A MYSTIC'S TALE

John Trevena Tells of People Prehistoric and Magical

BRACKEN. By John Trevena. Mitchell Kennerley. $1.35.

MR. TREVENA calls his book "Bracken" a novel. Since novel signifies tale, he is right in his definition. Yet, as compared with the general run of novels, the two resemble each other about as much as a dark, mystery-haunted mountain pass resembles a trim garden walk. Night and day visit each, and both serve as a passage for human feet. But those who walk the two are dissimilar as their environment and bent on different goals. The garden walk and those who wander therein are known to us; we are of them, talking the same gossip, sitting in the quiet shade, toying with the flowers and with each other.

But these trampers through the mountain pass! Strange creatures they, troubled with strange problems, struggling over terrible obstacles—slipping, falling—vanishing at last into the mist, perhaps to destruction, possibly to salvation, we cannot tell.

The story takes us into a world drowned, as it were, in a mysterious ocean, an atmosphere that magnifies and distorts. The men and women are of our own day and customs, to be sure, but they seem different, almost prehistoric, linked to the beginnings of things, framed with magic. It is the deep, black roots of us that Mr. Trevena digs up and exposes to the light—roots that unite us with the ancient mother and whose dark flowers we have smothered out of sight in the long processes of civilization.

It is the story of a human soul in its triumph and failure, its good and evil, its all-besetting pride; the story of the fall of Lucifer, in fact, in modern dress, and clothed in three personalities—a woman, a weak, sweet creature, whose father is an epileptic, and two men, master and pupil. Of these two the former moves robust and god-like, doing good, teaching virtue, sorry for the evil and suffering of life, sure of his own power and wisdom. The younger, a mere boy in the prologue, weak of body, intense, emotional, imaginative, but selfish and ungoverned, follows the moment's impulse and drags himself through the mire, and others with him. The experiences of life are lifted up into a cold, clear region by the master, but the pupil is dragged down deeper by each one. In the crises the two meet, meet at first almost in a vision, hardly understanding why. Then Cuthbert perceives that the master is to help him; at the end he clings desperately to the arm held out to him, but only in black and selfish fear, untouched by a single ray of sacrificial light, and the arm falls powerless.

Margaret, susceptible, timid, seeking, and unsatisfied, crosses Cuthbert's path. He is now a man, famous for his books, books that subtly dissect the human mind, books as poisonous as they are enticing. She begins to yield to the influence, her mind turns to his until finally from the depths within her Lucy is born; Lucy, vulgar, lustful, immoral, an animal with the health and beauty of an animal, who succeeds in driving Margaret out of her body, which she usurps. Wild with the joy of life and freedom she joins Cuthbert and dominates him, for he finds in her the secret part of himself. She is in fact his, created by his mind.

But the master, Jasper, who in his splendid old age had come to love Margaret, knows her danger and comes to her rescue. Yet not entirely for her sake. He, too, desires to create, to make a woman of his own, a saint, a woman free of earthly passions, a white creature of the intellect.

So over the body that was Margaret the two men meet in a strange and fearful battle. Of Cuthbert's union with Lucy is born a monster, a monster killed at birth. But long before this Cuthbert, exhausted and terrified by this woman whom he had called into being, has deserted her. And it is in Jasper's house that her child is born. Margaret, in one of her brief returns, learning how she had been made Cuthbert's plaything, dies of the revelation. And now Jasper is to conquer. For Lucy, worn out by her dreadful birth pangs, lapses into unconsciousness, and Mary, the emotionless, the unmoral, the cold and strong, the creation of Jasper's intellectual pride—Mary comes and usurps the woman body.

"God has not done this. This is the blundering, foolish work of man. Margaret has fallen in the conflict of human minds. First it was human wickedness; now it is human wisdom. * * *"

So speaks Theodore, Margaret's father. And Jasper assents, assents in deep sorrow. He did his best, he says. But Theodore replies: "I would rather the Almighty did His worst."

The end of Cuthbert and of Mary is as cold and black as the mystery through which they have passed. And human wisdom, standing alone at the edge of the bog into which two lives have sunk, a grave unmarked by man, but where nature has set "two little unquiet lights, blue and terrible, playing beneath the moon," this human wisdom says helplessly:

"Here are my pupils."

Mr. Trevena tells his story with a certain aloof poetry both in the conception and the execution. Though it has to do with much that is dark and hideous, it remains beautiful. A sense of awe is conveyed of the working of great forces, and though the end is darkness, there are hints of ultimate light, and a little sound of love and laughter from two simple creatures who have found happiness for themselves in mutual understanding and devotion.

The New York Times
Published: March 24, 1912