The Tragedy of Mr. Tarkington

Mr. Cabell as a subject is approached in an article to be found on the last page.

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL.

"BOOTH TARKINGTON," by Robert Cortes Holliday, New York. Doubleday, Page & Co. $1.25 net.

THIS is a "pleasant" and very nearly complete account of Mr. Tarkington's exploits as a writer. The one thing it omits is the tragedy of his success. For to Mr. Tarkington at 30 befell the disaster of becoming a popular novelist; and he has made since then no efficient, nor indeed any very perceptible, effort to rid himself of the handicap. That is really a tragedy.

If, as Stevenson declared, the fairies were tipsy at Mr. Kipling's christening, at Mr. Tarkington's they must have been in the last stage of maudlin generosity. Poetic insight they gave him; and humor; and the knack of story building; and all their own authentic elfin liveliness of fancy; and actually perceptive eyes, by grace of which his more truly Tarkingtonian pages are enriched with countless happy little miracles of observation; and the dramatic gift, of contriving and causing to move convincingly a wide variety of puppets in nothing resembling the puppet-master; and the not uncommon desire to "write," with just enough deficiency in common sense to make him willing to put up with the laboriousness of writing fairly well.

In fine, there is hardly one natural endowment requisite or useful to a great fiction writer that was omitted by these inebriated fairies. And to all this Mr. Tarkington has since added, through lonesome and grinding toil, an astounding proficiency at the indoor sport of adroit writing. No living writer of English, indeed, employs the contents of his dictionary more artfully or, in the general hackneyed and misleading phrase, has a better "style."

No less, for nineteen years Mr. Tarkington has been writing best-sellers, varied every once in a while by something that was a best-seller in nature rather than performance. His progress has been from the position of a formidable rival of the late Mr. Charles Major (not very long ago the world-famous author of "When Knighthood Was in Flower") to the point of figuring as prominently in The Saturday Evening Post as Mr. Peter B. Kyne and Mr. Ring Lardner. So that, upon the whole, one wonders if ere this the fairies have not humored their protégé yet further, by becoming Prohibitionists.

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MR. TARKINGTON has written nothing that does not make very "pleasant" reading. He has in fact re-written the quaint legend, that virtue and honest worth must rise inevitably to be the target both of rice-throwing and of respectful consideration by the bank cashier, as indefatigably as human optimism and the endurance of the human wrist would reasonably permit. For the rest, his "plots" are the sort of thing that make criticism seem cruel. His ventriloquism is of startling excellence; but his marionettes, under the most lifelike of exteriors, have either hearts of gold or entrails of sawdust; there is no medium; and as touches their behavior, all the Tarkingtonian puppets "form themselves" after the example of the not unfamous young person who had a curl in the middle of her forehead. And Mr. Tarkington's auctorial philosophy was summed up long ago, in "The Gentleman from Indiana": "Look," said Helen. "Aren't they good dear people?"—"The beautiful people!" he answered.

Now this, precisely this, Mr. Tarkington has been answering ever since, to every riddle in life. At 48 he is still murmuring, for publication, "The good, dear people, the beautiful people"—who, according to his very latest bulletin, are presently to be awarded suitable residences in "a noble and joyous city, unbelievably white." Questionless, the apostrophe, no less than the prediction, is "pleasant" to the apostrophized, his chosen and enormous audience; and as such is well received by the majority, who, according to our theories of government, are always right.

Yet to some carping few of us (who read the daily papers, say) this sentiment now seems peculiar anachronistic and irrational. The world to us present is not very strikingly suggestive of a gigantic gumdrop variegated by oceans of molasses: we dispute if Omnipotence was ever, at any time, a confectioner's apprentice: and to us whatever workmen may have been employed in laying out that "noble and joyous city" appear undoubtedly to have gone on strike. So we remember Mr. Tarkington's own story of Lukens and the advice therein, when dealing with a popular novelist, to "treat him with silent contempt or a brick." And we reflect that Mr. Tarkington is certainly not a person to be treated with silent contempt.

For Mr. Tarkington has genius, not mere talent—an uncontrollable genius that defies concealment, even by the livery of a popular novelist. The winding up of the William Sylvanus Baxter stories, for example, is just the species of necromancy attainable by no other living author; so that a theater wherein but now the humor of sitting upon wet paint and the mirthful aspect of a person vomiting have made their bids for popular applause, is shaken to its low foundation by the departing rumble of a "pompous train," and unsuspected casements open upon Fairy Land. Nor is the ending of "The Turmoil," technically, a whit inferior. Here, though, with due respect to Mr. Howells, one does not "stand a-tiptoe" to reach an effect so beautiful and unpredictable and so eminently as it ought to be. Instead one kneels.

Yet Mr. Tarkington enjoys a form of wealth which should not be exempt from fair taxation. And in fine, it all comes back to this: to write best-sellers is by ordinary a harmless and very often a philanthropic performance; but in Mr. Tarkington's case it is a misappropriation of funds.

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THIS may well seem the inkiest ingratitude, thus to begrudge to Mr. Tarkington prosperity and wide applause, in view of all the enjoyable half-hours he has purveyed. But in cold earnest one of the most dire calamities that ever befell American literature was the commercial success of "The Gentleman from Indiana," so closely followed by the popular triumph of "Monsieur Beaucaire."

For this double misfortune has since bred such concessions by Mr. Tarkington, to the necessity of being "pleasant," as would seem amply to justify a remission of that necessity, at all events among the admirers of his genius as distinguished from its employment. And the pathos of it all is but augmented by the circumstance that both of these novels were quite fine enough to have "fallen flat," and thus have left Mr. Tarkington to write in rational obscurity a book commensurate with his abilities.

As matters stand, we who have since read all his stories with resentful admiration can but consider hopefully the date of Mr. Tarkington's birth, and reflect that the really incurable optimism of senility remains a comfortably remote affair. Religion, too, assures us that there is always hope for a change of heart, if not for any actual regaining of the Biblical view—which, to be sure, is peculiarly ophthalmic as to the far-and-wide existence of "good and dear and beautiful people," and is unlikely ever to be taken seriously by Americans.

No less, the fact remains that out of "Forty-eight" years of living Mr. Tarkington has thus far given us only "Seventeen." Nor would this matter were Mr. Tarkington the mental and artistic equal of his far more popular rival, Mr. Harold Bell Wright. But Mr. Tarkington has genius. That, be its repeated, is really a tragedy.

It is a tragedy to which Mr. Holliday does not refer in his "pleasant" little book about Mr. Tarkington. For Mr. Holliday writes with admirable discretion, and does but, cautiously, infrequently, and from afar, presume to sniff the sacrifice; so that his book, too, makes very "pleasant" reading.