CLASSICS TO GO

A REBELLIOUS HEROINE

JOHN KENDRICK BANGS

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ILLUSTRATIONS

I
STUART HARLEY: REALIST

> "*—if a word could save me, and that word were not the Truth, nay, if it did but swerve a hair's-breadth from the Truth, I would not say it*!"
>
> —LONGFELLOW.

STUART HARLEY, despite his authorship of many novels, still considered himself a realist. He affected to say that he did not write his books; that he merely transcribed them from life as he saw it, and he insisted always that he saw life as it was.

"The mission of the novelist, my dear Professor," he had once been heard to say at his club, "is not to amuse merely; his work is that of an historian, and he should be quite as careful to write truthfully as is the historian. How is the future to know what manner of lives we nineteenth century people have lived unless our novelists tell the truth?"

"Possibly the historians will tell them," observed the Professor of Mathematics. "Historians sometimes do tell us interesting things."

"True," said Harley. "Very true; but then what historian ever let you into the secret of the every-day life of the people of whom he writes? What historian ever so vitalized Louis the Fourteenth as Dumas has vitalized him? Truly, in reading mere history I have seemed to be reading of lay figures, not

of men; but when the novelist has taken hold properly—ah, then we get the men."

"Then," objected the Professor, "the novelist is never to create a great character?"

"The humorist or the mere romancer may, but as for the novelist with a true ideal of his mission in life he would better leave creation to nature. It is blasphemy for a purely mortal being to pretend that he can create a more interesting character or set of characters than the Almighty has already provided for the use of himself and his brothers in literature; that he can involve these creations in a more dramatic series of events than it has occurred to an all-wise Providence to put into the lives of His creatures; that, by the exercise of that misleading faculty which the writer styles his imagination, he can portray phases of life which shall prove of more absorbing interest or of greater moral value to his readers than those to be met with in the every-day life of man as he is."

"Then," said the Professor, with a dexterous jab of his cue at the pool-balls—"then, in your estimation, an author is a thing to be led about by the nose by the beings he selects for use in his books?"

"You put it in a rather homely fashion," returned Harley; "but, on the whole, that is about the size of it."

"And all a man needs, then, to be an author is an eye and a type-writing machine?" asked the Professor.

"And a regiment of detectives," drawled Dr. Kelly, the young surgeon, "to follow his characters about."

Harley sighed. Surely these men were unsympathetic.

"I can't expect you to grasp the idea exactly," he said, "and I can't explain it to you, because you'd become irreverent if

I tried.”

“No, we won’t,” said Kelly. “Go on and explain it to us—I’m bored, and want to be amused.”

So Harley went on and tried to explain how the true realist must be an inspired sort of person, who can rise above purely physical limitations; whose eye shall be able to pierce the most impenetrable of veils; to whom nothing in the way of obtaining information as to the doings of such specimens of mankind as he has selected for his pages is an insurmountable obstacle.

“Your author, then, is to be a mixture of a New York newspaper reporter and the Recording Angel?” suggested Kelly.

“I told you you’d become irreverent,” said Harley; “nevertheless, even in your irreverence, you have expressed the idea. The writer must be omniscient as far as the characters of his stories are concerned—he must have an eye which shall see all that they do, a mind sufficiently analytical to discern what their motives are, and the courage to put it all down truthfully, neither adding nor subtracting, coloring only where color is needed to make the moral lesson he is trying to teach stand out the more vividly.”

“In short, you’d have him become a photographer,” said the Professor.

“More truly a soulscape-painter,” retorted Harley, with enthusiasm.

“Heavens!” cried the Doctor, dropping his cue with a loud clatter to the floor. “Soulscape! Here’s a man talking about not creating, and then throws out an invention like

soulscape! Harley, you ought to write a dictionary. With a word like soulscape to start with, it would sweep the earth!”

Harley laughed. He was a good-natured man, and he was strong enough in his convictions not to weaken for the mere reason that somebody else had ridiculed them. In fact, everybody else might have ridiculed them, and Harley would still have stood true, once he was convinced that he was right.

“You go on sawing people’s legs off, Billy,” he said, good-naturedly. “That’s a thing you know about; and as for the Professor, he can go on showing you and the rest of mankind just why the shortest distance between two points is in a straight line. I’ll take your collective and separate words for anything on the subject of surgery or mathematics, but when it comes to my work I wouldn’t bank on your theories if they were endorsed by the Rothschilds.”

“He’ll never write a decent book in his life if he clings to that theory,” said Kelly, after Harley had departed. “There’s precious little in the way of the dramatic nowadays in the lives of people one cares to read about.”

Nevertheless, Harley had written interesting books, books which had brought him reputation, and what is termed genteel poverty—that is to say, his fame was great, considering his age, and his compensation was just large enough to make life painful to him. His income enabled him to live well enough to make a good appearance among, and share somewhat at their expense in the life of, others of far greater means; but it was too small to bring him many of the things which, while not absolutely necessities, could not well be termed luxuries, considering his tastes and his temperament. A little more was all he needed.

“If I could afford to write only when I feel like it,” he said, “how happy I should be! But these orders—they make me a driver of men, and not their historian.”

In fact, Harley was in that unfortunate, and at the same time happy, position where he had many orders for the product of his pen, and such financial necessities that he could not afford to decline one of them.

And it was this very situation which made his rebellious heroine of whom I have essayed to write so sore a trial to the struggling young author.

It was early in May, 1895, that Harley had received a note from Messrs. Herring, Beemer, & Chadwick, the publishers, asking for a story from his pen for their popular “Blue and Silver Series.”

“The success of your *Tiffin-Talk*,” they wrote, “has been such that we are prepared to offer you our highest terms for a short story of 30,000 words, or thereabouts, to be published in our ‘Blue and Silver Series.’ We should like to have it a love-story, if possible; but whatever it is, it must be characteristic, and ready for publication in November. We shall need to have the manuscript by September 1st at the latest. If you can let us have the first few chapters in August, we can send them at once to Mr. Chromely, whom it is our intention to have illustrate the story, provided he can be got to do it.”

The letter closed with a few formalities of an unimportant and stereotyped nature, and Harley immediately called at the office of Messrs. Herring, Beemer, & Chadwick, where, after learning that their best terms were no more unsatisfactory than publishers’ best terms generally are, he accepted the commission.

And then, returning to his apartment, he went into what Kelly called one of his trances.

“He goes into one of his trances,” Kelly had said, “hoists himself up to his little elevation, and peeps into the private life of *hoi polloi* until he strikes something worth putting down and the result he calls literature.”

“Yes, and the people buy it, and read it, and call for more,” said the Professor.

“Possibly because they love notoriety,” said Kelly, “and they think if they call for more often enough, he will finally peep in at their key-holes and write them up. If he ever puts me into one of his books I’ll waylay him at night and amputate his writing-hand.”

“He won’t,” said the Professor. “I asked him once why he didn’t, and he said you’d never do in one of his books, because you don’t belong to real life at all. He thinks you are some new experiment of an enterprising Providence, and he doesn’t want to use you until he sees how you turn out.”

“He could put me down as I go,” suggested the Doctor.

“That’s so,” replied the other. “I told him so, but he said he had no desire to write a lot of burlesque sketches containing no coherent idea.”

“Oh, he said that, did he?” observed the Doctor, with a smile. “Well—wait till Stuart Harley comes to me for a prescription. I’ll get even with him. I’ll give him a pill, and he’ll disappear—for ten days.”

Whether it was as Kelly said or not, that Harley went into a trance and poked his nose into the private life of the people he wrote about, it was a fact that while meditating upon the possible output of his pen our author was as deaf to his