

# FIVE BOOKS OF THE MOMENT

## I.

### "THE WOMAN WHO TOILS."\*

The first thought nowadays, not perhaps of the literary worker, but at least of the publisher, is how to secure the so-called sensational sale for any new book. The means adopted to this end are many and varied. The volume under consideration has been widely advertised, and will undoubtedly be widely sold because of the letter written to one of the authors by President Roosevelt and inserted as a preface in the book. The popularity this cleverly chosen means of advertising will give the book will be dangerous and unjust. Dangerous because the majority of hasty readers will take their cue from the Presidential preface, and will, therefore, quite misunderstand the purpose of the book. The extremely slight connection between the purpose of this volume and Mr. Roosevelt's letter suggests the idea that our valiant and versatile Chief Executive wrote the letter, not so much as a criticism of the book, as a means of airing his own views on a certain subject evidently near his heart, and has to this end seized upon a casual remark, on a side issue, of one of the authors. This question, however, need not be further discussed. It was the act of a kindly gentleman to assist two ladies with the weight of his influence and position, and we can let it pass at that, even if it gain for the volume an uncomprehending popularity, unjust to a book which is thoroughly worthy of more serious consideration.

Mrs. John Van Vorst and Miss Marie Van Vorst, joint authors of *The Woman Who Toils*, are writers who have already made a name for themselves in literary work. That they are not trained in the science and thought of political economy the book shows, as they have set out to discover for themselves facts which are the property of every student of radical economics, and the conclusions they reach are quite unhampered by all that has been written before on the subject. But just

for this very reason, perhaps, the book has the value of a potential high usefulness. What these ladies have discovered in the course of an exploration involving, for women of the favoured class, fully as great an endurance of actual physical hardship as would be entailed by a trip to the North Pole or to the heart of Africa, they have discovered starting out with the point of view, with the lack of knowledge, shared by the majority of their class. Taking thus the angle of vision of their class as a starting point, and never losing sight of it through all the increasing widening of their own mental horizon, they have written a book which cannot fail to touch the hearts and awaken the minds of those who have, perhaps, never had the case put in a manner so comprehensible for them.

The authors of this book have gone out to discover for themselves how the American working woman lives, under what conditions she toils, and what are her opportunities for education and enjoyment. They have gained this knowledge in the only possible manner of doing it; they have gone into the factories, and lived in the home of the working girls as one of themselves, sharing hardships and pleasures, unsuspected at any time by those around them. What they have seen and heard and experienced, the conclusions they have drawn, and the means by which they think hard conditions can be ameliorated they have given us in their book, each writer treating her part of the work separately. From the point of view of literary criticism there is a difference in the work of the two. The personal equation is stronger in the portion written by Miss Marie Van Vorst than in the more objective narrative of her sister-in-law. She gives us more of her personal sensations and suffering, more of her sense of differentiation from those about her, and she philosophises on this in the apostrophic French style in a way that sometimes hinders the even tenor of the story. But it cannot be denied that this inclination to "fine writing" adds to the effect of some of the stronger portions of her work, notably in the superb closing chapter on "Child Labour in the Southern Cotton Mills." The story as told by Mrs.

\*The Woman Who Toils. By Mrs. John Van Vorst and Marie Van Vorst. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

Van Vorst is simpler, more direct. She gives us more of what she sees and less of herself, more of the simple narrator and less of the literary worker. But both writers are animated by the same spirit of sincere and sympathetic study, of study entered into from the desire to comprehend that they might assist. Both show an admirable logic in their comprehension of the fact that, though naturally the actual physical hardships endured pressed more acutely on their unused frames, this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion, seized so eagerly by the more favoured majority, that those whom custom has dulled to the suffering are beings different from ourselves. Mrs. Van Vorst writes:

It was probable that my comrades felt at no time the discomfort I did, but the harm done them is not the physical suffering their condition causes, but the moral and spiritual bondage in which it holds them. They are not a class of drones made differently from us. I saw nothing to indicate that they were not born with like *capacities* to ours. As our bodies accustom themselves to luxury and cleanliness, theirs grow hardened to deprivation and filth. As our souls develop with the advantages of all that constitutes an ideal, their souls diminish under the oppression of a constant physical effort to meet material demands. But the fact that they become physically callous to what we consider unbearable is used as an argument for their emotional insensibility. I hold such an argument as false: From all I saw, I am convinced that, *given their relative preparation* for suffering and for pleasure, their griefs and their joys are the same as ours in kind and in degree.

Goethe's word that man grows with his greater aims has proved its truth in the case of these two writers. The purely literary quality of their work in this book, with its greater scope and higher aims, is far better than in anything either of them has written before.

Grace Isabel Colbron.

## II.

### MR. LINN'S "THE CHAMELEON."\*

Mr. James Weber Linn has written a very interesting novel in spite of the fact

\*The Chameleon. By James Weber Linn. New York: McClure, Phillips and Company.

that there is a certain incongruity in some of the details and a decided improbability in the climax of the story. Here we find somewhere west of Omaha, a college town which is supposed to have hoary traditions and the mellowness of age about it, with a cloistered calm and a classical atmosphere such as would befit Oriel or Magdalen on the Isis. At the very least, we behold here Amherst or Williams transplanted to a part of the country where cottonwood trees abound and where white men were infrequent fifty years ago. That is the first and most marked incongruity. Carfax College has at its head the finest Greek scholar in the country. At any rate, Mr. Linn says so, and we cannot dispute it. Possibly this fine old scholar acquired his eminence in Greek by utterly neglecting his Latin; for whenever he or any of his pupils open their mouths in the book to utter a bit of the language of ancient Rome, they work havoc with both syntax and morphology. This, however, is a mere detail; so let us pass on.

In the second place, we object to the psychology of the heroine. The hero of the book, one Bradford, is a very delightful sort of fellow. He is energetic, well educated, modest, faithful to his friends, and a good sort generally. His two defects are these. In the first place, he is at times given to excessive introspection, and this he cannot help, because he has inherited the tendency from a morbid father. The result of this trait is a desire to appear well in the eyes of others, which, after all, when you come to think of it, is more or less commendable and by no means a mark of singularity. Perhaps, however, it leads to his second blemish, which lies in a tendency to elaborate a little at the expense of strict truth when relating a story—which may be called a literary quality and which, if he had been an author, would have been a purely professional instinct and would have won praise from the reviewers. As he was not an author, however, but a lawyer, his excessive imagination wrecks his domestic happiness and drives him to the verge of suicide. This is how it came about.

Bradford met a very charming young girl, named Amy Power; and, being somewhat at a loss for conversation, told her an exciting story about an adventure