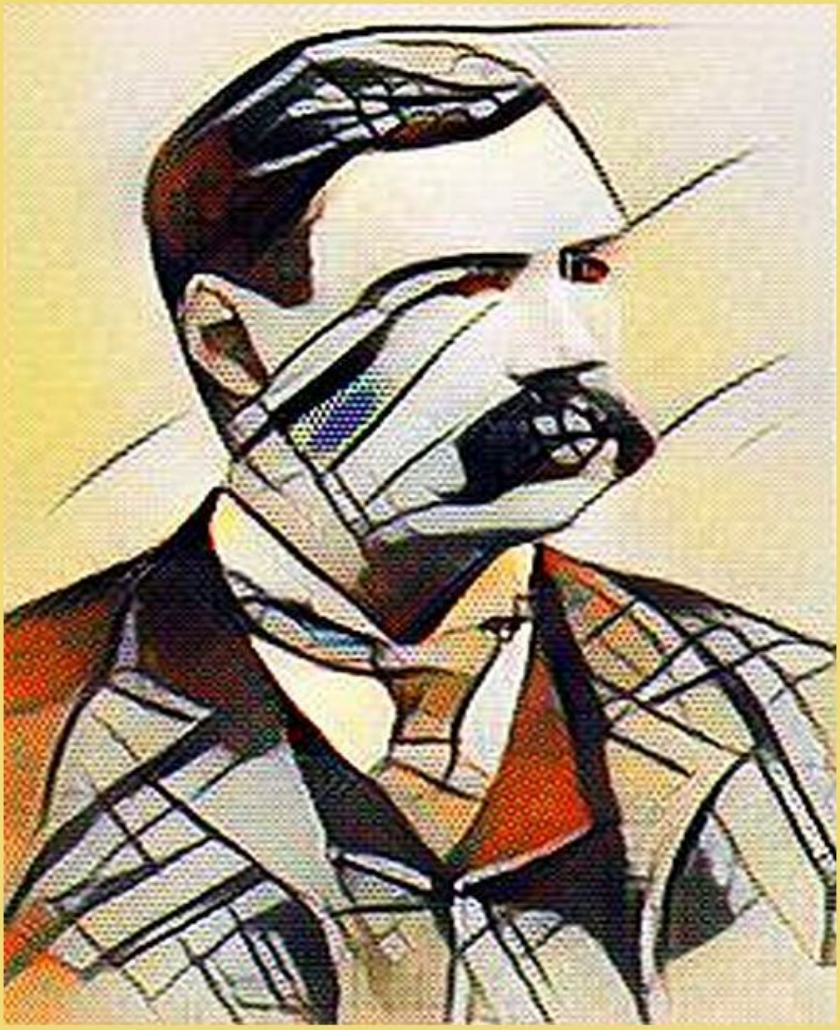
HAROLD FREDERIC



MRS. ALBERT GRUNDY

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Observations in Philistia

HAROLD FREDERIC

Mrs. Albert Grundy, H. Frederic
Jazzybee Verlag Jürgen Beck
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Deutschland

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www.jazzybee-verlag.de
admin@jazzybee-verlag.de

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Presenting in Outline the Comfortable and Well-Regulated Paradox over which She Presides, and showing its Mental Elevation

I suppose about the name there is no doubt. For sixty years we have followed that gifted gadabout and gossip, Heine, and called it Philistia. And yet, when one thinks of it, there may have been a mistake after all. Artemus Ward used to say that he had been able, with effort, to comprehend how it was possible to measure the distance between the stars, and even the dimensions and candle-power, so to speak, of those heavenly bodies; what beat him was how astronomers had ever found out their names. So I find myself wondering whether Philistia really is the right name for the land where She must be obeyed.

If so, it is only a little more the region of mysterious paradox and tricksy metamorphosis. We think of it always and from all time as given over to Her rule. We feel in our bones that there was a troglodyte Mrs Grundy; we imagine to ourselves a British matron contemporary with the cave bear and the woolly elephant But her very antiquity only makes it more puzzling.

There is an old gentleman who always tries to prove to me that the French are really Germans, that the Germans are all Slavs, and that the Russians are strictly Tartars: that is to say, that in keeping-count of the early races as they swarmed Westward we somehow skipped one, and have been wrong ever since. There must be some such explanation of how the domain which She sways came to be called Philistia.

I say this, because the old Philistia was tremendously masculine. It was the Jews who struck the feminine note. They used to swagger no end when they won a victory, and utilise it to the utmost limit of merciless savagery; but

when it came their turn to be thrashed they filled the very heavens with complaining clamour. We got no hint that the Philistines ever failed to take their medicine like men.

Consider those splendid later Philistines, the Norsemen. In all their martial literature there is no suggestion of a whine. They loved fighting for its own sake; next to braining their foes, they admired being themselves hewn into sections. They never blamed their gods when they had the worst of it. They never insisted that they were always right and their enemies invariably wrong. They cared nothing about all that. They demanded only fun. It was their victims, the Frankish and Irish monks, who shed women's tears and besought Providence to play favourites.

And here is the paradox. The children of these Berserker loins are become the minions of Mrs Grundy. By some magic she has enshrined Respectability in their temples. In one division of her empire she makes Mr Helmer drink tea; in another she sets everybody reading the *Buchholz Family*; in her chosen island home her husband on the sunniest Sundays carries an umbrella instead of a walking-stick. Fancy the wild delirium of delight with which the old Philistines would have raided her homestead, chopping down her Robert Elsmeres, impaling her Horsleys, and making the skies lurid with the flames of her semi-detached villa! Yet we call her place Philistia!

I know the villa very well. It is quite near to the South Kensington Museum. The title "Fernbank" is painted on the gate-posts. How well-ordered and comfortable does life beyond those posts remain! Here are no headaches in the morning. Here white-capped domestics move with neat alertness along the avenues of gentle routine, looking neither to the policeman on the right nor fiery-jacketed Thomas Atkins on the left. Here my friend Mr Albert Grundy invariably comes home by the Underground to dinner. Here his three daughters—girls of a type with a diminishing upper lip, with sharper chins and greater

length of limb than of old—lead deeply washed existences, playing at tennis, smiling in flushed silence at visitors, feeding contentedly upon Mudie's stores, the while their mamma spreads the matrimonial net about the piano or makes tours of inspection among her outlying mantraps on the lawn. Here simpers the innocuous curate; here Uncle Dudley, who has seen life in Australia and the Far West, watches the bulbs and prunes the roses, and, I should think, yawns often to himself; here Lady Willoughby Wallaby's card diffuses refinement from the summit of the card-basket in the hall.

To this happy home there came but last week—or was it the week before—a parcel of books. There were four complete novels in twelve volumes—fruits of that thoughtful arrangement by which the fair reader in Philistia is given three distinct opportunities to decide whether she will read the story through or not. Mrs Albert is a busy woman, burdened with manifold responsibilities to Church and State, to organised charities, to popularised music, to art-work guilds and the Amalgamated Association of Clear Starchers, not to mention a weather-eye kept at all times upon all unmarried males: but she still finds time to open all these packets of new books herself. On this occasion she gave to her eldest, Ermyntrude, the first volume of a novel by Mrs ————. It doesn't matter what fell to the share of the younger Amy and Floribel. For herself she reserved the three volumes of the latest work of Mr ————.

She tells me now that words simply can *not* express her thankfulness for having done so. It seems the selection was not entirely accidental. She was attracted, she admits, by the charmingly dainty binding of the volumes, but she was also moved by an instinct, half maternal prescience, half literary recollection. She thought she remembered having seen the name of this man-writer before. Where? It came to her like a flash, she says. Only a while ago he had a hook

called *A Bunch of Patrician Ladies* or something of that sort, which she almost made up her mind not to let the girls read at all, but at last, with some misgivings, permitted them to skim hastily, because though the morals were rocky —perhaps that wasn't her word—the society was very good. But this new book of his had not even that saving feature. Respectable people were only incidentally mentioned in it. Really it was quite *too* low. The chief figure was a farm-girl who for the most part skimmed milk or cut swedes in a field, and at other times behaved in a manner positively unmentionable. Mrs Albert told me she had locked the volumes up, after only partially perusing them. I might be sure *her* daughters never laid eyes on them. They had gone back to the library, with a note expressing surprise that such immoral books should be sent into any Christian family. What made the matter worse, she went on, was that Ermyntrude read in some paper, at a friend's house, that this man, whoever he may be, was the greatest of English novelists, and that this particular book of his was a tragic work of the noblest and loftiest order, which dignified the language. She was sure she didn't know what England was coming to, when reporters were allowed to put things like that in the papers. Fortunately she only took in *The Daily Tarradiddle*, which one could always rely upon for sound views, and which gave this unspeakable book precisely the contemptuous little notice it deserved.

It was a relief, however—and here the good matron visibly brightened up—to think that really wholesome and improving novels were still produced. There was that novel by Mrs ————. Had I read it? Oh,

I must lose no time! Perhaps it was not altogether so enchanting as that first immortal work of hers, which had almost, one might say, founded a new religion. True, one of the girls in it worked altar-cloths for a church, and occasionally the other characters broke out into religious conversation; but there were no clergymen to speak of, and

the charm of the other's ecclesiastical mysticism was lacking. "To be frank, the first and last volumes were just a bit slow. But oh! the lovely second volume! A young Englishman and his sister go to Paris. They stumble right at the start into the most delightful, picturesque, artistic set. Think of it: Henri Régnault is personally introduced, and delivers himself of extended remarks——"

"I met an old friend of Regnault's at the Club the other day," I interposed, "who complained bitterly of that. He said it was insufferable impudence to bring him in at all, and still worse to make him talk such blather as is put into his mouth."

Mrs Albert sniffed at this Club friend and went on. That Paris part of the book seemed to her to just palpitate with life. It was Paris to the very letter—gay, intellectual, sparkling, and oh! so free! The young Englishman at once set up a romantic establishment in the heart of Fontainebleau Forest with a French painter-girl. His sister was almost as promptly debauched by an elderly French sculptor. But you never lost sight of the fact that the author was teaching a valuable moral lesson by all this. Indeed, that whole part of the book was called "Storm and Stress." And all the while you saw, too, how innately superior the national character of the young Englishman was to that of the French people about him. One *knew* that in good time *he* would have a moral awakening, and return to England, marry, settle down, and make money in his business. Side by side with this you saw the entire hopelessness of any spiritual regeneration in the French painter-girl or any of her artistic set. And this was shown with such delicate art—it was so *perfect* a picture of the moral contrast between the two nations—that the girls saw it at once.

"Then the girls," I put in—"that is to say, you didn't lock *this* book up?"

Mrs Albert lifted her eyebrows at me.