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'strands' to death; while others of their 'strands' we could hardly regard as such at all. We, again, need not be surprised, for enthusiasm often overshoots the mark.

Note.—Echoes of this synthetic conception may probably be seen in the following passages in St. Paul's Epistles: 'We serve in newness of the *spirit*, and not in oldness of the letter' (Ro 7⁶). Here 'letter' seems to connote 'the Law'; 'spirit,' spiritual principles. 'Who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; not of the letter,

but of the *spirit*' (2 Co 3⁶)—not of the 'letter' of the old Covenant but of its 'spirit' . . . 'how shall not rather the ministration of the *spirit* be with glory?' (v.⁸)—'spirit' here is connected with 'righteousness' in the next verse, and does not refer to the Holy Spirit, but rather to the 'spirit' of the Law. 'Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' (v.¹⁷)—meaning that Jesus stands for the 'spirit' of the Law, and freedom from its 'letter'—the veil is removed. This interpretation seems to harmonize with the context.

Entre Nous.

The Mysticism of Mary Webb.

There is a magnificent wealth of pulpit illustration in the fiction of the nineteenth century. It is so rich in moral seriousness, in dignity, in style, that we do not wonder it is often quoted in the best sermons. But perhaps a more popular appeal might be made to the younger generation if some of our contemporary writers of fiction were chosen by preachers for quotation.

Take Mary Webb, for example, who died, in early middle age, two years ago. Her father was a Welsh schoolmaster, her mother the daughter of an Edinburgh doctor who claimed a distant kinship with Sir Walter Scott. She spent most of her days in Shropshire, and writes about the countryside and the country folk that she knew and loved. Her best book is undoubtedly *Precious Bane*, a novel which was awarded the 'Femina Vie Heureuse' Prize for 1924-25, and which will certainly find and keep a niche in the shelves of our classical English fiction.

We can only, at the moment, glance at one facet of this bright polished gem. What reflection do we find there of Mary Webb's attitude to religion?

In the first place, we have to remember that a novel written in the autobiographical form does not necessarily mirror, in the words of the hero or heroine, the mind of the author. Yet in the case of *Precious Bane* the writing is so simple, so intimate, so real a revelation of a good woman's heart, that even while we caution ourselves, we confess that nothing will make us believe that we have not here on those pages the soul of the author herself laid bare. For the sake of the literary

proprieties, however, let us say that we are looking upon the heroine—upon Prudence Sarn's—attitude to religion. It is reverent, more, it is adoring, and yet there is a strong vein of agnosticism, both religious and philosophical, running through the woman's mind. We quote from her own words, and we must remember that it is a Shropshire country lass, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, who is speaking. 'Kester said the past and the future were two shuttles in the hands of the Lord, weaving Eternity. Kester was a weaver himself, which may have made him think of it thus. But I think we cannot know what the past and the future are. We are so small and helpless on the earth that is like a green rush cradle where mankind lies, looking up at the stars, but not knowing what they be.' And again, speaking of her dead mother: 'Shall we meet again in the other world, dear soul, and atone to you for our heedlessness?' And again, after describing, with a marvelous beauty of style, an early morning ride to market, she adds: 'It seemed to me that it was like a great open book with fair pages, in which all might read. Only it was written in a secret script. . . . For indeed every tree and bush and little flower and sprig of moss, every least herb, sweet or bitter, every bird that furrows the air and worm that furrows the soil, every beast going heavily about its task of living, be to us a riddle with no answer. We know not what they do. And all this great universe that seems so still is but like a sleeping top, that looks still from very swiftness. But why it turns, and what we and all creatures do in the giddy steadfastness of it, we know not.'

And again : ' We are His mommets that made us, I do think. He takes us from the box, whiles, and saith, " Dance now ! " Or maybe it must bow, or wave a hand, or fall down in a swoond. Then He puts it back in box, for the part is played . . . the evil mommets do His will as well as the good . . . there was a mommet once called Judas, and if he had started away from his set part in fear, we should have none of us been saved. Which is all a very strange mystery, and so we must leave it. But it being so, I think we do wrongly to blame ill-doers too hardly. . . . But if we be chosen for a pleasant, merry part, how thankful we ought to be, giving great praise, and helping those less fortunate.' Less agnosticism in this, perhaps, than fatalism, and yet, really, there is more of autobiography than of theology about it. Mary Webb would never have written that passage unless she herself had played a good and innocent part in the Play. ' How thankful *we* ought to be.' That is where the emphasis lies. There, and in these other words, ' It being so, I think we do wrongly to blame ill-doers too hardly.' Forgiveness and gratitude, she is finding excuses for those two lovely things.

And that brings us to another quality of her work. If it is touched with agnosticism, it is also more than touched, it is permeated, with a childlike faith, the happy faith of a daughter at home in her Father's house. When her lover, still undeclared, was in danger, Prudence followed him and saved him. And so she excuses herself : ' Something drove me on, so that I must seek him in the crowd, and keep nigh him, as if I was his angel for that day. A poor angel, but God minds not much, I think, what His angels be, so that they do His work proper. The shepherd's collie that runs home to warn the missus that her man has fallen down the rock, is His angel sure enough, though he may be a mongrel of the very worst, with ears as flat as a spaniel.' At home in her Father's house, did we say ? Well, not always at home, but sure, at least, of going thither. After her first sight of Kester, her lover, she writes : ' Shall we know, when we come into His presence that made us, what outward seeming His majesty has ? No. Only our hearts will tremble in the light.'

Perhaps the greatest passage in the book is one that is too long to quote here, and that would need to be quoted in full, or not at all. A beautiful book might be made—and there this passage would find its place—of the Conversions of the Saints. And the records would be singularly alike in many particulars. But there is a very individual touch at the end of Prudence Sarn's account. She was afflicted, we must know, with a ' hare-shotten lip,' as it was called, and that tragic little fact has much to do with the whole story of her life. So, after describing her great experience, she adds : ' I fell to thinking how all this blessedness of the attic came to me through being curst. For if I hadna had a hare-lip to frighten me away into my own lonesome soul, this would never have come to me. The apples would have crowded all in vain to see a marvel, for I should never have known the glory that came from the other side of silence.'

The fault of the book, perhaps, lies just here : that this most authentic, and, if one might say so, classic account of the conversion of a soul is not followed, during the great tragic episodes at the end of the book, by an adequate reaction, on the part of the converted one, to those tragic happenings. When her brother's sins of selfishness and material ambition have finally involved him in ruin, and he sits beside his sister in black despair, she had no word of ultimate consolation or encouragement to give to him. ' You just think of getting on,' she advises, ' and scraping and saving as you use to do, and dunna think of Jancis or Mother till you're more settled in your mind.' Is it true to life that such a great experience as that described earlier in the book could pass over any human soul without leaving it something more to say, in the most desperate reaches of life's tragic happenings, than that ?

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