A Fool's Errand
By One of the Fools

When the Tourgées headed west in the fall of 1879, the outlines of the future were indeed vague. Fourteen years, no matter how turbulent, had made North Carolina a home, while Colorado was a complete unknown. Following the welcome rest of a long train trip, the family established itself comfortably in Denver, where the Judge concluded arrangements for an editorial position on the Denver Evening Times and began investigating the local legal opportunities. Amidst the still-prevailing romance and excitement of the mining frontier, Emma was thoroughly smitten by the silver fever, and the Judge, together with several cronies, soon invested a small sum in real estate and mining. Entirely unrelated developments then brought an end to these fresh endeavors and directed the Judge's interest back toward those Reconstruction experiences which had so wrought his heart and mind.

A month after leaving the South, Tourgé's second novel, Figs and Thistles, had been released to a mildly favorable reception, and six weeks later A Fool's Errand By One of the Fools appeared anonymously. The former work was of little significance, but the latter, a thrilling and largely autobiographical account of Reconstruction, proved to be of high quality and published at a most propitious time. The Fool is Comfort Servosse, like Tourgé an educated Yankee of French origin, who travels South for similar reasons, behaves in similar fashion, and endures similar adventures, failures, and successes. Marking a high point in the Judge's power of thought and prose, possessed of "moments of
pathos, suffering, and even stark tragedy;" the work appeared at a moment when the nation’s population was still in a quandary regarding southern events over the past fifteen years. Not only did it offer the populace an astute and entertaining account of the Reconstruction puzzle, but it particularly pleased those Republicans who were reacting against the conciliatory tactics of President Hayes, and it provided the Republican party with a powerful campaign weapon for the approaching presidential election.

The nation’s press, and soon its citizenry, were carried away by the exciting and convincing narrative of the Fool and intrigued by his anonymity. A book that had begged for a publisher in three cities and had been offered outright to Whitelaw Reid for one thousand dollars became a sensational success. The northern press was overwhelming in its recommendation, while even southerners found it “a powerfully written work” and fearfully wondered whether it would “do as much harm in the world as Uncle Tom’s Cabin” or successfully demonstrate “the utter hopelessness of revolutionizing the politics and society of the South.” More careful journals, such as the Atlantic Monthly and the Boston Literary World, were also impressed, the latter concluding that “the story throughout exhibits a naturalness, a composure, a reality, a self-restraint, which belongs to the best class of literary works. . . .” A more enthused New England reviewer wondered “in view of the power here displayed, whether the long-looked-for native American novelist who is to rival Dickens, and equal Thackeray, and yet imitate neither, has not been found. A romanticist, sage, publicist, politician, and philosopher in one, is a rare combination.” Such success encouraged public revelation of the author’s identity, which further added to the novel’s reputation and brought appreciative letters from fellow fools. In six months the Judge’s profits reached twenty-four thousand dollars. Within a year sales reputedly approached one hundred and fifty thousand copies and two foreign translations were under way. A Fool’s Errand had become the best seller of its day, and Judge Tourgée found himself suddenly lifted to fortune and fame.

2 Review clippings, Tourgée Papers.
No doubt with recollections of the key that had been prepared for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, early in 1880 Tourgée prepared a documentary supplement for some succeeding editions of *A Fool's Errand*, "The Invisible Empire," which remains a lively and superior interpretation of the dread activities of the Ku Klux Klan. Also at this time, one of the Judge's publishers ventured to Denver to persuade the somewhat reluctant author to undertake another Reconstruction novel, and soon Tourgée was working from earlier manuscripts on *Bricks Without Straw*, a venture that marked a decisive commitment to a literary and journalistic career. This decision, together with an urgent demand for the new work, induced the entire family to return east in July of 1880 and establish themselves in a rather stately mansion in downtown New York. Throughout the summer, the Judge toiled steadily in a sitting room overlooking an old, tangled garden just off Broadway, while each day Emma carried completed manuscripts to the publisher and returned with the previous day's proofs. About six, the family dined, after which Tourgée often was off to the city's Republican headquarters to partake in gratifying discussions about his book, the South, and the approaching election.

Judge Tourgée's second Reconstruction novel, *Bricks Without Straw*, appeared that October. Again he presented a plot that was sometimes entrancing but too often contrived, in this instance primarily directed toward depicting the dilemma faced by the freed slaves. The central characters are an idealistic Yankee schoolmarm, Mollie Ainslee; an intelligent and noble southern aristocrat, Hesden Le Moyne; a crippled mulatto preacher, Eliab Hill; and a powerful, illiterate, black freedman, Nimbus Ware. Led by Mollie, Nimbus, and Eliab, the Negroes in *Bricks Without Straw* begin the postwar period by rather successfully exploiting the educational, economic, and political advantages of freedom. But while Mollie "enthusiastically prophesied the rapid rise and miraculous development of the colored race under the impetus of free schools and free thought," most southern whites "only saw in it a prospect of more 'sassy niggers,' like Nimbus, who was 'a good enough nigger, but mighty aggravating to the white folks.'" As a result, race prejudice combines with aristocratic tradition and economic selfishness.

4 *Bricks Without Straw*, 147. For an illustration of the impact of this novel, see the review in *The Dial*, I (1880), 110-12.
to create a dogmatic resistance by the white South to Negro advancement. The nation had asked an impossible task of reform and Reconstruction, and the book ends with their collapse.

With the addition a short time later of “John Eax” and *Hot Plowshares*, Tourgée completed what was subsequently presented as a six-volume series on the origins and aftermath of the Civil War. In order of historical content, the set included *Hot Plowshares* (1883), *Figs and Thistles* (1879), *A Royal Gentleman and Zouri’s Christmas* (1881), *A Fool’s Errand* (1879), *Bricks Without Straw* (1880), and *John Eax and Mamelon, or the South Without the Shadow* (1882). Greatly varying in value, these volumes provided a provocative and significant contribution to American literature and thought, while also suggesting that the author was more successful as a reporter and historical analyst than as an artist.

The tragedies of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Tourgée suggested, had largely originated in mutually unrecognized differences between two essentially disparate civilizations, a North guided by the political and economic ideals of the modern world, especially those of democracy and freedom, and a South bound by an anachronistic slavery that had fostered racism and caste. “Why the Northern man felt as he did, believed what he did, and did what he did, and why the Southern man felt otherwise, believed otherwise, and did otherwise” were the perceptive questions Tourgée attempted to answer. Although he placed undue emphasis upon the continuing impact of slavery and left his own preferences thoroughly undisguised, he still dealt critically and fairly with both sections, and his account was astute, compassionate, and just. Nevertheless, his thesis, and it remains a defensible one, was that southern society had been and was still in annoying constant conflict with freedom, equality and economic progress, all of which were identified with the North, with God, and with the inevitable course of human evolution. The South should and eventually would obtain more industry, more education, more freedom, and more equality, Tourgée wrote, but its traditions and its leaders were conspiring to hold it back, while sectional misunderstandings continued to confuse the picture.

Edmund Wilson has concluded that because of Tourgée’s resemblance to southerners, his insolence and reckless independence, and his

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8 *Continent*, IV (December 5, 1883), 731.
romantic and chivalrous views, he succeeded in depicting the southern point of view "not merely from first-hand observation but with a sympathetic intuition such as, so far as I know, was exercised by no other Northern invader who has put himself on record. . . ." But this ability also reflected a basic philosophy, one that combined environmentalism, compassion, a faith in mankind, and a national pride encompassing the South. Convinced of the essential goodness of people, Tourgée sought the origins and esteemed the sincerity of beliefs that he himself abhorred. He presented the clash between North and South as a clash between good and bad values, but not as one between good and evil men. Honorable men on each side were following the dictates of a conscience imposed by their respective societies, and Tourgée, while urging particular values, also sought to encourage mutual tolerance and understanding. "Which was right and which was wrong, abstractly, is of little moment to-day," he said of the Civil War, but "that all who were actors in that mighty drama should understand and appreciate the sentiments and motives of those who stood opposed to them is, at least, desirable. That our children should understand that the great cataclysm was sprung, not from passion, greed or ambition, but was based upon the deepest impulses of right and honor, is essential to that homogeneity of sentiment on which our future prosperity and happiness so much depend." It was reflective of this attitude that despite vivid depictions of racist oppression and Klan terror, villainous personalities are lacking in Tourgée's fiction. Ironically, it was this same faith that produced in him not so much a jaundiced view of the South as an excessive trust in the idealism of the North.

Hot Plowshares, published last but historically the first of Tourgée's series, was necessarily a product of his imagination rather than his experience. The method and style is familiar. The tale revolves about the Hargrove and Kortright families, who represent, respectively, the substantial backbone of the slave South and of the free North, while an accompanying mystery of slavery and miscegenation again leads to a consideration of racial prejudice. In this instance, the moral of Toinette is carried to a logical but ludicrous end when the heroine undergoes the tortures of prejudice because of an erroneous assumption that she

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6 Wilson, Patriotic Gore, 537.
7 Hot Plowshares, Preface. See also Tourgée, An Appeal to Caesar, 22.
is of Negro ancestry. Although Tourgée has been censured for escaping the racial dilemma by having the heroine prove to be white, here, as later in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, was a fitting means of ridiculing race prejudice itself.

The main intent of *Hot Plowshares*, however, was to expose the personal and regional impact of slavery as the source of anger, misunderstanding, and war. Thus the misfortunes of Hilda Hargrove and the burning of the town of Skendoah incite the North, just as the abduction of the slaves of Mallowbanks does the South. The thoughtful historical digressions accompanying this interpretation range from assertions of mutual sectional responsibility for slavery and war to a defense of the proslavery constitutional position and on to considerations of the role of radicals in history. For example, Jared Clarkson, the abolitionist, is depicted as one who “saw every wrong that scourged humanity, and hated it . . . sought out every good cause, and helped it,” but “was like the comet among celestial bodies—bright, glowing, wonderful, upon which all gaze with admiration, but none set their watches by its movements.” Yet it is antislavery morality that is judged decisive in overcoming all other constitutional, judicial, religious, or economic considerations among the people of the free North. “What politician scheming for place and preferment could dream that a people’s conscience would ever drive them so far?”

The next two novels carry us through the war years, in the South, with *Toinette*, and in the North, with *Figs and Thistles*. The hero of the latter, Markham Churr, relives Tourgée’s boyhood and army experiences and is suggestive of many of his aspirations as well. A product of the democratic-religious tradition of the Western Reserve, Churr becomes the protégé of Boaz Woodley, a titan who typifies the honest accomplishment and skill, as well as the ruthless acquisitiveness, of the robber baron. After achieving wealth and a congressional seat under Woodley’s tutelage, Churr finds himself morally opposed to certain of his mentor’s tainted desires (which are obviously modeled after the Credit Mobilier scandal). Churr is torn between friendship, righteousness, and fear of his own egotism, but religious morality spurs him on to victory over Woodley, the political syndicate, and the controlled press. Although melodramatic and devoid of the perception and depth

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8 *Hot Plowshares*, 281–82. For the succeeding quotation, see *ibid.*, 226.
to be found in Tourgée's writings on the South, *Figs and Thistles* can be judged an early, significant critique of nineteenth-century American capitalism.9

But it is in depicting southern Reconstruction that Tourgée achieves a unique and vital place in American literature. The only carpetbagger and important participant to write pertinent fiction about this tragic drama, his work ably exploited his intense interest and firsthand knowledge without being crippled by an unconcealed commitment. Tourgée had much to say, and he said it powerfully and well. His balance and environmental emphasis are suggested by the following familiar section of *A Fool's Errand*, describing the contrasting thought of the North and South:

ANTE BELLUM.

**Northern Idea of Slavery.**

Slavery is wrong morally, politically, and economically. It is tolerated only for the sake of peace and quiet. The Negro is a man, and has equal inherent rights with the white race.

**Southern Idea of Slavery.**

The Negro is fit only for slavery. It is sanctioned by the Bible, and it must be right; or, if not exactly right, is unavoidable, now that the race is among us. We can not live with them in any other condition.

**Northern Idea of the Southern Idea.**

Those Southern fellows know that slavery is wrong, and incompatible with the theory of our government; but it is a good thing for them. They grow fat and rich, and have a good time, on account of it; and no one can blame them for not wanting to give it up.

**Southern Idea of the Northern Idea.**

Those Yankees are jealous because we make slavery profitable, raising cotton and tobacco, and want to deprive us of our slaves from envy. They don't believe a word of what they say about its being wrong, except a few fanatics. The rest are all hypocrites.

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The Northern Idea of the Situation.

The Negroes are free now, and must have a fair chance to make themselves something. What is claimed about their inferiority may be true. It is not likely to approve itself; but, true or false, they have a right to equality before the law. That is what the war meant, and this must be secured to them. The rest they must get as they can, or do without, as they choose.

The Southern Idea of the Situation.

We have lost our slaves, our bank stock, every thing, by the war. We have been beaten, and have honestly surrendered: slavery is gone, of course. The slave is now free, but he is not white. We have no ill will towards the colored man as such and in his place; but he is not our equal, and can not be made our equal, and we will not be ruled by him, or admit him as a co-ordinate with the white race in power. We have no objection to his voting, so long as he votes as his old master, or the man for whom he labors, advises him; but, when he chooses to vote differently, he must take the consequences.

The Northern Idea of the Southern Idea.

Now that the Negro is a voter, the Southern people will have to treat him well, because they will need his vote. The Negro will remain true to the government and party which gave him liberty, and in order to secure its preservation. Enough of the Southern whites will go with them, for the sake of office and power, to enable

The Southern Idea of the Northern Idea.

The Negro is made a voter simply to degrade and disgrace the white people of the South. The North cares nothing about the Negro as a man, but only enfranchises him in order to humiliate and enfeeble us. Of course, it makes no difference to the people of the North whether he is a voter or not. There are so few colored men
them to retain permanent control of those States for an indefinite period. The Negroes will go to work, and things will gradually adjust themselves. The South has no right to complain. They would have the Negroes as slaves, kept the country in constant turmoil for the sake of them, brought on the war because we would not catch their runaways, killed a million of men; and now they can not complain if the very weapon by which they held power is turned against them, and is made the means of righting the wrongs which they have themselves created. It may be hard; but they will learn to do better hereafter.

There was just enough of truth in each of these estimates of the other's characteristics to mislead. The South, as a mass, was honest in its belief of the righteousness of slavery, both morally and politically. The North, in like manner, was equally honest in its conviction with regard to the wickedness of slavery, and its inconsistency with republican institutions; yet neither credited the other with honesty. The South was right in believing that the North cared little or nothing for the Negro as a man, but wrong in the idea that the theory of political equality and manhood suffrage was invented or imposed from any thought of malice, revenge, or envy toward the South. The wish to degrade did not enter into the Northern mind in this connection. The idea that “of one blood are all the nations of the earth,” and that “race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” can not be allowed to affect the legal or political rights of any, was a living
principle in the Northern mind, as little capable of suppression as the sentiment of race antagonism by which it was met, and whose intensity it persistently discredited.\(^{10}\)

Still it was the "wise men" of the victorious North who were primarily responsible for the nation's postwar course, Tourgée insisted, and just as their initial understanding was clouded, so was their strategy absurd. Admirable goals were entrusted to the hands of the poor, the weak, and the idealistic, who were opposed by overwhelming power, wealth, and intelligence, and the South was inevitably "redeemed." "Like the ancient taskmaker, the Nation said: 'There shall no straw be given you, yet shall ye deliver the tale of bricks.'" It was this tragic story that Tourgée narrated with the greatest insight, passion, and skill.

Undoubtedly, his two masterpieces were *A Fool's Errand* and *Bricks Without Straw*, which, together with the short stories "John Eax," "Mamelon," and "Zouri's Christmas," constitute the invaluable testament of a carpetbagger and provide a panoramic view and an astute analysis of the Reconstruction South. The entire story is there—the postwar suffering and confusion, the issues of unionism, race, and reform, the various contesting forces, the terrors of the Klan, and the final failure.

Tourgée's most significant accomplishment in literary realism may well have been his portrayal of such Reconstruction types as the aspiring white yeoman unionist and Republican; the illiterate but aware, and sometimes able, Negro; the enlightened southern gentleman, whose intellect overcame his prejudice; the respectable, capable Conservative influenced so decisively by caste and race beliefs; the race-conscious white commoner; and the idealistic but naïve Yankee teacher, Bureau agent, or carpetbagger. Sketching rather than developing these primarily political character types, Tourgée depicted southern Reconstruction as essentially a struggle of Republican political equality and reform against Conservative reaction, demagogy, racism, and power. Especially varied and valuable are his discussions of those still elusive Reconstruction figures the unionists, the Republicans, and the Negroes, and, indicative of his extensive reliance upon fact, almost every character and major

incident in *A Fool’s Errand* can be at least partially identified with an individual or event in his Reconstruction experience. “He wanted to tell his bloodcurdling true story,” Edmund Wilson has written, “to put on record his observations of the South and to explain the conclusions he drew from them, and he alternates his exciting episodes with chapters of political and social analysis; yet the latter does not deaden the narrative as happens so often with this kind of book.” Tourgée’s intense concern and immense knowledge of his subject had combined with sufficient literary skill to make him “one of the most readable . . . of writers who aim primarily at social history. His narrative has spirit and movement; his insights are brilliantly revealing, and they are expressed with emotional conviction.”

Discussions of prejudice and the Negro inspired some of Tourgée’s finest writing—the confused but courageous adjustments to freedom of Nimbus Ware, the poignant exposure of Toinette, or the dialect, pathos, and humor of Berry Lawson. “Come up dar now an’ wuk a farm on sheers,” Berry jests with a friend, “an’ let Marse Sykes ‘lowance ye, an’ yer’ll come out like me an’ git some good clothes, too! Greatest place ter start up a run-down nigger yer ever seed. Jes’ look at me, now. When I went dar I didn’t hev a rag ter my back—nary a rag, an’ now jes see how I’s covered wid ’em.” Subsequent encounters with stuffed ballot boxes and the unfair tenant laws of redemption exasperate Berry and drive him from the South. Of more heroic proportions than Berry is the once trusted slave Nimbus, whose visit to his impoverished and embittered former owner, Potestatem Desmit, helps establish the postwar setting of *Bricks Without Straw*:

Nimbus stood before his master for the first time since he had been sent down the country to work on fortifications intended to prevent the realization of his race’s long-delayed vision of freedom. He came with his hat in his hand, saying respectfully, “How d’ye, Marse Desmit?”


"Is that you, Nimbus? Get right out of here! I don't want any such grand rascal nigger in my house."

"But, Marse Desmit," began the colored man, greatly flurried by this rude greeting.

"I don't want any 'buts.' Damn you, I've had enough of all such cattle. What are you here for, anyhow? Why don't you go back to the Yankees that you ran away to? I suppose you want I should feed you, clothe you, support you, as I've been doing for your lazy wife and children ever since the surrender. I shan't do it a day longer—not a day! D'ye hear? Get off from my land before the sun goes down tomorrow or I'll have the overseer set his dogs on you."

"All right," said Nimbus coolly; "jes yer pay my wife what's due her and we'll leave ez soon ez yer please."

"Due her? You damned black rascal, do you stand there and tell me I owe her anything?"

Strangely enough, the colored man did not quail. His army life had taught him to stand his ground, even against a white man, and he had not yet learned how necessary it was to unlearn the lesson of liberty and assume again the role of the slave. The white man was astounded. Here was a "sassy nigger" indeed! This was what freedom did for them!

"Her papers dat you gib her at de hirin', Marse Potem," said Nimbus, "says dat yer shall pay her fo' dollars a month an' rations. She's hed de rations all reg'lar, Marse Desmit; dat's all right, but not a dollar ob de money."

"You lie, you black rascal!" said Desmit excitedly; "she's drawn every cent of it!"

"Wal," said Nimbus, "ef dat's what yer say, we'll hev ter let de Bureau settle it."

"What, sir? You rascal, do you threaten me with the Bureau?" shouted Desmit, starting toward him in a rage, and aiming a blow at him with the heavy walking-stick he carried.

"Don't do dat, Marse Desmit," cried the colored man; "don't do dat!"

There was a dangerous gleam in his eye, but the white man did not heed the warning. His blow fell not on the colored man's
head, but on his upraised arm, and the next moment the cane was wrested from his hands, and the recent slave stood over his former master as he lay upon the floor, where he had fallen or been thrown, and said: "Don't yer try dat, Marse Desmit; I won't bar it—dat I won't, from no man, black ner white. I'se been a sojer sence I was a slave, an' ther don't no man hit me a lick jes cos I'm black enny mo'. Yer's an' ole man, Marse Desmit, an' yer wuz a good 'nough marster ter me in the ole times, but yer mustn't try ter beat a free man. I don't want ter hurt yer, but yer mustn't do dat!"

"Then get out of here instantly," said Desmit, rising and pointing toward the door.

"All right, Marse," said Nimbus, stooping for his hat; "'tain't no use fer yer to be so mad, though. I jes come fer to make a trade wid ye."

"Get out of here, you damned, treacherous, ungrateful, black rascal. I wish every one of your whole race had the small-pox! Get out!"

As Nimbus turned to go, he continued: "And get your damned lazy tribe off my plantation before to-morrow night, if you don't want the dogs put on them, too!"

"I ain't afeard o' yer dogs," said Nimbus, as he went down the hall, and, mounting his mule, rode away.

With every step his wrath increased. It was well for Potestatem Desmit that he was not present to feel the anger of the black giant whom he had enraged. Once or twice he turned back, gesticulating fiercely and trembling with rage. Then he seemed to think better of it, and, turning his mule into a town a mile off his road, he lodged a complaint against his old master, with the officer of the "Bureau," and then rode quietly home, satisfied to "let de law take its course," as he said. He was glad that there was a law for him—a law that put him on the level with his old master—and meditated gratefully, as he rode home, on what the nation had wrought in his behalf since the time when "Marse Desmit" had sent him along that very road with an order to "Marse Ware" to give him "twenty lashes well laid on." The silly fellow thought that thenceforth he was going to have a "white
man's chance in life." He did not know that in our free American Government, while the Federal power can lawfully and properly ordain and establish the theoretical rights of its citizens, it has no legal power to support and maintain those rights against the encroachment of any of the States, since in those matters the State is sovereign, and the part is greater than the whole.

The Negroes in Tourgée’s fiction are idealized, it is true, but one must remember that this is true of all his characters, white or black, northern or southern, and this idealization did not preclude a critical reality. Admittedly “a slave may be freed in an hour; a free man cannot be made in many a day.” The ignorance and inability, the emotionalism and mistakes of the freed slaves are freely depicted, but the humanity and manhood of the Negro are properly recognized and maintained, and the rationalizations of prejudice are satirically crushed. In Bricks Without Straw, the frustrated valor of Nimbus Ware, the good-natured resignation of Berry Lawson, and the educational endeavors of Eliab Hill touch precisely those attitudes destined to dominate ideological conflict among Negroes for at least another century. It does not seem too much to say that Tourgée’s accomplishments in Negro portraiture rank with those of George W. Cable and Mark Twain, while his interest in Negro dialect preluded the success of Joel Chandler Harris.

In his fiction Tourgée was also a pioneer in the destruction of various myths, as in his portrayals of a sturdy southern yeomanry, likeable slave overseers, and the fluidity of ante-bellum white society. While persistently repudiating his opponents’ racial and political beliefs, Tourgée depicted the origins, nature, and sincerity of these beliefs with understanding and care. “There was never a kindlier, more hospitable, or more religious people on the footstool” than those of the South. He recognized the honesty and ability of Conservatives and believed in their paternal interest in Negro welfare but considered this paternalism unacceptably limited by its insistence upon permanent Negro inferiority. Tracing the racist heritage primarily to slaveowners and their apologists, he also detected the intensity of newer racist demands from the poorer whites.

13 *Hot Plowshares*, 175. See also *ibid.*, 148, note.
14 *A Fool’s Errand*, 104: “only they were kind according to their notion, as everybody else is, hospitable according to custom, like the rest of the world. . . .”
Tourgée's contempt for the cruel and cowardly atrocities of the Klan was accompanied by admiration for its daring and successful defiance of a recent conqueror. "It was a magnificent conception, and, in a sense, deserved success!" he could say,\textsuperscript{15} while criticizing the North for its racial prejudice, its contributions to the existence of slavery, and its sole responsibility for the Reconstruction dilemma. The sincerity of his efforts even prompted praise from one of North Carolina's most determined Redeemers, Mrs. Cornelia Phillips Spencer, who concluded that A Fool's Errand was "the only book on South & North that presents a true picture. He has done it very well—and tells the truth as nearly as a c-bagger & a Tourgée could possibly be expected to do. I think he has tried to be fair."\textsuperscript{16}

This recognition of Tourgée's contribution is not meant to deny the existence of weakness in content and technique. His reliance upon his own experience limits the validity of the picture he presented, since his judicial district was not typical of North Carolina and its resemblance to the South as a whole is unclear. A more serious failing is his relative neglect of pertinent topics or character types. Tourgée inclined to interpret Conservative behavior solely in terms of race, he provided only the briefest glimpse of the insincere Republican or of the momentous railroad fiasco, and personality faults were beyond the pale. In exaggerating slavery as the origin of southern peculiarities, he failed to detect the industrial strain in Bourbonism and minimized the extent of racism in the North and the progress of democracy in the ante-bellum South. He touched upon most of these factors, but so concentrated upon verifying his basic interpretation that he neglected qualifying material. His presentation of too pat an argument may have done more to undermine his work than did any general inadequacy of his thesis.

Attitudes toward Tourgée's artistic significance and skill have varied greatly, primarily in accordance with the degree of interest in the social content of his books, and recent attitudes toward Reconstruction and the Negro have brought him increasing praise. The most common criticism, and it does not lack substance, concerns Tourgée's adherence to the hackneyed methods of the traditional romantic novel—the idealization of character, the artificiality of plot, the morality and

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 289.
\textsuperscript{16} Spencer to Charles Phillips, March 3, 1880, Spencer Papers.
sentimentalism, and the unconcealed tendentiousness. He has been accused, too, of poor dialect and an absence of humor, and his characters are usually lacking in "subtleties of character" or "nuances of human motivation." Accustomed to, and still essentially involved in, debate, it was too easy for Tourgée to lapse into polemics, for his characters to become mechanical vehicles for his interpretations, and for his emotions to lose their poise—thus the frequent didactic excursions and the almost compulsive avoidance of ambiguity. Tourgée's greatest artistic tragedy was probably his failure to control this inclination by making his message a more integral part of his tale, a failing that was all the more deplorable because of the unusual power of his prose.

In recent reconsiderations of Tourgée's fiction, his faults are still recognized, but he is conceded an attractive and powerful content and style; George J. Becker judged him in 1947 as "perhaps the most neglected figure in American literature." Tourgée's vigorous prose succeeds in retaining interest and in conveying his passion and intensity, his dramatic narrative achieves intense excitement and suspense, and he has a graceful descriptive ability. Alexander Cowie concluded that only a lack of emotional restraint kept Tourgée from becoming one of our greater writers, and he especially commends his "nice discrimination of phrase, his easy cadences, his distinguished talent for epigrammatic expression." Tourgée's irony and satire, his humor and dialect, his "gracious vignettes of Nature," and, in the case of Toinette, his "shrewd comprehending analysis of character" have also been applauded.

Tourgée's relationship to the emergence of fictional realism in the

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United States has been less satisfactorily considered. This confusing literary development was itself a part of a broader intellectual adjustment between an older, idealistic teleology and the social problems and scientific views of the modern world. In his own resolution of this conflict, Tourgée displayed a dichotomy typical of the age, deriving both strength and weakness from his bonds with the past. Wedded to collegiately ingrained literary values and somewhat of an outsider among novelists, he was very little influenced by the attack upon romantic techniques by a Twain on one hand and a Howells or James on the other. The apparent lack of modernism and finesse in Tourgée's literature may be attributed largely to an isolation from the literary profession, together with the fact that he was more concerned with social interpretation and with serving and influencing his own generation than he was with perpetuating his name as an artist or contributing to the novel as an art form. In addition, he was, in his sectional novels at least, a representative, rather than a critic, of an older society. In resisting the abandonment of an earlier idealism and in assaulting the slavery heritage, there was something appropriate about a reliance upon the traditional values and literary forms of the free North. These considerations, plus a practical interest in reaching the public, contributed to the retention of artistic methods that were already being undermined by the early realists.

Tourgée also recoiled from the laborious character study and psychological emphasis with which Howells and James sought to depict and comprehend the modern world. On the other hand, he did contribute to the social stream of realism represented by Mark Twain and the local colorists. Drawing from personal experience and observation, he accurately portrayed and interpreted socially important characters and situations. His depictions of the South and the Western Reserve marked him as a uniquely diversified regionalist, but he also sought to combine different regional values into a truly national literature. Although his success was limited, the conception was rare.

To summarize, one might say that as an author Tourgée retained too much of romanticism, shunned psychological trends, and contributed to the sociological interest and insight of the newer American novel. His focus and his ties to past crusades had been a source of inspiration and power but had also encouraged outmoded techniques and a
didacticism and sentimentalism that detracted from his powerful factual contributions. Thus, while in some respects old-fashioned, Tourgée was not an unsophisticated thinker. The idealism and nobility that he championed has often been too easily dismissed, and his attempt to utilize romance as a vehicle for fundamental truths anticipated the technique of Frank Norris. His social emphasis preceded that of Howells by a decade, and many of his conclusions were generations ahead of their time. A competent sociological awareness in his literature included an optimistic Darwinism, an environmental determinism (partially attributed by Tourgée to the influence of Oliver Wendell Holmes), and an acceptance of the primacy of collective over individual man. These particular views would become of increasing importance to his subsequent career.

While Tourgée does not stand among the great literary artists of the United States, his accuracy and significance easily equal that of many of the better regionalists and realists of his time. There is a perception, ability, and balance in his depiction of southern Reconstruction that differs markedly from the popular balderdash on that era subsequently presented by such writers as Thomas Nelson Page or Thomas Dixon, Jr. Within the confines of a skilled romantic technique, Tourgée captured much of the real tone of an age, and his conclusions regarding the Negro and the postwar South have increasingly gained credence. "A Fool's Errand," notes Edmund Wilson, "was received as a sensation in its day and it ought to be an historical classic in ours," a judgment that might well be extended to include Bricks Without Straw.21 In their field these two works have never really been equaled; they stand among the few perceptive and satisfying accounts of that period to be found.

Neither the fortune nor the influence that accompanied this phase of Tourgée's literary career continued, primarily, perhaps, because the value of his early fiction was unique, although in good part his decline, like his success, was fortuitous. His was the voice of an old Republican idealism that was being swamped by a postwar wave of racism, materialism, and cynicism. Tourgée's never-ending support of the abandoned principles of Reconstruction, together with his newer critiques of the industrial North, launched him upon a crusade in the North as deter-

21 Wilson, _Patriotic Gore_, 536. Surprisingly, no paperback editions of these works are presently available.
minded as his previous one in the South. Again, his was an increasingly lonely cry. As the Negro became the forgotten man in the United States, his most vocal white defender was also forgotten. There was something tragic in the futile assault against prejudice that followed, and something heroic and prophetic as well. “It is . . . only in the element of simple, undoubting faith, that the kinship of genius and folly consists,” Tourgée had written in A Fool’s Errand, and for many years, as he had predicted: “Time smiled grimly as he traced anew the unsolved problem which had mocked the Fool’s heart.” 22

22 A Fool’s Errand, 4, 359.