

E D I T O R I A L

Inelegant Vibrations.

WE printed last week an article about J. C. SNAITH'S new book with a sentence in the opening paragraph which ran:

"You naturally expect to find Mr. SNAITH going WELLS one better than KIPPS, and having read *The Sailor* you back him to do it."

A reader, a woman in Atlantic Highlands, clipped this and underlined it in violet ink, and sent it to us with the marginal comment in violet ink:

"This is not very elegant in its vibrations!"

We are not Highlanders and wear neither intellectual kilts nor thoughts in the latest plaid effects, and so we do not know what the lady means. In our youth we read BARRETT WENDELL and we know the denotations of words and the connotations of words; but he said nothing about vibrations that we can recall. Our oculist says that violet ink is bad for our eyes.

The Great Return Match.

Another reader says that he holds no brief for Mr. HERBERT BATES, Brooklyn's leading pessimist on American literature, but he would like us to name American equals of GALSWORDY, WELLS, DE MORGAN and CONRAD, cited by BATES.

Cheerfully. Mr. TARKINGTON in *The Flirt* and his forthcoming novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, matches Mr. GALSWORDY'S best studies of English social life and Mr. GALSWORDY'S best portraits. Mr. POOLE in *The Harbor* equalled Mr. GALSWORDY'S *Strife*, in fact excelled it. Mr. HERGESHEIMER matched Mr. GALSWORDY in *The Three Black Pennys*, although we cannot countenance matching pennies.

Against Mr. WELLS in his frivolous moments we are quite ready to put HARRY LEON WILSON in his almost serious moments. *Ruggles of Red Gap* is funnier than *Kipps* or *Mr. Polly*. Mr. WELLS, the social philosopher, never wrote *Sister Carrie*, but THEODORE DREISER did. *The Rise of Jennie Cushing*, by MARY S. WATTS, is worth two or three of Mr. WELLS'S *Marriage* together. England has no equivalent for MARY JOHNSTON. Has our reader ever looked inside the covers of *The Long Roll*, we wonder? Who is the English Ellen Glasgow? Who is their Edith Wharton?

DE MORGAN is delightful, but how about *Nathan Burke*? How about *Van Cleve*? How about *The Rudder*? All by an American woman.

CONRAD we can't parallel, but CONRAD is a piece of English luck. You'll remember that he hesitated whether to write in English or French, and decided for English because the sea stuff that he purposed to use could be most expressively put in that tongue and would most readily reach an understanding audience. All England is familiar with the sea.

This is a mighty incomplete answer. We have named only American writers now actually writing, though of the English four DE MORGAN is dead. The other three are veterans. It happens that our best men are mostly younger. Twenty years hence it may be the other way about. We can readily imagine some one asking an English editor, in 1938:

"But whom have we to compare with GERTRUDE GRANITE, ALOYSIUS SOSINSKI, JOSEPHUS DANIELS BINGHAMTON and PORTLAND OREGON, anyway?"

And he will be stumped—we mean he will be bowled out at the wicket (if that's right and if the national pastime remains the same).

Willa Sibert Cather.

SOME novelists are at their best in their first novels; others do their best work after a long apprenticeship in the public eye; a few show steady growth and a very few show steady and rapid growth. Of these last is WILLA SIBERT CATHER.

She has written three novels. You pick up *Alexander's Bridge* and read with discriminating pleasure. It is a fine piece of work. It is—excellent is the word, yes, excellent and artistically fine all through. The story is sound and gives a sort of aesthetic delight if you are susceptible to purely aesthetic delights in literature. But there is nothing about this very short tale of a great man who fissured and fell to make a deep impression. However, some time later you come upon another book by the same author and start to read.

Then what a shock; then what reverberations in your heart as well as your head (even an empty head will reverberate and perhaps rather better than a filled one). *O Pioneers!* is in its way an epic of the Western plains; it is wholly epic in its emotional force and sweeping panorama, though not in rich detail. The first chapter engages you and the second chapter enralls you. Thereafter you are a thorough believer in the literary gift of WILLA SIBERT CATHER. But though in-

tensely satisfied with *O Pioneers!* you never for a moment expect more of her—perhaps because it does not seem as if to expect more would be in any way reasonable.

A year or so passes. You get hold of a new novel by her, as much thicker than *O Pioneers!* as *O Pioneers!* was thicker than *Alexander's Bridge*. It is called *The Song of the Lark*. You eye it speculatively. You start to read it confidently but not breathlessly. And ere you are half way through you know that she has excelled herself again.

From the wonder of these second and third books, each so much bigger than the one before, we turn somewhat bewilderedly to the probable wonder of the woman who could—and did—write them. But here no wonder lies. At least, you may read the external record of WILLA SIBERT CATHER'S life and find nothing that fully, or even adequately, explains her growth as a novelist. If there were only a hint! But read through this bit of autobiography and see if you can find any.

Her Life Story.

"WILLA SIBERT CATHER was born near Winchester, Virginia, the daughter of CHARLES FECTIGUE CATHER and VIRGINIA SIBERT BEAK. Though the Siberts were originally Alsatians and the Cathers came from County Tyrone, Ireland, both families had lived in Virginia for several generations. When WILLA CATHER was 9 years old her father left Virginia and settled on a ranch in Nebraska, in a very thinly populated part of the State where the acreage of cultivated land was negligible beside the tremendous stretch of raw prairie. There were very few American families in that district; all the near neighbors were Scandinavians, and ten or twelve miles away there was an entire township settled by Bohemians.

"For a child accustomed to the quiet and the established order behind the Blue Ridge this change was very stimulating. There was no school near at hand, and Miss CATHER lived out of doors, winter and summer. She had a pony and rode about the Norwegian and Bohemian settlements, talking to the old men and women and trying to understand them. The first two years on the ranch were probably more important to her as a writer than any that came afterward.

"After some preparation in the high school at Red Cloud, Nebraska, Miss CATHER entered the State University of Nebraska, was graduated at 19, and immediately went to Pittsburg and got a position on the *Pittsburg Leader*. She was telegraph editor and dramatic critic on this paper for several years and then gave it up to take the place of the head of the English department in the Allegheny High School.

"While she was teaching in the Allegheny High School she published her first book of verse, *April Twilights*, and her first book of short stories, *The Troll Garden*. The latter book attracted a good deal of attention, and six months after it was published, in the winter of 1906, Miss CATHER went to New York to accept a position on the staff of *McClure's Magazine*. From 1908 until the autumn of 1912 Miss CATHER was managing editor of *McClure's Magazine*, and during these four years did no writing at all. In the fall of 1912 she took a house in Cherry Valley, New York, and wrote a short novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, and a novelette, *The Bohemian Girl*, both of which appeared serially in *McClure's Magazine*. In the spring of 1913 Miss CATHER went for a long stay in Arizona and New Mexico, penetrating to some of the many hardly accessible Cliff Dweller remains and the remote mesa cities of the Pueblo Indians.

"Miss CATHER has an apartment at 5 Bank street in New York, where she lives in winter. In the summer she goes abroad or returns to the West. This summer (1915) she refused a tempting offer to write a series of articles on the war situation in Europe, to explore the twenty-odd miles of Cliff Dweller remains that are hidden away in the southwest corner of Colorado, near Mancos and Durango."

The Secret Pops Out.

Very nice, but it tells you nothing that you need to know if you are to frame a hypothesis to account for Miss CATHER'S astonishingly rapid progress as a novelist. The material for *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, or a good deal of it, was patently gathered in her impressionable girlhood. The fine chapters of *The Song of the Lark* which relate THEA KRONBERG'S stay in the Cliff Dweller region with FRED OTTENBURG are outwardly explained by Miss CATHER'S personal interest in these ruins. What is not made in the least clear is the secret of her own success. Let us look into some of the things she has said and see if we can find a clue to it there.

"I have never found any intellectual excite-

ment more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of these pioneer women at her baking or butter making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said—as if I had actually got inside another person's skin. If one begins that early it is the story of the man eating tiger over again—no other adventure ever carries one quite so far."

Do you detect something? Do you perceive (1) a set of impressions acquired at the most plastic age and with a sharpness of configuration never to be lost and (2) an extraordinary blend of intellectual and emotional feeling—of heart and mind—which carried the girl *beyond* the spoken word; and also (3) an imaginative faculty which could go on living a thing after merely hearing about it and living it through to the unnarrated, possibly unexperienced, conclusion? Do you get a hint of any or all of these things? Of course you do!

What She Had to Learn.

Going further we learn that when Miss CATHER began to write she tried to put the Swedish and Bohemian settlers she had known in her girlhood into her short stories. "The results," we are informed, "never satisfied her. She discussed this dissatisfaction afterward.

"It is always hard to write about things that are near your heart," she argued. "From a kind of instinct of self-protection you distort and disguise them. Those stories were so poor that they discouraged me. I decided that I wouldn't write any more about the country and the people for whom I had a personal feeling.

"Then I had the good fortune to meet SARAH ORNE JEWETT, who had read all of my early stories and had very clear and definite opinions about them and about where my work fell short. She said: 'Write it as it is, don't try to make it like this or that. You can't do it in anybody else's way; you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don't let that frighten you. Don't try to write the kind of short story that this or that magazine wants; write the truth and let them take it or leave it.'

"It is that kind of honesty, that earnest endeavor to tell truly the thing that haunts the mind, that I love in Miss JEWETT'S own work. I dedicated *O Pioneers!* to her because I had talked over some of the characters with her, and in this book I tried to tell the story of the people as truthfully and simply as if I were telling it to her by word of mouth."

Why She Had to Learn It.

This is downright enlightening. Miss CATHER does not specifically say that she had to depart from actual persons when she came to do her good work, but that is the inference we draw. She does not entirely lay bare the real reason; and for the benefit of those who may be puzzled over it let us supplement what she says.

There is a pitch of emotion at which the artist cannot work; he can only see, feel, learn, store up; the rendering of what he has felt and seen comes afterward. WORDSWORTH said that poetry was emotion recollected in tranquillity. He might just as well have extended the definition to include all forms of art. When you or I come to sit down and put on paper actual persons whom we knew and loved (or hated) we cannot do it if the feeling is still very strong, any more than we can write about them while loving or hating them. Our hands shake and our emotional and mental disturbance is so great that we cannot collect our thoughts, or, if we contrive to collect them partially, we cannot put them down on paper. Tears blur the vision. We have to wait, then, until a little time has passed and we are calmer; until we can *recall* in a warm, remembering glow the feeling of that time, recall it just sufficiently for our artist's purpose. We sail through it then, but are not awash.

Very often this intensity of feeling about actual persons so persists as to make it impracticable to write honestly about them at all. And so the artist is thrown back on his imagination for the bodying forth of other persons and characters, typical enough, real enough, true enough, but not the flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood. About these creations of his own he can write and write well. And this, we are surmising, is the experience that Miss CATHER underwent as so many others have undergone it before her.

In her case the difference was that she had the imagination to come to her rescue. So few have! Or rather, so few have an adequate imaginative faculty, one that will bear them forward, one that will sustain their created people, that will meet every demand made upon its resources, early and late, that will not flag, that will not weary, that will not die in the middle of the creative task.