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Books of the Day

THE FREELANDS. By John Galsworthy, London, Heinemann, 6s.

Mr. Ford Madox Hueffer has somewhere said that the chronic perversity of a compositor has made him doubt the rule about the consecutive vowels in "receive" and "believe." Similarly, a person familiar with the Bible and modern fiction might be induced to wonder if, after all, the thing that "abideth," mentioned in the sacred volume, is "charity"—if, in fact, it is not irony. Certainly in this world, where many can die well and few can live well, irony, like a smiling sparkle from a smashed ornament, seems the proper solace of all who have forsaken the ideal and contemplate it at their feet, dead and unforgettable.

The Use of Irony.

It is right to say that a humane artist can use irony without constructing an ironic system, and Mr. Galsworthy shows how a thoroughly amiable and unusually observant artist can make of irony a tool instead of a god. One confidently looks to Mr. Galsworthy for an introduction to real people, of their earth earthy, of their class classy; and one is not disappointed. With the possible exception of a burlesque grandmother, who plays the part of amateur druggist to all who come her way, everybody in his novel is acceptable by an educated imagination. Several members of the family named in his title are admirably drawn. There is the prosperous novelist, as critical of society as any iconoclast, but without industrious destructiveness. There is his opulent brother, safely posed by self-interest and mildly antipathetic both towards reformers and the objects of their special scorn. There is his taciturn Nature-loving brother, whose wife and children are aflame against the tyranny of the countryside. There is his daughter, a veritable shrine of love, who makes the reader remember all ignorant and exquisitely melancholy comradeship with night and dawn and beauty everywhere, which is for many young people the soul's consciousness of birth.

Rulers and Ruled.

Besides these people Mr. Galsworthy gives us the oppressors and the oppressed. There is a lady in his little Worcestershire world who devoutly objects to romances in which the heroine is a deceased wife's sister, and she abhors a pretty girl out of step with propriety. She has power, and, like the police, she would intimidate what she conceives to be vice. In the clash of souls she wins, but her victory is so ugly and tragic that a Dickens could easily have brought it home to her as a defeat. But the old school of despotically "poetic" justice survives only among the third-rate. Mr. Galsworthy is fully aware of the impregnability of one rock—the principles of a narrow rich lady. One of the most impressive pages in his novel is that which records the failure of the two young altruists who called on Lady Malloring to dissuade her from evicting her husband's offending tenant. "They had not yet learned—most difficult of lessons—how to believe that people could in their bones differ from them."

Mr. Galsworthy's drawing of the labourers concerned in the case of Mrs. Grundy versus the rural Eros is excellent in its simple unexaggerated realism. If satisfactory presentation of character makes a good novel he deserves very nearly full marks. There is something more which would make a better novel; at that I fancy he is arriving; and I may add that no realist a la carte has ever arrived at it.

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