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"Ground Arms"

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“GROUND ARMS”

Every great novel is born of the conviction, on the part of the author, that he has had experiences or conceptions which the race should share in the interests of a fuller manhood and womanhood. Frequently such novels are evolved in the throes of a great movement—religious, political, or social; and the novel with a purpose is the result. If these premises are correct, it would seem at first sight that the novel with a purpose is the highest type of novel, for if the novelist is the mediator of ideals, that writer who throws himself headlong into a great cause must produce wonderful results. During the great liberal movement of the forties this principle was accepted as the real literary gospel in Germany, and in our anti-slavery days American poets accepted the doctrine with enthusiasm.

In the last generation we have discounted such literature far more than it deserves to be. It is pure gold as compared with the lace and spangles of our drawing-room poetry and fiction. It reflects forcibly certain ideals; but its danger lies in overstressing a single ideal at the expense of other and sometimes worthier ideals. Poetry with a purpose depends for its ultimate value upon the scope of the cause which it serves. A novel written in defence of the free-silver issue will not outlive the campaign very long; but many years will pass before the anti-slavery struggle will be forgotten, and therefore we shall read our anti-slavery poems in the distant future and still regard them as good literature.

One of the highest examples of this type of literature is Bertha von Suttner's novel *Die Waffen Nieder*, translated under the English title *Ground Arms*. The book appeared when Prussia was making history in Europe. At last this German people who had bled from disruption for centuries was coming into its inheritance. In the hands of Bismarck Prussia was evolving a military system which in the Danish, Austrian, and Franco-Prussian wars welded together a new empire and staggered the world with its efficiency. Romantic, philosophical Germany

roused herself to an activity at which she herself was amazed. She became the scene of the most amazing economic development that Europe has ever seen, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the new militarism made its solid contribution to this growth.

At this time a woman, sprung from the Austrian military nobility, dreams her dream of world peace and writes down her convictions in two volumes. The writer has not been caught by the wild noise of a movement, but she pits her consciousness against her environment. In opposition to the military sentiments of her time, she has the courage to write a book that attempts to correct the public clamour.

Properly enough the central figure is a woman, not a man, for the graver horrors of war have come to those who have suffered the incidental hardships rather than to those who have fought and died on the field of glory. The daughter of a military race, she imbibes the traditions of militarism, and her emotions react in accordance with these traditions. She falls in love with a young officer and accepts the happiness which comes to her in the good old unthinking philistine manner. But suddenly she is roused from her dreams by the Austrian war in Italy. The absence of her husband affects her profoundly, for she does not share the views of other wives of officers, who take this turn in their domestic affairs as a matter of course or even as a golden opportunity for flirtation. For her the war has serious consequences, for her husband meets a horrible death on the field of battle.

From a purely personal experience she is embittered against war. The military atmosphere in which her widowhood is spent becomes more and more uncomfortable to her, and gradually she acquires an intellectual and philosophical attitude toward the whole question of war. She is greatly helped by reading Buckle's works in which she learns for the first time that history is not made up of battles alone. Moreover, she becomes interested in evolution, and applies the principles which she learns to the problem in hand. After some years she becomes acquainted with an officer who has likewise outgrown his fondness for war and is chafing under the service which he detests. In spite of the opposition of her military father, she marries this man, who intends to withdraw from the army at the earliest opportunity. But after their marriage her husband loses his

money because certain banks have failed on account of the incessant wars, and he is forced to remain in the service.

Before he gets a chance to retire, he takes part in the Danish and Austro-Prussian wars. These are depicted in all their horror. In addition to the carnage on the battlefield are described the filth and disease of the camps, and the awful epidemics that follow the campaigns. The Austrian war robs the heroine of almost all her relatives and thus makes it possible for her husband to withdraw from the service. The two now decide to devote themselves to the peace movement. Their activity takes them to Paris at the time of the Franco-Prussian war. There the husband, although not a partisan, is mistaken for a spy and shot.

This cursory review gives a rather inadequate notion of the importance of the book, which upon a first reading looks so plausible that all opposition to its thesis seems to be silenced. And yet certain misgivings can not be suppressed when the book is weighed in the larger balance. It can not be denied that the preachment is too much in evidence. Interesting as the author's arraignments may be, one is constantly forced to confess that the book would have gained in power, if the author had presented the facts and had allowed the reader to make his own deductions. For this reason Schnitzler's *Der junge Medardus* has completely eclipsed *Die Waffen Nieder*. Schnitzler rigidly confined himself to characterization, and without betraying his effort, if indeed it can be proved that he made a conscious effort, he produced the most powerful attack upon militarism in German literature. The novel and the drama have shown a marvellous development in this direction in recent years. Schnitzler profited by the example of Bertha von Suttner, whose work was crowned by the Nobel Committee when it had been completely eclipsed by other writers.

But it can not be denied that *Die Waffen Nieder* meets some of the severest tests. It is a sincere piece of work, and was written to advance a cause that does not have a temporary or local significance, but will remain a cause everywhere and at all times. If a writer is to serve a cause, he will have difficulty in finding a better one. The question that remains is, whether a writer is wise in openly allying himself with any cause.

Popular orators in our vast movement for social betterment have repeatedly urged men and women to hitch themselves to a cause, asserting that it would ennoble them. If this injunc-

tion is correct, then the question is settled, and poetry with a purpose must be the highest type; for literature can not be divorced from life. But the well-meant advice is open to serious objections. No one ever hitched himself to a cause without sacrificing his judicial attitude and his highest sanity. It is highly proper to help good causes as they appear, but it is imperative for the man who values his manhood to remain independent.

This becomes perfectly clear, when we follow the peace addresses of our own day. However ardently one may be in favour of peace, one is constantly forced to regret that worthy people will allow themselves to be biassed to such an extent. We read about all the things that we might have if we were saved the expenses of war, forgetting that life is made up largely of luxuries. We learn that a nation surrounded by hostile neighbours can afford to consider disarmament, and yet somehow hold its own. It is made perfectly clear that we can build up international commerce without a navy when competing nations have adequate protection. The minor apostles of peace deny also that any good has ever come from war. The rising tide of crime in our cities, however, raises the question whether we are after all not in need of something like military training. No one can deny that military Germany is singularly free from crime, and that her efficiency has been greatly increased by just this type of training. Especially the lower classes have derived enormous benefits from it. The Polish borders and the eastern provinces show this very clearly. The peasants have not only gained in physical strength, but they have lost much of their crudeness, as is proved conclusively by the improvement in their speech alone. Nor can it be denied that nations have frequently revealed their greatest possibilities under the stress of a great conflict. Our American ideals were hammered into shape in the throes of the Revolution. Europe owes Napoleon an enormous debt of gratitude, for it is due to him that mediævalism did not creep down the nineteenth century like a poison. His costly wars did prove to Western Europe that personal efficiency must take the place of traditional distinction.

No advocate of peace has kept his writings on a higher level than Dr. David Starr Jordan, yet it is impossible to agree with the positions which he has taken since he has wedded himself to the cause. When he tells us of the Dutch painting which represents a modern scientist looking at Napoleon under a magnifying

glass, we feel that he has allowed his prejudices to warp his judgment. In his *Blood of the Nation* he seems to forget that wars have frequently rid humanity of very questionable elements. That his main thesis has great force no one will deny, but it remains a fact that when Dr. Jordan is a peace advocate he is not as judicial as when he is Dr. Jordan the scientist or critic of human affairs.

As soon as we turn to causes on a lower level the case becomes doubly clear. Most enlightened people now gladly concede that the women are entitled to political rights, but those women who have not been able to see anything but woman suffrage for thirty years have dwarfed their womanhood. They have forgotten that, in addition to this worthy cause, other and even more worthy causes have loomed on the horizon with a just claim to their attention.

Intellectual activity is in constant danger of such enthusiasms. Boswell devotes his life to a biography of Johnson—to the detriment of Boswell. Our associations devoted to a special research or to the activity of single authors have not been an unmixed blessing. Even Shakespeare and Goethe do not deserve to have so many organizations and individuals limit themselves in research in regard to them. So also in science a man may rivet himself so closely to a valuable tendency that he closes his eyes to new possibilities and shuts himself up from the chances of really great work. But we shall, of course, always have organized intellectual and social movements, which will enlist the support of good men and women, and many will continue to be ennobled by them. At the same time they will ever carry with them the danger of stereotyping human interest and endeavour, no matter how good and noble they may be.

Bertha von Suttner herself became a propagandist and her subsequent works suffered as a result. She was not able to match her earlier work, because her outlook became onesided. This was very apparent to those who heard her during her recent trip to America. She had become the representative of one idea, and her energies were devoted to details of campaign work utterly out of keeping with her superb powers. She had given promise of matching the work of Marie Ebner von Eschenbach, but became stranded on the rock of a good cause.

Great literary men have often been abused because they did not take the popular movements of their time seriously, because

they seemed to remain untouched when the whole nation waxed eloquent in the defence of some great cause. Erasmus thus stood out against Luther and his popular following, because he refused to surrender the judicial attitude. Goethe could never bring himself to the point of genuine enthusiasm for the political aggrandizement of Germany. The friendly conference which he had with Napoleon has never been forgotten by the Germans. Yet this attitude was due to his unwillingness to throw himself into any movement that endangered his larger outlook upon men and affairs. He insisted upon keeping an open mind, ever receptive to the things that he had to face. The more universal minds scorn mere “team-work” of any kind, a circumstance which does not invalidate the fact that “team-work” is good for many.

The best example of the dangers of problem writing is afforded by one of our own writers. Of all of our American writers, Lowell gave most promise of ranking as a world poet. His earlier poems give evidence of his poetic fire and insight. Rooted deeply in the American soil, he understood the consciousness of New England, as his immortal poems on domestic life in New England show. But he was also able to sound the deeper consciousness of modern civilization, fathom the deeper currents of modern thought, and share the finer sensibilities of real culture. But he turned aside from the broad current of his earlier work and placed his superb powers at the disposal of the anti-slavery propaganda; hitched himself to a noble cause. In this field he surpassed all of his contemporaries. With the fervour of a Hebrew prophet he chanted one great poem after another. Surely no poet can feel ashamed of *Villa Franca*, *The Washers of the Shroud*, *The Bigelow Papers*, *The Cathedral*, and *The Commemoration Ode*; yet the deeper nature of Lowell rebelled against his own prophetic vein. His whole later life was tragically disrupted by this earlier partisan attitude. He tried heroically to rid himself of his biassed consciousness, to see life in its entirety, to get back to the broadly human. This is painfully evident in his *Heartsease and Rue*. Side by side are poems that reflect what the author of *Above and Below* and *Ambrose* might have done for American literature, and prosaic, bigoted scolding that can not, by any courtesy of criticism, be called literature. He was indeed a man grown mad with too much prophecy. On account of too much prophecy Lowell finally suffered the fate of Wordsworth, and, in spite of himself, became “an old man faithless in humanity.”

The judicial temperament is as desirable in the poet as it is in the judge or scientist. It does not preclude intenseness of utterance nor virility of execution. It is indispensable to the highest living and is therefore reflected in the greatest literature.

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