

THE LATE DAVID GRAHAM PHILLIPS

Particularly because of his tragic and untimely end—still fresh in the minds of readers—the following consideration of David Graham Phillips as a representative American story teller, by Calvin Winter, will prove interesting. Mr. Winter, writing in *The Bookman*, says:

Have you ever watched a small ant attempting to drag a rather large beetle along a bit of rough ground? It is evidently a somewhat difficult and discouraging task, and the ant is likely to stop every now and then and walk around the beetle, trying to discover some point of vantage from which the more easily to grapple with his task. For, of course, there is some one way of doing the thing quite simply and easily, if only the ant has the perseverance to find it out. The critic who approaches the sum total of Mr. David Graham Phillips's published work finds himself at the start somewhat in the position of the above-mentioned ant. The work looms up rather big and bulky and unmanageable; and it seems to be a problem to know just from what angle to approach it. And yet undoubtedly here, too, there is some one way of approach that will greatly minimize the whole problem of analysis.

In the first place, however, let us frankly recognize that Mr. Phillips is a rather important factor in the development of American fiction at the present day. We could name on the fingers of one hand the contemporary novelists who, like Mr. Phillips, are devoting themselves to depicting and studying the big ethical and social problems of their own country and generation, and doing it in a big, bold comprehensive way, with a certain epic sweep and magnitude. And among these few none is more in earnest than Mr. Phillips, none striving more patiently to do the thing in the best, most forceful, most craftsman-like manner. Having conceded all this, we may also recognize that his results have fallen somewhat behind his intentions, that with all his industry he has developed his technique rather slowly, and that while just a few of his novels are of a quality which no serious student of present-day fiction can afford to neglect, a large proportion of the remainder may conveniently be set aside altogether as merely tending to increase the bulk of a critical analysis without contributing any light of real importance.

Now, in saying that Mr. Phillips has been slow in acquiring the technique of construction, we ought in fairness to define very carefully just wherein he seems to be defective. No competent judge could possibly read such books as "Old Wives for New" and "The Second Generation," without perceiving that the author must be widely acquainted with the best modern novelists, abroad as well as at home. There are certain qualities in these later books of his which are to be explained only through the influence of the best French realism—qualities which on the one hand are not the result of a conscious and deliberate imitation; but on the other, cannot possibly be an independent and spontaneous creation. The broad, Zolaesque sweep of phrase and action, the sense of jostling crowds and ceaseless activity, the endless panorama of city streets, the whole trick of treating humanity in the mass—these are things which Mr. Phillips has learned to do as very few American writers have done them; and necessarily he must have learned them at the fountain head. Indeed his whole conception of what a novel should be is French rather than Anglo-Saxon. If you talk with him about theories of fiction he will admit frankly on the one hand that he has small use for the artificiality of such devices for giving unity to a series of stories as Balzac's plan of the *Comedie Humaine* or Zola's complicated family tree of the Rougon-Macquart; but, on the other hand, he does insist upon seeing every human story as a cross-section of life; and by a cross-section of life he does not mean a little local slice carefully measured to fit the dimensions of the particular story he is telling. On the contrary, if he is narrating the simple love affair of a boy and girl in some small town of the middle west, he is always conscious, even though he has no need of bringing this out in the story, that there is between that boy and girl and all the other people in that town an inevitable and all-pervading human relationship; that that town is not an isolated community, but is itself one of the links in the vast network of social and industrial life stretching over a huge continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific with endless miles of railroad intersecting it, with a centralized government, a President and Congress at Washington and with countless lines of steamers keeping it in touch with the other world powers. All this helps in a way to show what to Mr. Phillips is a very vivid actuality. And of course the writer who always sees each little human happening, not as an isolated incident, but as a detail of a tremendous and universal scheme, necessarily has a bigger outlook upon life and necessarily communicates to his readers a similar impression of bigness and of vitality.

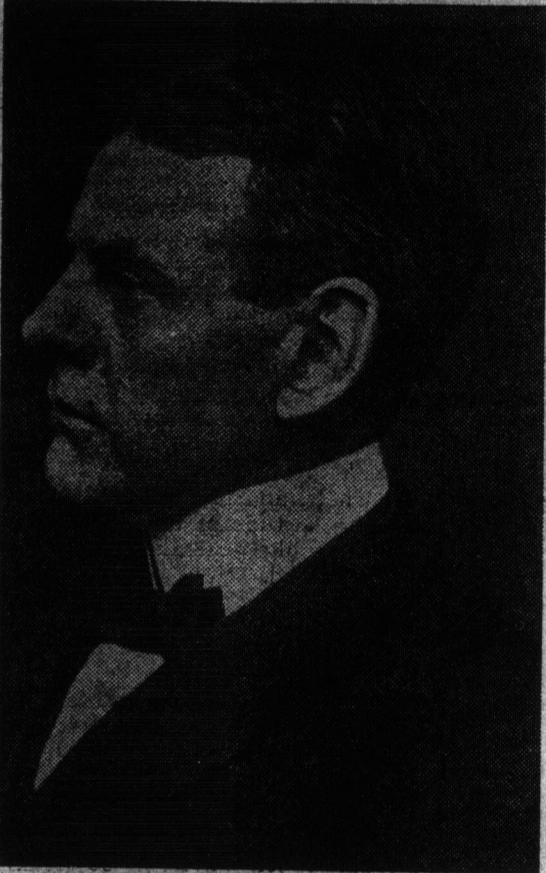
This brings us directly to the question: Why is it that so many of Mr. Phillips's books contain more of promise than of fulfillment? Why is it that, starting as they do with big ethical problems and a broad epic treatment, they are so apt at the end to leave rather the impression of having given us an isolated and exceptional human story and not

as having symbolized some broad and universal principle? The answer, I think, is that Mr. Phillips in his methods of work reverses the usual process followed by writers of the epic type by finding his germ idea in a single character or incident and building from these, instead of starting with some ethical principle or psychological problem and then searching for characters and incidents that would best illustrate it. It follows that while such books as "Old Wives for New," and "Light-fingered Gentry," and even "The Hungry Heart" make us feel that there is in the background, behind the specific story of individuals, a certain general and widespread principle, just as there must be in any story that lays claim to epic breadth; yet this secondary and general theme of the book is never clearly and specifically defined, never personified with that graphic visualization that makes us think, in Zola's *L'Argent*, for instance, of the Bourse, in *Le Ventre de Paris* of the Halles, in *L'Assommoir* of Alcohol; as vast symbolic monsters wreaking their malignant pleasure upon mankind. The Zolaesque method is not necessarily the best method of arriving at this double interest, the individual and the universal, which just a few big novels have achieved; it is simply one of the best methods and the one most easily grasped by the layman, because it is so obvious. No one, for instance, could read Frank Norris's "McTeague," with its underlying symbol of Gold, and miss the significance of it. That symbol of Gold is flung at us from every page; it dangles in the air in the shape of the huge gold tooth outside McTeague's dental parlor; it lies warm upon the ground in golden discs of sunlight filtering through the trees; we feel the cold, sharp greed of it in Trina's hoarded coins, the madness of it in the hidden treasure of glistening vessels that wrecks an unbalanced mind. In Mr. Phillips's books, on the contrary, one feels the ethical purpose far more vaguely; he is always stimulating, he sets us thinking deeply over big problems—most deeply, perhaps, when he most strongly antagonizes us; but it is difficult to say with precision, or, at all events, to say within the limits of ten words just what principle any one book of his stands for. Take, for instance, the best and strongest of all his books, "The Husband's Story," even here the general public has groped rather helplessly to decide just what the author meant. It must be admitted that on the whole the general public has in this particular case been rather stupid in failing to recognize that when Mr. Phillips chose to see this particular story through the eyes of a certain shrewd and unscrupulous financier, he deprived himself of the chance of expressing his own ideas directly, and was obliged to give us everything strongly colored by its passage through another man's temperament. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly to some extent Mr. Phillips's own fault that the majority of his readers assumed that "The Husband's Story" was an indictment of the American woman as a whole, and not simply of one limited and ultra-snobbish type of American woman. And the same question of his meaning is raised with considerably more justice in every one of his earlier books. Is "Old Wives for New" a protest against girl-and-boy marriages, or an endorsement of divorce, or both? Is "The Hungry Heart" an arraignment of the doll house treatment of a wife, or a plea for equal standards for man and woman in questions of morality? And is "The Second Generation" to be taken mainly as a protest against inherited fortunes—a glorification of work, or as a satire upon the snobbery of America's idle class? In other words, had Zola written this book, would his symbol for it have been the Probate Court, the Dinner Pail or the Powdered Flunkey? It is part and parcel of Mr. Phillips's habitual tendency to see his cross-section of life in its completeness that he finds himself unable to do one thing at a time, obliged to complicate and obscure his central purpose by having in reality several central purposes.

And this brings us directly face to face with the real fault of Mr. Phillips's method of work, the real weakness of even his best achievements. He is not merely the clear-eyed and impartial observer of life; he is always a partizan and a reformer. He is so keenly interested in the problems that he is setting forth that he cannot keep himself and his ideas out of them. Of course when you take one of Mr. Phillips's novels to pieces you discover that in its essence it is a problem novel; but this side of his work he has learned to disguise pretty cleverly. It is not so much the way in which he twists the lives of his characters in order to point a moral, but rather the slight running comment going all through the narrative portions of his story that keeps us reminded of what his particular outlook upon life is and of the somewhat annoying fact that he is trying to do our thinking for us. Here, for instance, is a trivial little example which stands as typical of his whole method: in "White Magic" he has occasion to tell us, as evidence of the expensive scale on which his heroine's mother runs her summer home, that she had no less than five footmen in attendance at the front door. Now, some of us may think this mere foolishness; others may wax indignant over it as a criminal extravagance; and others again simply regard it as no more than right and proper for a person in her position of life. Mr. Phillips has as good a right as anybody else to

his own opinion about it, but it is not good art for him to force that opinion upon the reader by couching this little fact in the following terms: "Five lackeys... five strapping fellows with dumb faces and the stalwart figures that the rich select, as menial show pieces." There is a veiled sneer in the very intonation of such a sentence that is incompatible with the best art.

It is this uncontrolled tendency to inject the personal equation into his books that every now and then sets the reader tingling with sudden antagonism in the midst of some of his strongest scenes. His outlook upon life is extremely clear-eyed and broad; and if he would be always content to give us the uncolored facts and let us think what we will about them we would get considerably more benefit as well as enjoyment out of contact with his people and their histories. That there is a good deal of snobbery among our wealthy and fashionable class, our imitation aristocracy of money, is undoubtedly true.



DAVID GRAHAM PHILLIPS

And to the average sane-minded American there is something distinctly foolish in the sight of an American mother trailing her daughters through Europe with the open and unashamed intention of selling them to a title. But, after all, questions of this kind are largely a matter of the point of view. There is no useful purpose served in waxing indignant over people who happen to regulate their lives somewhat differently from the way in which you or I would regulate our lives. It is always worth while to set forth as strongly as possible in a story certain existing social conditions which the author in his secret heart condemns, but there is nothing gained by insisting that the reader must condemn them also. It may very well happen that the reader does not at all share the author's views, and in that case such an attempt to prejudice him is fully as irritating to read as the coloring given to news in a paper of the opposite political party to your own.

This interference on the part of Mr. Phillips, born as it is of over-earnestness, produces upon the types of his people and the construction of his plots certain modifications which are precisely what a shrewd judge of books might expect in advance to find there. In the first place, it leads him quite frequently to picture not what average people are doing under existing conditions, but what somewhat unusual people would in his opinion do under conditions just the reverse of those that exist—as, for instance, in "The Second Generation," not what happens to the inefficient heirs of great wealth, when the hard-working father dies, but to the distinctly exceptional and self-sufficient children of a rich man who, for their own good, deliberately disinherits them. Or again, in "White Magic," he studies not the typical case of the girl reared in wealth and luxury who, upon losing her heart to an impetuous artist, fights a long battle with herself because she cannot go against her training; but the exceptional case of the girl who flings such training to the winds and brazenly offers her heart and her hand to the penniless artist in question, repulses her because he selfishly thinks that she will interfere with his art.

And, secondly, this tendency to tell us what we ought to think has its effect upon the individualization of his characters, and more especially upon his women. What I mean here is best illustrated by taking for a moment a book from which this particular fault is absent, "The Husband's Story." This book being written in the first person makes it of course impossible for Mr. Phillips to intrude directly his own opinions; and probably it is due to this fact quite as much as to any other that, artistically speaking, this is the best book that he has produced. The character of the wife Edna we get entirely as colored by the husband's eyes—as strongly colored as though we were looking at her

through a piece of stained glass. The admirable thing about it is that the color is uniformly and consistently maintained from start to finish—a bit of craftsmanship that requires a rather masterly touch. In turning from this book to others that are not written in the first person we realize that a good deal of the time Mr. Phillips is coloring his women not so strongly to be sure, but none the less to a noticeable extent—in other words, that he is forcing us to see them through the medium of his own eyes instead of directly from life. We become aware of this by finding that he quite frequently expects us, indeed demands of us, to admire things that his heroines do and sty which we ourselves cannot find at all admirable; and sometimes he is led into making them take certain actions that we are quite sure the women that we ourselves think they are would not have been guilty of taking. But questions of this kind are not a matter for generalization; they can be better understood when we proceed to take up for separate analysis a few of the more significant of his novels.

Mr. Phillips has been writing novels for about a dozen years, during which time he has produced somewhat less than a score of volumes. To analyze these books one by one in the order of their production, beginning with "The Great God, Success," and "A Woman Ventures," and coming steadily down the list through the "Golden Fleece," and "The Cost," and all the rest of them, would be not only tiresome but futile. It would be simply one of the many ways of making it impossible to see the woods because of the trees. Mr. Phillips has been striving from the start to do pretty much the same sort of thing in all his work, and the only practical difference between his later volumes and his earlier is that he has been learning to do the same sort of thing considerably better. For this reason there is no more point in spending time on those earlier volumes than if one were writing an analysis of Zola it would be better while to waste space on "Madeline Ferat" and "Nantas" and "Therese Raquin." In point of fact, one gets quite effectively the whole range of Mr. Phillips's powers and also of his weaknesses in the volumes that belong to his period of mature development, the volumes produced within the last four or five years.

"The Second Generation" is probably the best book to recommend to a reader approaching Mr. Phillips for the first time, because, on the one hand, it contains less than most of his books that is likely to arouse antagonism; and, on the other, it admirably illustrates his strongest qualities, his ability to give you the sense of life and motion and the clash of many interests. The substance of it can be told in rather fewer words than is usual with Mr. Phillips's novels. Old Hiram Ranger, millionaire manufacturer of barrels in a small western town, suddenly makes two rather painful discoveries. First, he learns that his remarkable physical strength, which has never failed him for a day throughout all his years, is at last breaking and that he has not many days in which to "set his house in order." And his second and even more painful discovery is that for 20 years he has unwittingly been harming his son and his daughter by over-indulgence, allowing them to grow up in idleness, to form foolish and extravagant tastes, to choose their friends exclusively from the ultra-fashionable circles and to learn to despise the humble beginnings from which he himself sprang and from which the money that they thoughtlessly waste has come. He decides in bitter agony of soul that there is at this late date only one thing that he can do to repair his huge mistake, and that is to deprive his children of the inheritance on which they have counted. The act hurts him more cruelly than it can possibly hurt them—it hurts him through his love for them, through his pride in them and through his desire for public esteem and approval, since he foresees that such an act will be misunderstood and disapproved. All of this part of the story, the old man's sturdy courage and shrewd common sense, contrasted with the weak vanity and costly luxury of the son and daughter, is given with a graphic truth, a rugged strength, a sure swiftness of movement, that show you before you have finished the opening chapter that Mr. Phillips is one of the few American novelists who deserve to be taken seriously and to be watched with some care. But from the middle point of the story we get a rather exasperating impression that we are being allowed to behold not so much a cross-section of life as an up-to-date morality play. Old Hiram Ranger has chosen rather drastic methods to teach his son and daughter a lesson, to reform their characters, practically to make them over. No one can say that a situation thus created is without interest; but it becomes exasperating to find that the old man has made his calculations with the sureness of omnipotence, that his plan succeeds even in all its minor details and that the son and daughter repent of all their errors, reform themselves completely, are to all intents and purposes born anew. Mr. Phillips was probably not conscious of it when he wrote the book, but none the less it is to all practical intents a grown-up version of the story of the bad little boy who went fishing on Sunday and was drowned and the good little boy who

went to church and was rewarded with plum pudding.

A dozen different readers would probably give a dozen different statements of the central theme of "Old Wives for New." The real importance of the book—for among Mr. Phillips's books it is unquestionably one of the important ones—is that it sets forth quite pitilessly the gradual estrangement that arises between a husband and wife in the course of long years through the woman's sloth and selfishness and gratification of all her whims. It is an open question whether Mr. Phillips's method of presenting this problem might not have been improved upon. What he has done is to show us first in a brief prelude the sudden ardour of a boy-and-girl attachment, each caught by the mere physical charm of youth and health, and high spirits and rushing into a marriage with no firm basis of mutual understanding. Then he skips an interval of about 20 years and takes us into the intimate life of this same couple, showing us with a frankness of speech and of thought that is almost cruel in its unsparring realism the physical and mental degeneration of the woman, fat and old and slovenly before her time, and the unspoken repulsion felt by the man who has kept himself young, alert and thoroughly modern in outward appearance as well as in spirit. The situation is complicated by the presence of two grown children, a son and a daughter, who see unwillingly the approaching crisis and realize their helplessness to ward it off. Such a situation in real life may solve itself in any one of 50 different ways. What Mr. Phillips has chosen to do is to bring the husband in contact with a young woman who represents everything in which his own wife is lacking. And although the man fights for a long time against temptation, in the end he obtains freedom from the old wife through the divorce court and promptly replaces her with the new. There is probably no other American novel that gives us with such direct and unflinching clairvoyance the sordid, repellent, intimate little details of a mistaken marriage that slowly but surely culminate in a sort of physical nausea and an inevitable separation. What a good many of us are apt to resent in the book is the stamp of approval that the author seems to place upon the man who deliberately discards a wife after her youth and beauty are gone, not because he thinks it for their mutual welfare, but for the cold-blooded reason that he wants to marry somebody else. There is a sort of heartless immorality about the whole, proceeding that makes us feel that the slovenly, faded wife, with her shallow pretense of having worn herself out with household cares, her gluttony that has been the ruin of health and beauty, her peevish temper and ridiculous vanity, makes on the whole a rather better showing than the husband. One cannot leave this book without adding just a word of protest against what may seem a trivial detail, yet is the sort of detail in which Mr. Phillips sins rather frequently. The husband has met the woman who embodies his ideal of feminine perfection quite by chance in the woods, where he and his son are camping out. In the course of three weeks, almost without their knowing it, they have fallen in love with each other; then comes the awakening, and they go their separate ways, the man still knowing nothing of the woman's identity, of her station in life or of the particular corner of America which is her home. Several chapters later the man is in New York helping his daughter buy her trousseau. There are a thousand shops in New York from which she might choose, but purely by chance she takes her father to the one shop which happens to be presided over by the woman with whom he is in love. A coincidence of this sort is bad enough when it seems to be more or less of a structural necessity; but when, as in this case, one can think of a dozen simple ways of avoiding it it becomes unpardonable.

There is only one excuse for pausing to speak of Mr. Phillips's next volume, "The Fashionable Adventures of Joshua Craig," namely, that it shows that even yet the author is weak in the power of self-criticism. How it is possible for a writer possessing the breadth of view and the power of expression that have gone into the making of at least four or five of Mr. Phillips's best novels to put forth seriously a piece of cheap caricature like Joshua Craig quite passes the understanding of the ordinary impartial outsider. Joshua Craig is simply an exaggerated specimen of a rather exasperating type of novel which has unfortunately become far too common in American fiction; the novel which shows the refined and carefully nurtured American girl, usually from the east, belying all her inherited instincts and acquired training by marrying the rugged, virile, usually rather vulgar man of the people who, for the purposes of this type of novel, is generally represented as coming from the west. The whole type seems to have originated at about the time that Owen Wister made Mollie's New England conscience capitulate to "The Virginian," and the type has rather steadily degenerated year by year. But of course it is never fair to quarrel with an author simply because one does not happen to like what he has tried to do. The trouble with Joshua Craig is that he has so obviously failed to do what he tried. Joshua is not merely bluff and

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Popularly, next it is an introduction can happen to a wild come popular among is sealed. It may l bers for many year nal abundance, the e and the degree of pr habits and habitat, reaches that point w of its diminished s the normal hazard o of the species is th If the animal itself a group, its fate is no in recognition of this advanced game aut laws for the adequat voracious beasts as e to an extent that e Thus there is alrea the bear in some sec in time to come the those other wild an "pests" which are g favor of sportsmen. when these beasts of out to the point wh game do not balanc ing quarries.

Foremost in this the largest and most erican cats, and per member of the genus as panther, painter, and puma, it has e place in the imagina tive country, where tically nothing autho cerning its real chara quently fancy wove p the power and appar beast, and indigenous countered the cougar about it, were not s imagination with hig ferocity and prowess of considerable dogm ter-assertion, little m than its genera stress of pursuit, but this head is now su and authentic to e gar where human b stances are on reco made unprovoked on there are exceptional per, such as are obse meekest animals, any sense characteristic o To assert, however early tales of the cou invariably fables seem unless, indeed, we are the character of the o change in consequen civilization. It is a v the grizzly has lost n city and courage wh and possibly in the s the cougar has learn grizzly. At least, la the contrary, it is ju the unsophisticated may have been a gre it is at present.

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Except for certain originated in the im chronized the event, report that conceivab pened. Two of the d probable, and a third arily, when attacking animal, and in many greater part of the ye noise at any time; ye ing seriously amiss w the cougar screamed. impossible that a seco pursuit. These animal and even during the a not sharply defined, the society of the fema individuals vary greatl On the third point the The cougar, although i carry it with wondr distances, has the win could no more keep u a portly city magnate motor. It is an excep outrun the dogs for yards, if started close u hunters will agree th age limit of the cou speed. After that its ru