

Transcribed from *Literary Club Papers 11, 1892, April 30 to June 25*

Pure Mud – A Protest

Dr. Geo. W. Ryan's Informal

by Chas. Theo. Greve

“To the pure all things are pure” is a sentiment that has stifled many an honest criticism and has covered many a hideously naked truth. No man is anxious to pose as one so degraded in his tastes or so low in his perceptive powers as to discover impurity and nastiness in something that to all others is “noble and poetic”. As a result the “savage critic” of Keats' diseased imagination and Shelley's fine fancy has retired from the field of literature and the world is to some extent the loser. Abuse is not criticism, nor is a milk-and-water praise of all that is trivial, or an unthinking acception of anything that is a little out of the ordinary run of moral ideas literary production, even if grossness is glossed over by being called “strength” or “force”.

One of the most remarkable circumstance that go to make up literary history is the well-known trick of Wilhelm Hauff, the celebrated German prose writer. In the heat of a controversy with the prevailing ideas of his time he produced a work “The Man in the Moon” At once aroused the admiration and approval of his enemies and confounded his friends. All Germany wondered that his performance in the book was accepted as a veritable product of his serious reflections. But after a short time some inquiring mind, a little shrewder than his fellows, suggested that the work was a satire. The mere suggestion brought conviction to all and at once the world was convulsed with laughter at the trick and admiration for the most complete satire on record.

Not long since a very lovely young girl of my acquaintance descanted to me in most glowing terms of the beauty and purity of Mr. Thomas Hardy's last novel “Tess”. I felt inclined to believe that this brilliant novelist was imitating the example of his predecessor in writing of folk-tales and is now laughing in his sleeve at the success of his trick. For “Tess” is the sensation of the hour. Any book-seller will tell you that it is now most in demand by the general public and the world of book reviewer has lauded it to the skies. One of our most carefully conducted literary magazines says of it,— “in it Mr. Hardy has reached the zenith of his genius” and that this chronicle of “A pure woman faithfully presented” (such is its title) “has not only greatness of intention and bursts of power and beauty, but it possesses the finish of a cut gem, which emits light from every facet”.

What then is this faithful presentation of a pure woman? The plot baldly but truthfully stated is as follows. Tess Durbyfield, “a mere vessel of emotion, untinctured by experience” but “of a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth which made her appear more of a woman than she really was” yields to the

solicitations of a pseudo-Cousin, who is detestable in her eyes, and merely persistent, and as a result becomes a mother at a very early age. After parting from the partner of her guilt (they were never lovers) and after the convenient death of her child, she goes to work at a dairy, where she meets a young clergyman's son, who has agricultural aspirations and feels that the best instruction is obtainable among the dairy maids all of whom fall in love with him and any of whom would have yielded to him in any request that he might have made. Tess was no different in this respect from the others and in a short time her passion for him is only exceeded by her hopelessness. But Clare is an honorable man and eventually urges her to become his wife. A slight feeling of remorse causes her to hesitate and she makes a feeble effort to tell him her story but circumstances prevent and they are married. On their wedding day Clare seeing that his wife is troubled by thoughts of her own unworthiness makes a confession of how he once "went to London and plunged into eight-and-forty hours dissipation with a stranger". This seems a favorable opportunity and with confidence renewed by this confession of moral backsliding she tells her story. But strange as it may appear her husband did not view this matter in the light which he viewed his own fault and, to her dismay, insists on an immediate separation. He leaves her, after making provision for her wants and with the promise of return, if he can bring himself to bear it. Almost immediately after quitting her, he meets another of the dairy-maids to whom he proposes a liaison to which she readily and eagerly assents. He repents of this however and goes off alone. The pure woman, his wife, refuses to take advantage of the provision her husband made for her and returns to her former mode of life. Poverty is too much for her and hearing nothing from her husband and being moved by the wretched condition of her family she becomes a mistress of her first lover. The return of her husband makes her desperate and she kills her paramour and ends her miserable existence upon the scaffold.

This is the satire upon purity of which one of our foremost writers has been guilty and pure maids and mothers are reading it with approval and admiration. Says a reviewer "it is a tragedy of so poetic and noble type, that even the soil which clings to the garments of Tess is glorified." In other words without the excuse of passion, (for this she never feels) or of unusual poverty (she has never known any thing else) she yields to every solicitation made to her, Her first error was due to the discomfort of resisting the man that is repulsive to her, her second yielding to the desire to help her mother with- calling upon the bounty of her husband. There is no case any coercion but always what our author naïvely calls an "unresisting inevitableness." There is no reason to suppose that she would not have yielded to her husband without the form of marriage had he so desired but quite the contrary. This is a "pure woman" faithfully presented. What a base slander is this and how demoralizing is its tendency. Every social convention, every moral idea every sentiment of purity is thrown to the winds and yet, such is the art of the writer, that the purist in mind applaud the most. To quote again "The

people he shapes are big with primitive issues of things and we feel in them the swelling of forces native to a human world which our ordinary life, with its social artifices and conventions, cannot cramp after its own models.”

And yet this “swelling of forces” is simply and these “social artifices and conventions” are simply ordinary every day decency and morality which distinguishes respectability from profligacy.

Purity in woman means above all things personal chastity and there is no moral code that forgives a woman that yields up her virtue, even under the excuse of excessive passion. Our heroine has no such excuse. She is simply bartering her body and soul for an equivalent in creature comforts. She never makes a sacrifice. She makes not even the pretense of resistance. There is not a moral idea inspired by any thing or person in the book. And yet our young girls read and discuss this story of profligacy and sensuality and tell one another's mind is broadened by its perusal and that it is an evil mind that sees things aught that is wrong in this tale of shame. What can a pure woman who reads such a story of moral relaxation, such an insidious attack upon all that is pure and sweet in our most sacred relations be thinking of when she defends such stuff? It is an unexplained mystery. But the disagreeable fact remains and the logical conclusion must be that good taste is no longer a safe guide in literary censorship. For this reason I think it's time for a protest and a demand that we should resent with all our power such an assault upon what is dearest to us all, the purity of our women. Mr. Hardy's eminent position, his consummate skill and his marvelous power of description ought not to blind us to the fact that he has written a book that will do more to undermine our highest ideals than any work on the character usually excluded from our mail service and will put to shame the most extreme of our modern French realists.

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Apr 30th, 1892

Note: -I have been accused of inconsistency in that I defend Elsie Delaunay (in David Grieve) and attack Tess. Elsie was always pure. It is true she broke the bound of conventional morality but it was on account of the disbelief of the system itself and she was always true to her own ideal. Tess was distinctly a believer in those conventionalities and her whole conduct was in complete contrast with her fixed ideas of purity. Elsie's point of view may have been wrong but she was pure according to her standard. Tess standard may have been the correct one therefore so much the worse her betrayal of it. C. T. G.