American Novelists,
by Wm. Müller.
Albion W. Tourgee.

In a literary society composed almost exclusively of Anglo-Americans, and of which I am a member, I had, shortly after the death of Berthold Auerbach, reviewed the work of the author of the Schwarzwälder Dorfgeschichten. (Village Stories of the Schwarzwald.) As I am indebted to that author for many a beautiful hour of inspiration and elevating leisure, I did not at all hesitate to clothe my veneration for him in the warmest words.

Shortly after the beginning of the address, a

prominent member of the society entered, accompanied by an unknown gentleman of robust medium height, with sharply chiseled features, mighty forehead and dark, expressive eyes, and upon whom the glances of all present were fixed. At the close of the evening program, a faint murmur was heard in the room, the eyes were again turned upon the stranger, the name Fourgee was heard, and soon the visitor was greeted by the temperance acclamations of the assembly, and at the same time he was requested also to pronounce a few words.

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Being thus invited, he arose, thanked the audience with a winning smile and made a short address. He began by saying that he esteemed himself happy, that such a favorable chance had led him into the society at the very evening when the tribute of grateful recognition was paid to an author, whom he himself highly revered. The poetic characteristics of Auerbach, he said, were as sympathetic to him, as his influence upon the people seemed wholesome. He considered (i.e. Tourgee) as the chief aim of an author, to crystallize and express in a clear form, the unconscious thoughts

and the prevalent opinions of a given period. Only such an author, he claimed, whose thoughts retained their full essence even after the evaporative process of translation, and which can be regarded as an augmentation of the intellectual treasures of his nation, only such an author, ought, in his estimation, be given notice in the Areopagus of the history of literature. These demands were satisfied in the fullest measure, by the literary activity of Auerbach. It was profitable, he said, even for a matured man, who is impelled, on by the mighty reality of serious life, in

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in its rapid changes, to study this reflective and thoughtful author and to derive lasting gain ~~from~~ from this thoughtful intercourse.

These forcible words which Albion W. Tourgee pronounced that evening in praise of B. Auerbach, proclaim his view of the activity of a poet and characterize his own entire literary work. He is not content to draw pictures of the phenomena of life; but never hesitates, if circumstances permit, to pronounce thoughts of such depth, such feeling and such beauty, as can not be found, according to the verdict of most writers of the

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naturalistic school anywhere among his contemporaries. In the introduction of his novel, "Black Sea" he freely discusses his own stand in regard to the newest school in literature, in the following words of his hero:—

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The first work, with which Albion Tourgee appeared before the reading public, was the novel, "A Fool's Errand," which immediately upon its appearance attracted universal attention. Tourgee is considered an eminent jurist, and after the Civil War he filled a prominent judicial office

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in the South. This gave him an opportunity to make himself closely familiar with the prevailing conditions and to embody the result of his minute observations in a number of historical (kulturgeschichtlich, referring to history of civilization) ~~novels~~ as well as to treat the different political and social problems arising after the defeat of the South by the North, from the standpoint of the statesman, jurist, author and philanthropist. In "A Fool's Errand" he describes the position of a northern settler among the hereditary aristocracy of the South and graphically portrays the contrast between representatives of the two sections of the

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country in regard to character, convictions and manner of life. An officer of the Union army, whom the hardships of the war, have physically weakened settle with his family in a section favorable in climate, beyond Mason and Dixon's Line. It is his intention to devote himself as a private individual to the management of his plantation and to his family, and with the exception of the exercise of his civic duties, to refrain from each and every interference in the political affairs of his new home. He remains faithful to this intention until at a public meeting, his reticence is

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construed as cowardice and he is thereby forced to avow his political beliefs. With this open free exposition of his views, which are bold in spite of the moderation of the language, the "Fool's Errand" opens. As a matter of course he becomes the intellectual leader of the few Union people living in the district, as well as of the counsellor of the colored people, but exercises his far-reaching influence with the utmost discretion and takes no active part in the political battles. Notwithstanding the previous well meaning neutrality of his southern neighbors who belong to the

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exclusive circles, changes into frigid indifference and finally into irreconcilable enmity. He sees the success of his business enterprises menaced, the exercise of the simplest civic rights followed by the most ruinous consequences, and, finally, his life threatened by the barbarous outrages of the Ku-Klux-Clan. Only the heroic action of his daughter saves him from imminent death, and, as his family can no longer endure such a life of wearing anxiety and continual persecution, he is obliged to leave the South, physically broken-down, discouraged at heart and giving up the fruits of several years of labor.

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Tourgée's second novel presents the life of the colored people after the period of reconstruction. According to the ancient statement (Müller: an ancient legend (!)) a Pharaoh commanded the Israelites in Egypt to make bricks; but he forbade to give them straw to mix with the clay and ordered them to seek the stubbles on the field. The contents of this story forms the leading motive of the novel. By a stroke of the pen, the negroes of the South had suddenly been freed of the chains of slavery and made free men. Now the national government said to them, "We give you your civic rights, use them to your advantage and the interests of the

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country. However, a decree of a legislative body can not wipe out the results of two centuries of slavery and he, who yesterday was still treated as merchandise can not today be a citizen of the most advanced republic in the world. Thus the so ardently desired emancipation of the negroes, became for them during the first years of reconstruction more of a curse, than a blessing. It gave them rights for which the great majority had only a feeble comprehension, imposed duties upon them, for the fulfillment of which they lacked not only intellectual capacity and moral strength, but also material means. No wonder

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that many of them longed for ante bellum times, as the Israelites for the flesh-pots of Egypt, and that others, in gloomy despair gave up the unequal struggle against the white caste, which was superior to them in every way, and that only a few succeeding in mildening the miserable conditions of their existence, by the grotesque humor of their race. These originated the political songs of that period, which were sung by the colored minstrels for the consolation of their race, and in which their helpless condition is described in biting satire. One of them, in speaking of the tax imposed upon the utter-

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by destitute negroes in many southern states, says:-

"Yer got no lan' &c &c.

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Indeed the condition of the negroes was deplorable. The conditions created by their emancipation, forced them to real conflicts between the two races, to a struggle for dominion, for life or death, and it is this struggle which Tourgee describes to us in all its phases, with ~~im~~passionate veracity.

In a third novel, "Patrocles Prime" the author describes the conditions arising from the civil rights of a negro who has acquired a certain degree of education as well as some property, in their

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relation to those of his Caucasian neighbor. He shows that the social position of such a man is an exceedingly difficult one and creates a problem whose solution will engage the best thought of future statesmen and the sympathy of philanthropists. In a series of later works, such as, "A royal Gentleman," "Hot Ploughshares," "Figs and Thistles" and others, Tourgee takes for the theme of his art certain ~~conditions~~ questions arising from the conditions of population of the New World, or which are caused by specifically American institutions, and presents in his novels very interesting descriptions of character full of a deep

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"culture-historical" importance.

After the publication of Tourgée's first novels, especially of "A Fool's Errand" and "Bricks without Straw" he was, on account of the similarity of the subject-matter treated, given a place beside Mrs. Beecher-Stowe. According to my opinion, this comparison says too much and too little. As an artistic production in which contents and form perfectly correspond, I consider "Uncle Tom's Cabin" higher than the works of Tourgée. But in inexorable love of truth, in far-reaching statesmanlike foresight and philosophic depth his novels by far excel those of Mrs. Stowe as well

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as those of other American authors.

If anything, it is the power of his thoughts that compels the author at times to abandon the form of the novel and to weave into his narrative ingenious discussions of statesmanship, historical retrospections, and reflections on social politics. At the same time Tourgee is a great master in the art of character painting and has created, especially in the male representatives of Southern aristocracy, and in negro types as "Bo'er Nimbo", the colored preacher "Eliah" and the prolific minstrel and jester "Berry",

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characters of such spirited vitality that they fix themselves indelibly in our memory, even in their most insignificant traits.

In those novels of Tourgee whose plot is laid in the western states, as "Figs and Thistles" and "Button's Inn" the foreign born element occasionally is considered. In proper keeping with the real conditions of those sections, the reader gains an impression of their mixed population, and even if many the ancestors of many persons did not cross the ocean in the "Mayflower" or dine with the cavaliers of Virginia, they are nevertheless described in such a

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manner that they do not appear as a carricature besides the representatives of the Anglo-american race. This same clear observation and objective judgment of conditions appears also in all southern tales of Tourgee and imparts to them such a high value as 'cultur-historical' matter. Tourgee does not only relate events, but inquires into the causes of the phenomena, and if the severe veracity of the historian compels him to describe with inexorable realistic all the fearful transgressions of southern terrorism after Reconstruction, he casts the searching glance of the student of human nature into the

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hearts and can, if not ex-
cuse, at least explain that
period of dismal horrors.

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