

COLOUR IN COMPOSITION

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There are novels and novels. A society novel has its special type: there are the conventionalities of social life, the routine, the courtesies, the absence of startling events, a general smoothness. It requires no local colour. Society is the same throughout England. One town-house is much like another, one country-house may differ from another, in that one is Elizabethan and another Georgian, but social life is the same, eminently nineteenth century in all, and in all alike. It really matters nothing where the scene is laid, whether in Cumberland or in Cornwall, in Yorkshire or in Kent. The *dramatis personae* talk the same conventionalities, dress alike, behave in a similar manner everywhere. Social life rubs down eccentricities, almost abolishes individuality. In an American social novel there is a certain American flavour, and in an English social novel a certain English flavour, that is all. A social novel does not need local colour, and local colour least of all enters into the composition of the characters.

There are certain conventionalities in the social novel: the purse-proud new man, who drops his H's: the haughty lady of rank, and so on ; just as there is the conventional lawyer on the stage, who is a rogue. If we want to be bold and original, we vary or change our pieces, and make the *nouveau riche* all that is desirable, and the lady of rank all that is humble; but the range of alteration in this respect is not great, and the range of varieties in character is not great, and of local colours influencing the characters there can be none at all.

It is quite another matter when we come to a lower phase of life, when we step down out of the social sphere into genuine country life. Then colour becomes an essential element in the composition. The ladies and gentlemen in the hall at one end of England are like the ladies and gentlemen in the hall at the other end of England; and it is the same with the sweet girls and the honest, frank boys of the rectory and vicarage – they are as fresh and delightful everywhere, in all parts of England, and all very much the same. But it is not so with the peasantry. They have their type in Northumberland, which is not the type in Devon, and the type in Yorkshire is not the type of Sussex. The peasantry represent racial differences much more than those in a class above them. No racial differences are observable in the most cultured class. Then, again, surroundings have much to do with the formation of type; and so naturally has the occupation. Look, for instance, in Yorkshire at the mill-hand and at the agricultural labourer. They are different as different can be, and yet of the same stock. The manner of life, the variety of occupation, have differentiated them. And in appearance it is also true. The coal-miner, shuffling along with an habitual stoop, is a different man, not in gait only but in face, and different in habits as well, from the wool-picker

or the foreman at the mill. It is the same with the girls. The factory-girl is distinct, as a specimen, from the farm-girl. They think differently, they comport themselves differently, they look different. Their complexions are not the same, their eyes have a different light in them, they move in a different manner.

An observant eye is necessary to note all this, and to draw distinctions.

Then, again, in writing a story dealing with life in the working-class, dialect has to be taken into consideration. In some parts of England there is hardly any dialect at all, the voices have a certain intonation in one county which is different from the intonation elsewhere, but there are not many linguistic peculiarities. In the Midlands, in Essex, in Middlesex, the dialect is vulgar; but it can hardly be said that it is so in Northumberland, in Yorkshire, in Cornwall, in Dorset. In Somerset it is unpleasant, but that is another thing from the vulgarity of the Cockney twang. It does not do to accentuate the brogue too much in a book that is for general readers. It puzzles, irritates them. What is needed is to hint the dialect rather than render it in full flavour. Such a hint is a necessary element in giving local colour.

In addition to dialect, it is well to get at the folk wisdom as revealed by common sayings, proverbs, and the like. This helps to measure the character of the people, their sense of humour, their appreciation of what is beautiful, their powers of observation, and their imaginative faculties. We generally find that there is more poetry among the peasantry – by this I mean a picturesqueness and grace – a quality lending itself to fiction, where there is Celtic blood. This wonderfully effervescent, unpractical element is very lovable, very entertaining, where it is found. In my own county of Devon we have on one side of Dartmoor a people in which this volatile sparkling *ichor* exists to a good extent – in fact, the people are more than half Celts; on the other side of the moor the population is heavy, unimaginative, and prosaic – the dreadfully dull Saxon prevails there. A story of the people in the one district would be out of place if told of those in the other district. Then there are peculiarities of custom, all of which should be observed and noted; they help wonderfully to give reality to a tale. The houses the people inhabit are different in one county from another, differ in one district from those in another ten miles away. Here, where I write, the cottages are of stone; often in them may be found a granite carved doorway, sometimes with a date. Five miles off, all is different. The farms and cottages are of clay, kneaded with straw, and the windows and doors of oak. In Surrey, the cottages are of red brick and tiled; on the Essex coast of timber from broken-up ships.

It is not often now that we have a chance of coming on anything like costume, but we do sometimes. In Yorkshire, what else is the scarlet or pink kerchief round the mill-girl's head, and the clean white pinafore in which she goes to the factory? The bright tin she swings in her hand that contains her dinner is not to be omitted. Every item helps to give realism, and every one is picturesque.

When I was in the Essex marshes I saw women and boys in scarlet military coats. In fact, old soldier-uniforms were sold cheap when soiled at Colchester; and these were readily bought and worn. It was a characteristic feature. I seized on it at once in my *Mehalah*, and put an old woman into a soldier's jacket. She gave me what I wanted – a bit of bright colour in the midst of a sombre picture.

In story-writing it is always well, I may almost say essential, to see your scenes in your mind's eye, and to make of them pictures, so that your figures group and pose, artistically but naturally, and that there shall be colour introduced. The reader has thus a pleasant picture presented to his imagination. In one of my stories I sketched a girl in a white frock leaning against a sunny garden wall, tossing guelder-roses. I had some burnished gold-green flies on the old wall, preening in the sun; so, to complete the scene, I put her on gold-green leather shoes, and made the girl's eyes of much the same hue. Thus we had a picture where the colour was carried through, and, if painted, would have been artistic and satisfying. A red sash would have spoiled all, so I gave her one that was green. So we had the white dress, the guelder-rose balls greeny white, and through the ranges of green-gold were led up to her hair, which was red-gold.

I lay some stress on this formation of picture in tones of colour, because it pleases myself when writing, it satisfies my artistic sense. A thousand readers may not observe it; but those who have any art in them will at once receive therefrom a pleasant impression.

With regard to the general tone of a story, my own feeling is that the character of the scenery and character of the people determine the character of the tale. A certain type is almost always found among the people that harmonises with the scenery. Nature never makes harsh contrasts. Where, in a stone and slate district, a London architect builds a brick house and covers it with tiles, it looks incongruous. I was at one time in Yorkshire, near Thirsk. In the village all the farms and cottages were of brick and tiles; a London architect built a church of white stone, and covered it with blue slate. That church never would look as if it belonged to the people, it will never harmonise with the surroundings. So some architects transport Norman buildings into old English towns-the effect is hateful. In Nature everything tones together. In the Fens of Ely the people are in character very suitable to the fenland-silent, somewhat morose; on the moorland, wherever it is, they are independent, wayward, fresh, and hearty. In my judgment, then, the aspect of the country has much to do with determining the character of the story told concerning it. In writing a novel you are drawing a picture, and your background must harmonise with your figures in the forefront, the colours must not be incongruous. You would not paint a pirate under a maypole, nor put village dancers among rocks and caverns.

I do not like to appear egotistical, but in writing for young beginners, I think that nothing could more illustrate my meaning than to tell them how I have worked myself.

One day in Essex, a friend, a captain in the Coastguard, invited me to accompany him on a cruise among the creeks in the estuary of the Maldon river – the Blackwater. I went out, and we spent the day running among mud-flats and low holms, covered with coarse grass and wild lavender, and startling wild-fowl. We stopped at a ruined farm built on arches above this marsh to eat some lunch; no glass was in the windows, and the raw wind howled in and swept round us. That night I was laid up with a heavy cold. I tossed in bed, and was in the marshes in imagination, listening to the wind and the lap of the tide; and *Mehalala* naturally rose out of it all, a tragic, gloomy tale. But what else could it be in such desolation with nothing bright therein? Some little while ago I went to Cheshire, and visited the salt region. It vividly impressed my imagination – the subsidences of land, the dull monotony of brine-"wallers" cottages, the barges on the Weaver, the blasted trees. Well, then, in contrast, hard by was Delamere forest, with its sea of pines, its sandy soil and heathery openings, the Watling Street crossing it, the noble mansions and parks about it. The whole aspect of the salt district on one hand, and the wild forest on the other, seemed as if it could produce in my mind only one kind of story; and with the story, the characters came; but they came out of the salt factories on one side, out of the merry greenwood on the other, artificiality and some squalor on one side, freshness and simplicity on the other. It may not be with others as with myself, but with me it is always the scenery and surroundings that develop the plot and characters. Others may work from the opposite point, but then, it seems to me, they must find it hard to fit their landscape to their *dramatis personae*, and to their *denouement*.

Another point I may mention. Erckmann and Chatrien could never write a novel of Alsace and the Jura on the spot. After a visit to the scenes they were going to people with fictitious characters, they wrote, but wrote in Paris. They found that imagination failed when on the spot. I find very much the same, myself. I do not believe I could write a novel of the valley in which I live, the house I occupy. I must lay my scene somewhere that I have been, but have left. When in Rome one winter, impatient at being confined within walls, weary of the basaltic pavement, my heart went out to the wilds of Dartmoor, and I wrote *Urith*. I breathed moor air, smelt the gorse, heard the rush of the torrents, scrambled the granite rocks in imagination, and forgot the surroundings of an Italian *pension*.

I repeat, my experiences may not, and probably are not, those of others. When engaged on a novel, I live in that world about which I am writing. Whilst writing a Cheshire novel, I have tasted the salt crystallising on my lips, smelt the smoke from the chimneys, walked warily among the subsidences, and have had the factory before my eyes, for a while, and then dashed away to smell the

pinetrees, and lie in the heather and hear the bees hum. It has been so real to me, that if I wake for a moment at night I have found myself in Cheshire, my mind there. When I am at my meals, I am eating in Cheshire, though at the other end of England; when in conversation with friends, directly there is a pause, my mind reverts to Cheshire; and, alas! I am sorry to own it, too often, in church, at my prayers – I find my mind drifting to Cheshire. This I believe to be a secret of doing a thing well – that is to say, as well as one's poor abilities go – to lose oneself in one's subject, or at all events in the surroundings.

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