

Popular Catchwords Are a National Menace

Mary S. Watts Laments "Social-Consciousness," Deliberate Bohemianism, and Influence of New York on Rest of Country

CINCINNATI is a cheerful, friendly sort of a city, not the sort of place to which one would naturally go seeking for penetrating criticisms of our civilization and revelations of national peril, and that sort of thing. Yet it was in Cincinnati, in that city's pleasant suburb called Walnut Hills, that Mary S. Watts recently announced and described to a representative of THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE the greatest menace of our time. That menace, according to the author of "Nathan Burke" and "Van Cleve," is the people who think they are thinking.

Before an open fire in the living room of her home, Mrs. Watts (in private life she is Mrs. Miles Taylor Watts) grew eloquent on the subject of this menace.

"These people who think they are thinking," she said, "do not make up their own phrases or originate their own ideas. They think in catchwords."

"What are some of these catchwords?" THE TIMES man asked.

"Well," she replied, "the relation of capital and labor is one. And 'the child in the house' is another. And then there is that very popular catchword 'social consciousness.' But out here in the Middle West we aren't so much bothered with social consciousness as you are in the East.

"You see, out here we have a kind of civilization that doesn't exist elsewhere. We are not South, we are not East, we are not West, we are a blend of the three. And it happens that some of the very newest catchwords don't bother us out here. Either we're conservative and opposed to new things, or else we're indifferent and don't care for new things, or else we just 'live and let live.' At any rate, we don't run about after novelties as you do in the East.

"Now and then we make desperate attempts to be Eastern and cosmopolitan, and all the rest of it. We try hard to get up a bohemian atmosphere among our writers and painters—we try to do this even out here, in Cincinnati. But we haven't enough writers to form a separate class."

"Do you think that this is a fortunate thing?" Mrs. Watts was asked.

"I don't think that it is either fortunate or unfortunate," she replied; "it merely is inevitable. It is a part of our quality; it belongs to the character of the Middle West. In the East you have your bohemia; here we try to have it, but in vain."

"But what about bohemia?" the reporter insisted. "Is it a good or a bad thing for literature and life?"

"I don't think," said Mrs. Watts, "that writers should form a class distinct from the rest of humanity. And yet a little bohemia is rather refreshing—a little tang of bohemia is a pleasant thing, like a little coquetry in a pretty woman.

"But bohemia, deliberate bohemia, the studio-sandal-Chinese incense sort of bohemia, is one of the worst of the shams of this age of shams. If it enters into any art it does serious harm, and literature is more easily affected by shams than any other art. Shams make literature run into a mold and get fast set.

"Literature is more easily influenced by catchwords than anything else I know. Most of the shams of the day show themselves in our literature, especially in our novels. And yet these shams are not literary in origin but social."

"What are some of these shams?" Mrs. Watts was asked.

"One of the most conspicuous of them," she replied, "is the generally accepted idea that the working class consists entirely of downtrodden angels. You find this idea enthusiastically proclaimed in the novels of Booth Tarkington and Winston Churchill and in Ernest Poole's 'The Harbor.' The workingman, according to these writers, is a downtrodden angel and the capitalist is an octopus in a white waistcoat.

"Now, this false conception of hu-

man values is a lamentable thing, a serious blemish on our contemporary fiction. This grave error, which mars many recent novels, exists through lack of knowledge and lack of humor on the part of the authors and through laziness and unwillingness actually to investigate and think on the part of the reader.

"In past years there was some justification for this description of social conditions. In past years the workingman was not treated justly, because in a sense no one was treated justly. But now the workingman, as a class, does not endure injustice. Rather he administers it. It



Mary S. Watts.

is the public that suffers—it suffers from the tyranny of the workingman!

"My latest novel dealt with that subject. I have been much criticised because in that book the working class is described as it is, instead of as a company of angels.

"Workingmen really are not angels. Anything but that! Indeed, I think that to look for the deserving poor is not worth while. There are no deserving poor!

"It is ridiculous to try to help the workingman. We cannot help any one class by itself, we can do good only by helping all society. The truth of this was strikingly brought to me the other day in the course of a conversation I had with a certain retired business man. He is a man of great wealth—he belongs to what some of our novelists would call the octopus class. Being, then, one whose favorite diversion is grinding the faces of the poor, he established, after retiring from business, a philanthropic loan bureau, the object of which was to keep poor people out of the hands of the loan sharks.

"Well, I said to this man, 'you must find this work very interesting?'

"Not at all!" he replied. "It is the most depressing occupation possible. My loan bureau doesn't seem to do any good. These people are and always will be poor. They are shiftless and foolish and they never will be able to take care of themselves. They always will need to be helped."

"Of course, this doesn't mean that these people don't need pity. They need

it especially. But it means that they are not noble souls enduring undeserved misfortunes. Whatever pains they undergo they bring upon themselves.

"Why can't our novelists see this? Why do they write things like 'The Inside of the Cup' and fondly claim that they are writing realism? How can any writer dare to apply the name realism to a book which is a grossly false picture of our entire social structure?"

"You can't fool me," said Mrs. Watts, "with novels about the downtrodden laborer! I keep house, and any house-keeper knows that a plumber gets \$6 a

porter, "are not writing about the downtrodden workingman, are they? Haven't we some writers who give a true picture of contemporary society?"

"Of course we have," said Mrs. Watts. "But they are not numerous; nor are they loudly advertised as the social unrest people are. The last book that I read that seemed to me to be an important contribution to literature was Margaret Deland's 'Rising Tide.' And in addition to being an important contribution to literature that book is true—it is an accurate portrayal of social conditions. The contrast between the old and the new generations is effectively brought out. The girl who proposes to the man—what a fine portrait that is. She is typical of the younger generation—and in no respect is she more typical than in that of being a good deal of a sham!"

"I think that in all our novels, even in those that give false pictures of life, we have better writing than we used to have. William Dean Howells is largely responsible for simplicity in writing and for the direct treatment of things. He has come nearer than any one else to writing the great American novel."

"Will the great American novel ever be written?" Mrs. Watts was asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "It certainly cannot be written in our time. The great American novel, the novel that reflects the life of all the United States as 'Vanity Fair' reflects that of England, is impossible in a country made up as ours is, of elements so varied. All our novels are sectional in theme. I write my novels of character and manners and I know that they do not reflect the life of the country; they reflect merely the life of the Middle West. Some of Mrs. Deland's stories and Basil King's 'The Side of the Angels' and William Dean Howells's greatest novels come near to expressing the whole country, but I think that the task really is impossible.

"But it is not really a defect in a novel for it to deal with just one part of the country. I like to have people cultivate their own garden and drink out of their own cup. I am satisfied to write about the people of the Middle West—it does not make me unhappy to know that New York and San Francisco are beyond the reach of my pen.

"I think that we are writing and reading better books than those of twenty-five years ago. Twenty-five years ago we were reading 'She' and 'The Prisoner of Zenda' and books of that sort. These were rattling good stories, but of course they were not novels. Today we are reading things that really are novels. Twenty-five years ago we took detective stories and mystery stories seriously. Today we know that the detective story is the last refuge of the incompetent writer."

"Are the modern English novels," Mrs. Watts was asked, "better than those of the United States?"

"Well," she replied, "England is an institution and the 'modern English novel' is a catchword. And I am tired of catchwords."

Mrs. Watts comes to New York seldom and stays usually for only a few days.

"I stay," she said, "in the Middle West. The idea that every writer must rush to New York, must be at the fountain head, is a pernicious superstition, a superstition that has tremendously harmed American letters.

"There is too much of the Get-rich-quick-Wallingford spirit in New York. Writers are not satisfied with being talented, they want to be clever. All the clever magazines come from New York. And of course you want cleverness in magazines. But you don't want cleverness in literature. No great writer is clever. But George Randolph Chester is. And Mr. Chester, rather than Thackeray, represents the predominant influence in the literary circles of New York."

"But Mr. Chester came from Ohio," said the reporter.

"Yes," said Mrs. Watts, "but he went to New York."