"THE LAND IN DECAY"

As the novel is beyond question the voice of the spirit of the times, it is interesting to note the similarity of the questions which are now treated through the medium of fiction in countries as widely different from each other as are France and America. Even a cursory examination would seem to prove that both peoples are less interested in the tragedies and comedies of sentiment than in subjects social and psychological. In France, the peasant, the laborer, the artisan, the student is fast usurping the place of the high-born guilty lover, who has so long been one of the three characters indispensable to the plot and action of imaginative literature. The first fruits of this change are found in almost every important work of fiction that has been produced during the last six years. The "Affaire Dreyfus," involving the vexed and intricate Jewish question, the ambitions of the clergy, the national and Jesuitical systems of education,—these are some of the subjects treated in the social novel, which is, as yet, a form of art somewhat new, crude and harsh, although it promises to fulfil all that Auguste Comte long since predicted of its future power over the people.

Of the examples of the new social novel many are interesting to Frenchmen alone; since they treat of conditions impossible outside of France, and therefore difficult to be appreciated by foreign thinkers. Such as these illustrate but a single, more or less durable phase of national life, and, therefore, even in France, will soon lose their value, except as historical documents. One only has passed beyond these restrictions, and, by the force of genius and sympathy, is worthy to be ranked among enduring masterpieces. It is "The Land in Decay" of M. Rene Bazin, which has excited the admiration and stirred the hearts of foreign critics and readers to a degree scarcely equaled since Victor Hugo laid down
the romancer’s pen. This book has been widely noticed in both England and America: in every case eliciting from the reviewer an acknowledgment of its greatness.

The sense of its power does not produce a sudden and irresistible attraction; since its idyllic character is at first deceptive, and would lead the reader to suppose that a new eclogue, worthy of a place beside the pastorals of Virgil and Madame Sand, had appeared in French literature. But while a cooler, calmer judgment corroborates this opinion, it also reveals a strength and a pathos which must make appeal to all hearts which patriotism, love of family, and the associations of childhood have ever quickened. The peasants painted by Millet and Breton, and represented in Mme. Sand’s “Master Pipers,” “Nanon,” or “La Mare au Diable,” here find worthy companion pieces. But the new types are more complex and modern than any before presented. The men are more restless, reactionary and subtle, while the women are no longer the passive, resigned beings who accept, without murmuring, the hard lot inseparable from the soil to which they are attached by birth. Both sexes have developed thought, which if not yet sound, is at least indicative of progress.

“The Land in Decay” is at once a warning and an appeal to the loyal children of France. It pictures that most fertile country, as already seriously compromised in its economic status. It shows the peasantry as wholly changed from those sturdy, courageous, abstemious sons of the soil who, it is said, drew from their savings hoarded in stockings the war indemnity of two billion francs demanded by the German Empire only thirty years since. The scene of the book is laid in Brittany, and exquisite art is displayed in fitting the characters to the landscape. Each telling episode is projected against a back-ground so realistic that one can almost seize with the senses the glow of the atmosphere, the lowing of cattle, the odors of field and farm. The
characters are all peasants and members of a single family; the romantic element being only just sufficient to weld together a plot, which has itself an economic, rather than a sentimental or domestic value. This peasant family, by name Lumineau, has, for generations, held in lease lands belonging to the local nobleman: paying to him not only rents, dues and products, but also a peculiar respect, or homage which flavors of mediaevalism. So that one can almost imagine the feudal system, with its lords and vassals, as still in force in this province of Brittany, which, during the first great Revolution, remained faithful to the king, and which, from those days down to our own, has shown the greatest aversion to modern ideas.

The book pictures the old system in a decay due partly to natural causes, and partly to outside disintegrating forces which attack the younger generation, leaving the older isolated, and in despair. The army has, of course, claimed a recruit from the Lumineau family; thus, not only depriving the land temporarily of a vigorous cultivator, but furthermore opening to the youth, during his service in Algeria, ways of life and vistas of thought fatal to the happiness of a French peasant. Again, a grave accident has stricken the eldest son, sadly crippling and deforming him, rendering him unfit for marriage, and so destroying the most cherished of the family hopes. A third son and the elder daughter, discouraged by the partial failure of the land, the prolonged absence of their favorite and soldier brother, the melancholia and spasmodic violence of the cripple—above all, by the hard, constant, monotonous labor of the farm, leave, almost without warning, the paternal home to seek employment in the nearest town. The climax of calamity for the old father lies in the ravages of the phylloxera, the description of which forms the strongest and most pathetic episode of the book.

It occurs after the return of the soldier from Algeria, and when he is left alone with his
father to do more than a double share of labor. A sorrow-
ful picture is first given of the two men uprooting from the
soil of France the vine which once contributed so largely
to her riches; working with pick-axes of primitive form
fashioned for an extinct race of giants; laboring through-
out a cheerless February day, and returning home in the
gray twilight, through frozen fields, along bare hedges,
beneath leafless trees and surrounded by the damp, pitiless
cold; working and walking in silence, with their thoughts
fixed upon "the land in decay." The sadness of the
father is represented as differing from that of the son, since
the elder man is inspired by a strong, tried love of the
fatherland, which rises anew after every blow of Fortune.
In uprooting the dead wood, he already anticipates the day
when he shall plant a new vineyard, and pictures to
himself joyous vintages to come in the days of his suc-
cessors. In the son's heart, on the contrary, hope promises
nothing, since his love and devotion has weakened. The
father is the first to break the painful silence; expressing
himself in the homely speech of the peasant, and lamenting
his forced task. The son, divided between filial tender-
ness and impulse, hesitates to reply. But, at last, with a
sweeping gesture which points far beyond Brittany, and
carries something like a sea-chill beneath the rough woolen
garments of the old peasant, he cries:

"Yes, the day of our vineyards
has passed; but the grape thrives elsewhere!"

At the moment of this cry, the
plans of the young man become definite, his future opens
plainly before him. He begins, like the brother and sister
who have preceded him, to make secret preparations for
departure. But, unlike them, he does not shrink from the
toil of the fields. He longs for work, but work in the
midst of life, joy, hope and liberty. He steals away at
night, but it is afterward known that he embarks for
South America.
Three members of the once prosperous family now remain: the father, broken by misfortune and abandoned by those whose strong young arms should have arrested the decay of the land. Beside him, there are the cripple and a younger daughter, long since fallen into disgrace because of her love for a farm-laborer, who, early in the story, was dismissed for his presumption. The cripple, wrought to a frenzy by the consent of his father to allow the unequal marriage, attempts one night to visit his former betrothed, believing that she may yet accept him and so restore him to his birthright as the eldest and leader of the family. But the change of seasons is at hand, and the low marshes of Brittany are submerged in spring floods. The unfortunate loses control of the boat peculiar to the region,—the yole,—to which he trusts himself, and is found dead by his father, who, divining his intention, has followed him. A dramatic scene ensues, picturing the return of the corpse to the farm, and lacking nothing of the power of the greatest French painters. It is indeed above and beyond any art that can possibly be displayed upon canvas, because it is communicated by human speech. Characters, landscape, the time and the season are as real as those that are offered in the world of matter.

And now misfortune appears to have wreaked its full vengeance both upon the land, and upon those who are attached to it by the traditions of centuries on centuries. But were the book to close upon this climax of the father’s grief, and the death or departure of all his sons, no solution would be suggested for the remedy of “the land in decay.” Hope comes through a woman: the younger daughter, who has suffered no temptations of flight, and who has devoted her dowry inherited from her mother to relieve her father’s pressing needs. Described as uniting in herself the virtues of the ideal peasant, and those which have distinguished the best women of her own old family, she goes to the hus-
band of her choice, who is a stranger in the region, poor, and accustomed to serve rather than to command.

This union, so ill-suited in the eyes of the prejudiced, contains the elements of salvation for the land and renewal for the family. It is the suggestion of the infusion of new hopes, new love, and new energy into a sterilized region. It has a basis and precedent in science, and therefore is valuable as an economic measure. Those born to labor, must, in self-defence, avoid the life of the towns, and the State, considering its own interests as well as their welfare, must provide that they go "back to the soil."