

WHAT Johan Bojer planned to make *The Face of the World* there is no way of telling. But as the volume stands it is a very handsome piece of irony; and its main character in particular is "rendered" in such a manner that all readers of this book will (I believe) remember Harold Mark for a long while, with (I sincerely trust) unuttered sentiments.

This Harold Mark the reader encounters as a newly graduated Norwegian doctor, contentedly married, and temporarily established in Paris, where his wife, Thora, is vaguely studying "art" at the Louvre and thereabouts. And the two were happy enough until Harold fell to thinking quite seriously about what sort of a world he and his fellow creatures inhabited and began extending toward his fellow creatures a great, burning sympathy.

Now, as everybody knows, when Scandinavians once begin sympathizing they go further than the philanthropists of more abstemious races, who can take pity or leave it alone. Thus this great, burning sympathy at once demolished Harold's liking for Thora's art. "Looking at Veronese's beautiful women, he thought of the number of slaves there must have been to maintain such an article of luxury." He would even embarrass his wife by voicing such high reflections quite openly before strangers.

One day Harold and Thora were standing in front of David's picture of Napoleon's coronation. Thora was for saying the proper things and for enjoying all the proper reactions; but Harold's devastating contribution to æsthetic criticism was to remark that Napoleon was "one of the world's greatest criminals" and to reflect "How far along the world would have been if only he had lost the battle of Lodi!"

Thora was startled, but she exhibited commendable self-restraint by turning silently away from him to converse with a Finnish sculptor who estimated the Louvre pictures by more customary touchstones.

Then came the evening when there was a public meeting in the Place de la Republique to protest against the massacre of the Jews in Kiev, and Harold was wishful to extend to these dead Jews his great, burning sympathy by standing in the crowd and hearing M. Anatole France deliver an address.

But Thora's feeling was that for them to stand in the crowd in all that rain would do small good to the dead Jews and a great deal of harm to her best clothes. So she undressed and went to bed. "Do you come too!" she urged. "And the candle threw a yellow light over the simple bed and her pretty young face, while the slender, warm body beneath the bedclothes made its appeal to him. She was full of the joyful present and wanted him to forget everything else."

So Harold took her hands in his and pressed them. "Listen, Thora," he said; "if you'll be good and let

me go to that meeting this evening I'll go with you to the Louvre tomorrow in return."

Thora let him go. Later she very sensibly let him go for good and all and she married the Finnish sculptor who estimated the Louvre at its true value.

II.

Later still Harold Mark returned to Norway to practise medicine in Christiania. He was by this time a socialist, and, sinking gradually into yet murkier depths of mentality, became at last a prohibitionist. He spoke at labor demonstrations, wrote letters to the newspapers and (very gratifyingly) was sued and fined for his verbal assaults upon various liquor dealers in a land as yet unterrorized by an Anti-Saloon League. All this was due to Harold's continuing to think quite seriously about the world, which seemed to him in a very bad way indeed and eminently deserving of his great, burning sympathy.

"I think," he wrote his mother, "about everything and everybody. My mind enlarges itself so as to embrace the whole world. Mankind becomes a seething ocean that rolls backwards and forwards through all my being. I grow dizzy with the feeling of infinity. Millions of cries for help rise from the hopeless confusion: I see a crowd of faces contorted with pain: arms are outstretched for help as from millions in danger of drowning. . . . Good Lord, mother! If I could only get rid of this great, burning sympathy for everything and everybody!"

In fact, that does not seem to be a pleasant way of spending one's evenings: nor, after several years of thus enlarging his mind after supper could Harold detect that his great, burning sympathy was being of any use to any specific person. In consequence at about the time he is appointed senior physician of the seaside hospital at his birthplace Dr. Mark resolves to focus all his great, burning sympathy upon "one human being who is unhappy"; and casting about for a likely victim decides that Ivar Holth, a partly insane ex-convict, has received from the town what is vernacularly describable as a pretty raw deal.

So Dr. Mark makes Holth the steward of Mark's hospital and day after day affords the former convict the full benefit of Harold Mark's companionship and great, burning sympathy.

There may be scoffers to suggest that it was Harold Mark's society which proved the last proverbial straw to Holth's weak mind. At all events Holth presently becomes violent and sets fire to a building which unpleasantly reminds him of his past.

Then the fire spreads, the whole town ignites with Scandinavian thoroughness, the hospital is destroyed and Harold Mark himself sustains severe bodily injuries.

III.

Mentally, too, Harold Mark is shaken as he lies abed and continues his serious thinking. "Behold," declares Harold Mark in effect, "I have tested man as an individual and see what comes of it! I put faith in my fellow creature and he has repaid my great, burning sympathy by burning down my hospital." To which, of course, the obvious answer would be that to place a mentally unbalanced person in a position of grave responsibility is not a test of anything except the full scope of your personal muddleheadedness.

Even so, the reader is delusively encouraged as Harold Mark continues his serious thinking: "You with the bleeding world's conscience, you stretch yourself upon the cross and suffer and bleed like a fool. You help no one." For the reader begins to hope that this Mark is on the verge of discovering at least a fraction of the truth about Harold Mark, when, in the nick of need, the most gratifyingly uplifting reflections occur to the hurt dreamer concerning "the great dreamers of the past."

"A slave rises in Rome with a star on his brow: one of his disciples becomes emperor of the world. In Judæa the son of a carpenter stands with some fishermen round him and takes water out of a well. Over the Italy of the Renaissance rises a figure with a chisel in his hand; in England a poet builds a world throne. They were dreamers like you," says Harold Mark to himself with very moving modesty. "They were dreamers, and yet they are the torch bearers in the procession of mankind: and it is owing to them that there is not night over the world."

And that makes him quite happy.

Thus finally, in wringing gladness from the reflection that but for the strivings of dead dreamers things might, you know, really have been much worse than they are, does Harold Mark attain to tranquil mental unison with that other eminent philosopher, Pollyanna. And the book ends with the reader comprehending that the already devastated town, and all Norway, and the face of the world at large, are doomed indefinitely to remain the objects of Dr. Mark's serious thinking and great, burning sympathy, once he is out of bed again.

IV.

So much for this Dr. Harold Mark, whom Bojer has made the pivot of a big ironic book, very finely conceived and very finely executed. I have but outlined, with it may be improper levity, where Bojer meticulously "renders"—with, as I think, a loving malevolence—this man of average endowments who is dissatisfied with human life as it is now conducted, and as it has hitherto been conducted, and

who is distrustful (having reason) of the circumambient and ambiguous universe.

"What does it all mean, and toward what is this disastrous muddle striving?—I do not know. What can I do about the incomprehensible huge mess? Why, nothing whatever: and indeed my efforts to do anything about it appear but to augment the discomfort of my fellow animalculæ. Very well, then! I will make the humiliation of my position endurable by tipsifying myself with optimistic verbiage and with uplifting drivel about what fine fellows are, at any rate, such an elect minority among mankind as Shakespeare and Christ and myself."

One cannot but think, be it repeated, that this portrait of a philanthropist has been etched with the acid of premeditated irony: though the publishers, to all appearance, would have you believe that Johan Bojer portrayed this Harold Mark with tender seriousness and whole hearted admiration and, in a word, with the indorsement of Bojer's own "great, burning sympathy." One must respectfully question that. Yet, even should the case be such, the irony is none the less keen for being two edged, nor is the portrait rendered a whit less impressive by any queer light thrown upon the painter. The volume as it stands may fairly be decreed a very handsome piece of irony either way.

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