unifying American spirit, be recognized as the great American novel.

From the time of the production of "Rip Van Winkle" and "Sleepy Hollow" by Washington Irving, of the "Leatherstocking Tales" by James Fenimore Cooper, and of "The Scarlet Letter" and "The House of the Seven Gables" by Nathaniel Hawthorne, to the present, the men who have
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done the most effective literary work and shown us most vividly certain phases of American life have usually been those who wrought in somewhat circumscribed fields—fields that they personally knew and loved. And among the writers of so-called "realistic" fiction in America none has had a more distinct place as a leader or a wider recognition among readers than William Dean Howells. Although born in the Middle West, Mr. Howells lived for a number of years in Boston, and notwithstanding his later life in New York, he is still recognized as distinctly and successfully a portrayer of New England character. Three of his finest achievements in fiction have to do almost entirely with New England life,—"A Modern Instance," "The Lady of the Aroostook," and "The Rise of Silas Lapham." These are all in what is known as his "earlier" manner, before his literary art became so subtle, sociological, and photographic, and give in a remarkably real way various phases of that typical New England character which the world has come to believe combines in itself many of the elements of the American national mind. In the first-mentioned book Mr. Howells's characterization of Bartley Hubbard as the "smart" young newspaper man, who is reading law in 'Squire Gaylord's office, and who later woos and wins and divorces Marcia, the 'Squire's daughter, is so masterly that at one time we can hardly help admiring the breeziness and audacity and acuteness of the character, and at another we are driven in repulsion from its cheapness and baseness and brutal cynicism. And when the old 'Squire—"Mr. F. J. Gaylord, of Equity, Equity County, Maine"—pleads in the Tecumseh court-house in his own daughter's behalf, and charges his son-in-law with perjury, the pathos and dramatic quality of the scene go far to divert from Mr. Howells the
A Brief Survey of the Field

oft-repeated charge that he is enamored of the commonplace.

As Mr. Harry Thurston Peck, the editor of *The Bookman*, remarks of "The Lady of the Aroostook," it would be difficult to find in American realistic fiction a more happily developed and delightful story than that of Lydia Blood, the provincial New England girl, who, reared in the grim and almost joyless rural community of South Bradfield in the hills of Northern Massachusetts, shows herself on board the sailing vessel *Aroostook* to be, unconsciously to herself, but very charmingly to her exclusively male companions, a genuine "lady," — though to the eye of the European critic such a middle-class provincial type could hardly come under the designation of "a lady" at all. And in Venice itself, under the well-meant but embarrassing surveillance of her half-Europeanized aunt, Lydia is as easily the true and self-possessed and irresistible "lady" as she was under the eyes of the chivalrous old sea-captain Jenness, the vulgar and drunken Hicks, or the hypercritical and cynical Staniford. Mr. Howells has given to this unique story a distinctly provincial setting, his opening and closing chapters bringing before the mind with almost perfect art the characteristic figures of fussy but undemonstrative Aunt Maria, Deacon Latham, the domesticated and uncertain old grandfather, Ezra Perkins, the dumb and formal driver of the yellow Concord coach, besides the picture of the "blue-cold" meeting-house, the savage desolation of the snow-hidden hills, the graveyard, as animated as the rest of the village, the sheet-iron stove in the parlor, the horsehair furniture, and the pea-green lamp with the red woolen wick that lights up this typical New England village with an immortal glow.

But the most distinctively and broadly national figure that
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Mr. Howells has drawn is probably that in "Silas Lapham," —the character of the paint manufacturer, that typical product of the American *nouveaux riches*, who has struggled out and up from the bleak Vermont hills into a prosperous and expanding business in Boston, and who yet hangs suspended above the precipice of social failure when he pitifully discovers that his hard-earned money cannot buy him position or friendships or culture. Here are the braggadocio of the self-made man who is praising his creator and is yet self-deprecative, the shrewd and refreshing humor, the instinctive generosity and genuine nobility, the undying energy and sure eye to the main chance, and the merciless conscientiousness that pursues even to self-ruin — these are all here, united in a Yankee nature that stirs one's sense of the ridiculous, the pathetic, and the positively heroic. And much of this is felt even in the first few pages of "The Rise of Silas Lapham," through the subtle and vivid power of the novelist,—in that memorable interview with Bartley Hubbard, who seems unerringly to penetrate every weak little vanity of the boastful and self-centered man, and draw from him without reserve the wearisome minutiae of a commonplace life.

Another convincing study of a rural type under urban conditions is found in "The Minister's Charge," in which, through the unwilling agency of a Boston preacher, Lemuel Barker, a raw New England boy from Willoughby Pastures, smitten with the egotism of literary creation, comes to the city bent on publishing a poem; and by strangely connected causes the poor boy is driven on from one emergency to another, through love and poverty and ambition and shame and self-sacrifice, to an apparently impotent end. And with him are involved such strongly