

# The Nation

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## The Last Cry of Romance

*Barren Ground.* By Ellen Glasgow. Doubleday, Page and Company. \$2.50.

THIS is the best of many excellent books by Ellen Glasgow. I record the statement after a lengthy and reminiscitory appraisal of the list of its fifteen predecessors. And in considering this list, I am surprised by two quite casually allied phenomena. One is the startling approach to completeness, presented by these books as a whole, of Ellen Glasgow's portrayal of all social and economic Virginia since the War Between the States. The other is the startling announcement, upon the dust jacket of this new book, that "with 'Barren Ground' realism at last crosses the Potomac."

Now, upon dust jackets, of course, wild statements appear as common as cardinal virtues in a cemetery. Yet this particular statement, when advanced, or at any rate countenanced, by the firm which for some twenty-five years has been publishing Miss Glasgow's novels, arouses the troubled suspicion that Messrs. Doubleday, Page and Company have been regarding, all the while, these books as pleasant little tales of the one sort—still to quote from this dust jacket—which, before the appearance of "Barren Ground," had ever been written about the South, as "a land of colonels, old mansions, and delicate romance."

Eventually, however, every author, I reflect, must learn, with time and much vexation, how handily the pranks of publishers may be compared with the axiomatic peace of God. I therefore dismiss the problem tacitly. And, no matter what her publishers may assert, I reflect also, here, in these sixteen books, is Ellen Glasgow's picture of present-day Virginia; and here is the vast panorama of, upon the whole, futility. The land of Ellen Glasgow's birth and nurture, the land which she has so consummately depicted, has always been, in her interpreting, an unmistakably barren ground, howsoever pleasantly diversified in some places by the dejected relics of yesterday—"the colonels and the old mansions"—and in other places by the sort of perennial vaticinatory rose-coloring of Virginia's future which only out-and-out pessimists (I hope) would describe as "delicate romance." Meanwhile, it is plain enough that for the deciduous aristocracy of the commonwealth which most often and appallingly figures in oratory as a cornerstone and a guiding star and a cradle, Miss Glasgow has, in the double-edged phrase, "no use" except as bijouterie. The virtues, the really highbred vices, and the graces of the unhorsed Virginian Cavaliers survive a bit pathetically their heyday, and very nicely serve her turn: so, for their ornamental qualities she cherishes and at need extols them, with the peculiar and perturbing amiability of a past mistress in the art of parenthetic malice. And the one element of high-flown "romance" detectable in Ellen Glasgow's books is so far from being outmoded that it remains always, after a fashion which I shall later indicate, quite actually the *dernier cri*.

And meanwhile also, in "Barren Ground," we have a hint of what I take to have been Miss Glasgow's philosophy, all through so many books, in regard to the best-thought-of constituents of "romance." This latest novel is the story of Dorinda Oakley, born in Virginia of the tenant farmer class, and getting, somehow, through a life in which the traditional ardors and anguishes simply do not ever ascend to their advertised poignancy. Love comes to you, and for the while it is well enough: but, to the other side—when that also comes about—being by this later Jason cast for the role of a forsaken and unwed Medea, after the customary childish souvenir of the faithless lover is already en route, proves not intolerable. You marry by and by somebody else, because you like this middle-aged Nathan Pedlar well enough; and when your husband in due season dies it makes astonishingly slight difference. Yet other wooers come, and pass out of your living, and some of them are well enough; but none of them really matters. Later you preserve from the almshouse your first collaborator in amour, who technically "ruined" you; and you permit him to die as a dependent upon your charity; and you are conscious of neither complacency nor sorrow, but merely feel, with a sort of incurious resignation, that the affair has turned out well enough.

No one of these material and "romantic" accidents, you find, at all poignantly matters. And when Dorinda Pedlar, a woman who has succeeded in life, a widely wooed but a convinced and contented widow, and an ever-busy and prosperous landholder now in her own right, stands at the side of her first lover's yet open grave, we encounter the pregnant passage which I abridge:

Out of the whirling chaos in her mind, Jason's face emerged; and, dissolving as quickly as it had formed, it reappeared as the face of Nathan, and vanished again to assume the features of Richard Burch, of Bob Ellgood, and of every man she had ever known closely or remotely in her life. They meant nothing. They had no significance, these dissolving faces. Yet as thick and fast as dead leaves they whirled and danced there, disappearing and reassembling in the vacancy of her thoughts, as faces, ghosts, dreams, and regrets; as old vibrations that were incomplete; as unconscious impulses which had never quivered into being; as all the things that she might have known, and had never known in her life.

Now, that, the exact may protest, is here presented by Miss Glasgow, not as a philosophy, but as the Dorinda puppet's transitory state of mind. Nevertheless, you will find, I think, that a great many of Miss Glasgow's protagonists—and all her later ones, I am sure—reach very much this identical state of mind not far from the end of the particular book in which each of them figures. The things which ought, by every rule of tradition, to have mattered most poignantly have in reality meant nothing.

Not that Ellen Glasgow, any more than life, permits any person to remain in this state of mind. It is this "point" I have been approaching; it is upon this "point" I would dwell, after having found an inspection of Miss Glasgow's final paragraphs to be rather strikingly revelatory. Thus in "The Builders" Caroline Meade is left facing a peculiarly ambiguous outlook, uplifted by her perception—which the prosaic could only have interpreted, at that hour and location, as a sign of somebody's house having caught fire in Chesterfield County—that "beyond the meadows and the river light was shining on the far horizon." In "Life and Gabriella" the much battered Mrs. Fowler is joyously departing, with her most recently acquired lover, "anywhere—toward the future." In yet another book, the green grass of oncoming spring is, to I forget whom, already visible among the melting snows: elsewhere, the earth's rotation has thoughtfully provided a new day, and the beloved is coming, in the last clause of the last sentence and the sunlight of a remarkably fine dawn. Thus, in book upon book, does Ellen Glasgow—after, to phrase it mildly, evincing no parsimony in supplying her characters with trials and defeats and losses—yet end upon this note of indicating her puppets' unshaken faith in an immediately impending future wherein everything will come out rather more than all right. It is the exact and the very truthful note of what I have already alluded to as the last, and indeed the expiring, cry of romance.

Just so the Dorinda Pedlar of this most recent book eventually retains—about six pages after the depressing reflections which I have epitomized—her firm, her explicit, and her inexplicable plerophoria, that "the best of life was yet to come" and that "the understanding soul can never remain desolate" so long—one gathers from a colorful poetic passage—as the rural scenery of Virginia stays picturesque. For Miss Glasgow, you perceive, knows the bipedal fauna of her chosen hunting ground far too well either to boggle over the circumstance that they, toward fifty, do occasionally glimpse the truth as to their personal experience with "romance" or to omit recording the more generally significant fact that, having done so, they with haste and admirable good sense resort to narcotics in the form of fairy stories about tomorrow. Miss Glasgow knows that, after all imaginable trials and defeats and losses, life does, illogically and relentlessly, fill the battered human machine with fresh optimism, very much as when, at more palpable filling stations, fresh gasoline is pumped into an automobile, and the machine is thus kept going. And that Ellen Glasgow should so emphasize, at the conclusion of almost every one of her books, this especial human foible rather than others, you may, if you like, regard as her punctilious oblation before the fetish of the happy ending. But I elect to see in it only the final flick as the ironist dismisses her sport.

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