

A CHASTE MAN. By LOUIS UMFRAVILLE WILKINSON. Alfred A. Knopf.

It has often been disputed as to how far a novelist is right in showing us the seamy side of life. But the answer admits of no dispute. Truth is the most precious jewel of all. The atmosphere of Mr. Wilkinson's new book, despite the brightness and insouciance of the manner and the lightness of the incident, is one of the most tragic gloom. The scene opens upon the hero reminding somebody that this is the third application, etc., and unless, etc., yours faithfully, and the novel ends with his reminding somebody, probably the same person, of the same thing. Such an appalling realization of the horror of life makes one shudder and sicken. Between the two applications comes an adventure.

The hero, who is a married man, meets a charming girl of sixteen, falls in love with her—and she with him. Every conceivable circumstance conspires to bring about immoral relations, so-called, between them. The girl's father himself urges it. But the hero remains chaste. The tragedy thus brought about is absolutely nauseating. It is hard for the reviewer to think of the grim and grisly abomination which follows. The hero has to go away to Switzerland, for a month or two; and during his absence the girl marries a Canadian and goes to Canada with him. The gloom is not even lightened by any hint that she may have had some adventure previous to the marriage. No hope is held out that she may have any adventure after that. The Abomination of Desolation is set up in the holy place.

But there is reserved for us a yet more terrible contemplation. If one had said, "The girl escapes from the intrigue with her married lover, and is honorably married to a Canadian," every one would say, "What a wholesome story!" The poison of puritanism has rotted through the whole of human thought. Conventional morality is the syphilis of the soul, and it is for the God Mercury, no one less, to oppose its action. Our trouble is rendered a thousand times more grievous because most of us do not recognize how foul is our disease. The

words "marriage with a Canadian' should be expunged from human language. People should be prosecuted for printing so foul and obscene a phrase.

Yet these things happen every day. The sun turns sick in heaven to behold them. Yet we do not see his anguish. Life which involves such possibilities of infamy and horror as "marriage with a Canadian' must surely be some atrocious species of damnation; the reward of infinite iniquity. But humanity has become so callous, so anaesthetic to any proper feeling, that many people may even fail to see the high seriousness and noble purpose of such statements as the above. The degradation of humanity has gone so far that marriage with a Canadian seems almost normal and natural.

There is no mistaking the great advance made by Mr. Wilkinson upon his previous novel, *The Buffoon*. In that work, there was, indeed, power and wit. But it was on the whole a pleasant book. There was plenty of comic relief—e.g., Powys' duodenum. In *A Chaste Man* the author moves stately and terrible from peak to peak of tragedy. The book reminds us a little of James Thomson, *The City of Dreadful Night*, in this respect. With infinite art the climax is set off by an adventure of the hero's sister with a man dying of consumption at St. Moritz, and this single glimpse of Paradise makes the surrounding gloom more visible and shameful.

It is unfortunately the case that stories of this kind are only too true to life. Few of us, indeed, but have some experience of the classes in which such abominations are not only possible but actual. It is true that the war has done a great deal to destroy the morality of the middle classes. From all hands comes the wail of the Puritan as he is forced into a recognition that life is a savage and beautiful thing, and that his attempt to make every one behave with the decorum of a putrefying corpse is bound in the long run to fail. We find, for example, the Bishop of Worcester offering a tasteless substitute for Worcester Sauce. He complains pitifully of how he saw three women in the street trying to seduce a soldier. Apparently in consequence of the appearance of the Bishop, the soldier "saw his chance and ran

away," but from what we know of Bishops it seems probable that he was trying to escape from the Episcopal rather than the feminine menace.

We hope that in Mr. Wilkinson's next novel he will try to give us the brighter side of the picture. The eternal death which the bourgeoisie calls life is not the only feature of experience. St. Paul has prophesied of the future of the church, "Many members in one body," and it is also written, "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth."

Do not even the most pious and pig-headed agree that these are the `last days'? Are we not come through much tribulation to the latter end of the Apocalypse, and shall we not cry with the Apostle, "The spirit and the bride say: come."? "Yea, come, Lord Jesus, come quickly."

JOHN ST. JOHN.