

# CONSTANCE HOLME

## AN APPRECIATION

JAMES G. BERRY

**A**BOUT a year ago, I opened with eager expectation one of the books in the familiar blue covers of the "World's Classics", that rich store of literary treasure provided by the Oxford University Press. It was *The Trumpet in the Dust*, by Constance Holme. My expectations were heightened the more by these words of Mr. Ralph Strauss printed on the jacket:

Sooner or later the great reading public will discover that these quiet rustic stories, . . . . . are not only unusually powerful, but hold an appeal which bears no relation whatever to the size of the hamlets and townships of which they tell. Like the cities, these Westmorland villages contain all the drama there is. . . . . Miss Holme knows where to look. More, she follows a way of her own, a distinctive, alluring, distinguished way.

That is high praise by a discerning critic, in these days when the undiscerning ones are so ready with extravagant praise for books that ill deserve it. In this way I was introduced to the novels of Constance Holme, and my enjoyment has been very great.

Times have greatly changed since Charlotte Brontë timidly sent out *Jane Eyre* from Haworth parsonage almost one hundred years ago. There were many speculations about the unknown writer in the north of England. That the writer lived there and was a woman in days when women writers were comparatively few, soon became known. Curiosity about Constance Holme has been satisfied by the writer herself. In the preface to *The Old Road from Spain*, when that book was given a place in the "World's Classics", she has told us much about herself and her surroundings, shedding a revealing light upon her novels.

The significant fact about her is that she is hereditarily attached to the land, and has an intense love for it. The members of her family have been for generations land-stewards or agents in a patch of Westmorland that runs from the Pennines to the sea. Some of them went farther afield, but the call of the land and of the old places often brought them back:

And into this same patch I too was born (in an eighteenth century house with an unexisting and quite unproven ghost), lived, married, and shall probably be buried; the youngest of

fourteen, not all of whom survived to carry on the good work in a spot that may perhaps have had quite enough of us.

For her, too, the land is full of memories which reach far back; every spot is redolent of the men and women, her forebears, who loved the land, served it and their generation:

There was little that I could look at that these forebears had not looked at first, no place where I could walk where they had not walked long before. Their homes were still to be seen in village, in marsh or on fell; their dust was in the churchyards. They had travelled about the same land to the same tune of horses' hoofs. They knew the same lanes which lovers and dobbies shared equally as of right. On the same sea-fresh air they had heard their wedding chimes and the slow moan of the passing-bell for their departing souls.

Responding to this environment with the sensitiveness of the poet and with the poet's imagination, and absorbing the influences of the living past and the no less vivid present, the dead and the living who peopled the scene, Constance Holme was moved to transmit the inheritance. "The ecstasy of these experiences drove her into creation, the impact upon her mind in pity and pain and power." She realized that her work was the result of a race feeling which through many generations had sanctified a certain countryside with the light that never was on sea or land.

After reading the prefaces which she wrote for her novels after they were first published, we come to the books themselves and read them in the light in which she herself saw them; we catch the spirit which is alive in them, and which burned and glowed in her.

Her first book, *Crump Folk Going Home*, appeared in 1913. That was the year before the Great War which was to cleave time and usher in an epoch of change. The late Arthur Clutton Brock has a fine essay, *Sunday Before the War*, in which he describes the country in the West of England on the border of Wales, Mary Webb's country, as it lay quiet and beautiful before the shock:

All its cultivation, its orchards and hopyards and fields of golden wheat seem to have the beauty of time upon them, as if men there had long lived happily upon the earth, with no desire of change or fear of decay. . . . There one saw how beautiful the life of man can be, and how men by the innocent labours of many generations can give to the earth a beauty it has never known in its wildness. And all this peace was threatened.

*Crump Folk Going Home* is a portrait of the country scene in Westmorland on the eve of change. The change had already begun, but the great slide had not yet come, altering land and people.

In this, Constance Holme's first novel, there can be seen the promise of greater things. She has keenly observed, with a feminine felicity of observation, the circle of life around her, especially the life of the landed proprietor. She describes the stir of market-day, the recreations and amusements, the sheep-dog trials on the fells, the wrestling matches and games. She goes out of her way, we feel, to introduce the local colour, those features which she knows so well; but then, this is her first venture. The old legends and superstitions which hang over the countryside, destined to be developed in her later books, appear; the Fate that lies looming over lives and families. And here too is her first portrayal of character. Slinkin Lyndesay, the dissolute squire, passing away in the old home on which a curse lies; old Mrs. Lyndesay, who has seen the spell of sorrow and hate and death working out; Nettie Stone the horsedealer's daughter, wife of Lyndesay, with something frank and brave about her; Deb and her father whose lives are bound up with Crump, the estate:

Nobody has ever known, not even my father, but the longing of it drove back upon me, eating the soul out of me. Even when I was away, the thought of Crump was a more vivid thing to me than the world around me. I would have married Stanley for Crump—for the soil, the soul of Crump, for this! She struck her hand passionately on the turf. Her longing to serve Crump was at last realized. The rooks were coming back, calling their way over park and village, ploughing steadily through the pure air to their nests in the dim woods. The two lonely young figures followed them. Crump folk all going home!

In *The Lonely Plough*, too, the land, permanent in all changes, pervades the whole story. Changes were very near, for it was written a few months before August, 1914. *The Lonely Plough* is a study of loyalty to the land on the part of those whose heritage it is. There is the landlord, the agent, the tenant. The loyalty of these and their trust in one another, qualities fostered and made strong by ancestral tradition, are depicted over against the breaking up of the old estates and the arrival of a new day and new people whose lives have not been lived close to the land.

The fine character of the agent Lancaster and his devoted service dominate the story. "I took the responsibility from you," he says to Lord Bluecaster, "I need not have done it. I could have refused it. But I didn't refuse. This is my work." He saw clearly that in every crisis one particular soul holds the scale. . . . . It is always one man's work, always and everywhere. We all stand alone, if it comes to that. We drive our furrows single-handed out

of the dark into the dark. It's always one man's hand on the lonely plough."

But Lancaster is not alone in standing loyal to the estate, to the work of his dead father who built the Lugg or sea-wall. There is also Wolf Whinnerah, the old tenant farmer, a genuine North Country man, rugged and strong and loyal. In a fine outburst of anger he declares his trust in the honour of the agent Lancaster and his father. The Lugg fell in a tremendous storm. The old tenant and his wife were drowned, but Wolf was the victor, for many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it. It is the victory of loyalty to the land and to those who serve it, even though the work of their hands fail. Lancaster in the hour of disaster says: "It is better to keep trust and be betrayed, ay better even to betray trust in keeping trust, than never to have trust at all."

Along with her strong attachment to the land, Constance Holme has a deep sense of the influence of race and family ever at work. "There is no good or evil done, fine thoughts put into shape or base ones grown secretly, but blooms again somehow in later lives." This truth has a strange fascination for her. Her novel *The Old Road from Spain* gives expression to it.

There was Spanish blood in her family, obvious in her mother, having its origin in the sixteenth century in the days of the Armada. The story is well-known, how several vessels were wrecked on the west coast of England and Scotland. The family preserved the legend of a waif cast up on a northern fell, who grew up and married an ancestor of the writer. Some of her forebears also traded with Spain from the little seaport near her home. In *The Old Road from Spain*, this binding from the past is shown at work on the lives of two brothers. One is a landlord who is cut off prematurely by the increased demands made upon him—which he is too conscientious and kind to resist—and by the nervous strain which the knowledge of his doom brings; a legendary curse hangs over the family. The other brother, who has spent years in Spain, comes home for a holiday. Gradually he comes under the spell of the land and the spirit of its quiet, enduring life. He too knows of the curse, and in Spain at his post again resolves to overcome it by sailing home over the Armada path to join the woman whom he loves on English soil. But he has to pay a more tremendous price. He perishes in the bay, in sight of home.

There is a feeling of unreality in the legendary and superstitious machinery which the writer uses. The real power and charm of the novel, however, lie in the author's love for the dear and fami-

liar countryside. This expands into what a writer of the *New York Nation* has called "a sure understanding of the spirit that is England"; her work has become a national interpretation.

It is interesting to follow Constance Holme's books in order of time. It is then apparent that in these first three there are, in spite of certain immaturities, signs of great promise and growth. This promise has been fulfilled in her later books, notably in *The Splendid Fairing*, which was awarded the *Femina-Vie Heureuse Prize*. "The art has won fineness, the psychology has gone deeper. Now she gives us the folk itself, its beauty and its hardness, its clinging to the visible earth, its intensity and its inarticulateness even in its dreams. The manner of telling is more concentrated, irrelevancies are pruned, subordinate characters are held more firmly in the background." These are noteworthy judgments by a writer in the *Times Literary Supplement* (September 1933), and each of them could be exemplified.

*The Splendid Fairing* gives us the land again, but now the chief interest is in the characters which are moulded there. It is the story of a single day, "a day when the white mist shredded above the trees, leaving the atmosphere with the look of a glass that has been breathed upon and never clears." The story vibrates with intensity. The Simon Thornthwaites have come to the end of things. They have farmed sandholes for years, dogged by ill luck. Sarah Thornthwaite's eyesight has failed. There must be an operation. They can farm no longer. The mire of debt has engulfed them. Their son Geordie has gone to Canada. He was an ineffective young man, always promising great things, bringing frolicsome gifts from the fairs, saying all the time how splendid the fairing was going to be, real gold as bright as the king's crown. This day the farm must be given up. Simon and Sarah had to call on Will and Eliza, his brother and sister-in-law to see what help they could give them in their ill fortune. Eliza was a woman whose counterfeit kindness hid her callous soul. She had always got the better of Sarah, and mocked at her misfortune; and Sarah lived only to be even with her some day.

Eliza had a son too—Jim, just Geordie's age. He had been drawn to Sarah ever since childhood, and had been more at home at Sandholes than with his father and mother in their prosperity. He too had gone away to Canada.

The drama of hate develops. There is a rumour of Geordie coming home, a rich man. Sarah cannot believe it, but in order to have her triumph over Eliza she publishes the story. In reality she and Simon will soon be servants on Will Thornthwaite's farm

—a bitter prospect. So the day passes; and now they are home at Sandholes, across the river. At nightfall, when Sarah is alone in the house, there is a knocking at the door. A stranger stands there. Who can it be? Geordie or Jim? Here at the climax of the story Constance Holme shows her power in portraying tragedy. The stranger is Geordie, come home with money, but he pretends to be Jim, and tells how he left Geordie serving in a store and "hankering like honey after the old spot." Sarah refuses to recognize him, even though he tells her that mothers always know. When he sees himself refused, he becomes changed and hard. He will go across the river to his sweetheart May, who has remained faithful throughout. He looks at the tide-table; at the wrong one. For a moment his mother hesitates, and then she lets him go to his death in the flood:

Into the hands of this oppressed and poverty-stricken woman there had suddenly been given the heady power of life and death, and the stimulant of it was like wine in her thin blood, making her heart steady as a firm-blown forge. She felt strong enough in that moment to send every child of Eliza's out to its death in the maw of the night wave. She felt an epic figure, poised on the edge of the world, heroic, tremendous, above all laws. Indeed she seemed, as it were, to be the very Finger of God itself. The tide comes in. Simon hears it; and Eliza realizes that she has been out of herself. She flings out her arms toward Jim in an aching passion to hold him close, and in a moment of revelation she feels the truth drop stilly into her whirling brain. He turns his face, but it is not Jim's face. . . . She saw swept and helpless in the swirl of the tide and in the dark, and the tumult knew that the precious body was not Jim's.

. . . . . At the same moment Sarah burst her bonds. "Geordie, Geordie!" she screamed, and ran frienziedly to the door. "Nay, it's over now," she finished, falling back against the wall. "Gang out and seek our fairing, master—mine and thine."

The tragedy of hate recoiling upon the hater has worked itself out in unrelieved gloom.

The character of Sarah is painted with power and intensity. She is possessed by one great passion, the hate which had grown in her soul, embittered by the waste and futility of long years. "There is little to choose at the farthest point between the exaltation of holiness and the pure ecstasy of hate. To the outside eye they show the same shining serenity, almost the same air of shining peace. It is the strangest quality in the strange character of this peculiarly self-destroying sin."

Two novels, *Beautiful End* and *The Trumpet in the Dust*, followed. The latter is the chronicle of one day, finely and delicately

wrought. Three characters, each of them drawn with deep understanding, sympathy and power, dominate the story. After long years of hard work, Mrs. Clapham looks forward to the rest and comfort of the almshouse. Martha Jane, a weak and pitiful figure, a faded village outcast, is also an applicant for the same haven; and Emma Catterall plays a dark and cruel part in the day's happenings. Mrs. Clapham, through the sudden death of her daughter, is called to take the motherless and fatherless children. In order to do this, she sacrifices the pleasant little house on the hill, which falls to Martha Jane:

Has it not been the time for me to light my lamp?  
 Has my evening not come to bring me sleep?  
 O thou bloodred rose, where have my poppies faded?  
 I was certain my wanderings were over and my debts all paid;  
 Then suddenly I came upon thy trumpet lying in the dust.  
 From thee I had asked peace only to find shame,  
 Now I stand before thee—help me to don my armour,  
 Let hard blows of trouble strike into my life,  
 Let my heart beat in pain, beating the drum of thy victory;  
 My hands shall be utterly emptied to take up thy trumpet.

These verses of Rabindranath Tagore are the theme of the book.

The land is everywhere in Constance Holme's novels, described as only one who has spent her life close to it, with loving observation and delight, can describe it. "Why," says Bill Fausset in *The Old Road from Spain*, "the most beautiful, priceless, passionate things we possess are the procession of the seasons and the graduated scale of days and nights! And we can't lose them while they live; that's the amazing comfort of it all. Every fine autumn and lovely spring, I think of all those still to come, until I feel so rich that I can hardly carry myself home."

We are reminded of Wordsworth and his sister who found the same joy in the county adjoining Constance Holme's as they roamed over the fells, and who expressed it for others:

He found us when the age had bound  
 Our souls in its benumbing round;  
 He spoke and loosed our heart in tears.  
 He laid us as we lay at birth  
 On the cool, flowery lap of earth;  
 Smiles broke from us and we had ease;  
 The hills were round us, and the breeze  
 Went o'er the sunlit fields again,  
 Our foreheads felt the wind and rain,  
 Our youth returned; for there was shed  
 On spirits that had long been dead,  
 Spirits dried up and closely furl'd,  
 The freshness of the early world.

The freshness and the beauty of the countryside seem to distill from Constance Holme's writings, and they bring us a refreshing fragrance.

But the land, beautiful as it is in itself, is also the enduring background for human lives, almost a living thing, wielding power over men and women, and claiming their labour and service. The land is the scene of the continuity of human life:

It is the little events that obsess a man at the last; the commonplace circular come-and-go that runs between the cradle and the grave. Not public health problems or new inventions or even the upheaval of great wars; but marriage, birth and death, the coming of strangers destined to be friends, the changing of tenants in houses which mean ever so much more than they ever mean themselves. Binding all is the rich thread of the seasons with its many-coloured strands.

Constance Holme recalls us to the old things, the immemorial rhythm of living slowly, of working steadily and of suffering bravely near to Nature and her ways. Dr. L. P. Jacks in *A Living Universe* contrasts the civilization of power with that of culture. The former aims at the exploitation of the world which is thought of as a dead, mechanical thing existing that men may exploit it. That of culture aims at the development of man, thought of as the citizen of a living universe which can be loved, enjoyed and revered. It is the living universe that counts with Constance Holme, and the people whose lot is cast there.

Even though the stage is the countryside with its simple human routine, there is fate and suffering and tragedy in the lives of these men and women. We feel that very poignantly in *The Splendid Fairing*; and we may call Constance Holme a pessimist who sees the darker side of human life and who leaves with us an impression of its waste and futility—one who has looked into life with the eyes of Hardy and has given her verdict. But we might more truly say that she has seen life itself, and in the characters and plots of her novels has sought to represent with truthfulness the whole circle of the lives of these country-dwellers of whom Tolstoi in *My Confession* wrote: "I understood that there veritably is life, that the meaning which life there receives is the truth, and I accepted it." With all its limitations, its frailty, its pain and disaster, the life which Constance Holme has seen has a certain strength and dignity, and she has portrayed it with delicacy of perception and in her own distinctive and appealing way.