

Some Stories in the May Magazines

By DOROTHY SCARBOROUGH.

WAR'S burning finger is felt in our fiction as elsewhere now. The range of material is being narrowed by the preponderance of emphasis placed on themes directly or indirectly associated with the conflict, so that current stories show less variety than we should like.

Some magazines apparently publish nothing but war fiction, as the *Bookman*, that this month inaugurates a department of short stories, but limits the choice to war echoes. Has the *Atlantic Monthly* decided to give us nothing but war stories? One wonders if patriotism demands this—if readers would not be better off for more fiction that allows an escape from heavy thoughts. Where is a person to find relief now, if not in reading?

War Tales.

Of the May stories whose action is set in the scene of fighting three stand out as worthy of mention.

Bill, by Sidney A. Merriam, in the *Atlantic*, is distinctive for its effects of contrast and its well sustained suspense. The central character here is a canary bird that plays its tragic part in the conflict.

The Plateau of Thirst, by Capt. F. Britten Austin, in the *Red Book*, has a convincing actuality that many battle stories lack. The struggle here is tense and the climax has genuine power.

Sophy and the Lieutenant, by Etta Henry, in the *Touchstone*, is a quaint, appealing story of the havoc wrought by war, told with sincerity and possessing good atmospheric values. It has real power—in fact is one of the best stories of the month.

Studies in the Uncanny.

The popularity of the supernatural as complicating material for fiction continues unabated, as shown by the fact that various current stories employ this motif. The element of the weird may be suggestive or may be brought forward frankly without apology for its presence.

The Black Key, by Joseph Hergesheimer, in the *Century*, is an excellent example of symbolic impressionism. The descriptive passages are unusually good, producing an atmospheric effect of the uncanny which harmonizes with the curious character revelation and the resulting action.

The Jade Bracelet, by Mary Wilkins Freeman, in the *Forum*, is an interesting study, combining realism skilfully with the supernatural. The *Forum* publishes a single story each month, one well worth reading.

The White Battalion, by Frances Gilchrist Wood, in the *Bookman*, gives a novel and pathetic twist to the theme used variously before, that regiments of the allied dead come back to aid their comrades in time of sorest need.

Analysis of Situation.

There are some stories whose chief interest lies in situation, rather than in plot or character development, studies in circumstances that may be typical as well as individual.

That's Marriage, by Edna Ferber, in the *Metropolitan*, is a well motivated account of the workings out of antagonism aroused by the two close association of married life, of the hysteria that a husband's harmless mannerisms may stir in his wife. Miss Ferber's stories always

"The Pawns Count"



E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM,
Author of "The Pawns Count"

MR. OPPENHEIM'S latest, his forty-second novel, *The Pawns Count*, is in his favorite method and manner. International intrigue is its material. England and Germany are fighting in the field—or ditch—to make work for the spies and the foilers of spies.

An English officer, flushed with success in his efforts to outdo the inventors of deadly explosives, betrays his own secret. The precious paper bearing the formula of destruction is at this moment concealed upon his person—I will away to the War Office, and place it in safe hands! The war is as good as won! The German hosts shall be blown, straightway, to kingdom come.

But wait—the very walls have ears. They are the ears of friends of Germany. The officer and his papers disappear together. Now the brave and brilliant American girl, Miss Pamela Van Teyl, gets busy. With very marked acumen and indomitable courage, she beards the villains in their den. Then the war of wits begins.

The chief villain is an American hyphenate. Love for the beautiful maiden and love for the base antecedent member of his racial compound vie for mastery in his breast. A clumsy Britisher muddles in. A Japanese butler proves a prince in disguise. The villain is playing Japan and America off against each other, in the hope of effecting an alliance with one or the other for the All-Highest.

He is all that a villain should be: double dyed, and dipped again, and then

have the ring of reality and they show an interesting range of plot ideas.

Marchpane, by Katharine Fullerton Gerould, in *Harper's*, treats of the psychological changes wrought by war on a returning soldier. This story is intellectually interesting, but fails to touch the heart. Mrs. Gerould's material is usually of a hair drawn subtlety remote from ordinary interests, or else of a revolting abnormality, physical or psychic, so that her fiction either leaves the reader cold or stirs him with repulsion. Mrs. Gerould is unquestionably an artist in style, so that one can but wish she exercised a happier choice of themes.

Character Stories.

Gifts, by Alice Brown, in *Woman's Home Companion*, shows slow unfolding of character with noble simplicity and earnestness. To read a story like this expands the soul.

We Go Together—You and I, by Alice Garland Steele, in the *American*, has a certain appeal of pathos, yet is not altogether convincing.

Ardessa, by Willa Sibert Cather, in *Century*, shows admirable skill in portraiture, each person in the story being touched off with apt strokes.

An Error of Choice, by Clarence Budington Kelland, in *Pictorial Review*, is

shellacked with all the social graces. Through a bewildering series of complications the plot weaves its tortuous way. The willing reader is fooled and fooled again, to the top of his bent—whatever that is. The market is manipulated; British pounds and German marks are matched quite recklessly, while American speculators writhe on the hot griddle. America narrowly escapes the immeasurably bitter fate of having a German-hyphen-American seated in the White House.

Lovers, with heartfuls of hate hidden beneath the finest of society smiles, strive for the hand of the lovely Pamela. And always there is the precious formula in the background. The villain thinks he has sent it to his imperial master; the girl thinks she has it safe in a silken belt close, close to her pretty person. But the stupid Britisher—ah, gentle reader, you will have pierced the mask of that stupidity! He knows where the papers are—and they are where they will do the Hun no good. So the villain comes to his foreordained and predestined end, and the stupid Englishman and the brilliant American girl are happy and hyphenated in a blessed way—and the reader has been beguiled of a couple of hours that might else have dragged.

So it will be seen that this is right Oppenheim, the goods, the real thing, hot stuff. Great are the tellers of stories, and high among these great ones stands E. Phillips Oppenheim.

THE PAWNS COUNT. By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM. Little, Brown & Co. \$1.50.

amusing, but in both situation and character revelation it is too reminiscent of Booth Tarkington's *Cherry*.

The Common Sense of Thomas Edison Holmes, by Sophie Kerr, in *Munsey's*, is an entertaining story of a resourceful small boy, but the plot drags in places and the denouement seems rather improbable.

A Singing Bird, by Dana Gatlin, in *Collier's*, while lacking in plot, is a pleasant study of adolescent love.

A Dear Little Four Flusher, by Harold Titus, in *Everybody's*, is another story of young love, entertaining, but not memorable.

Old Folks and the Things That Do Not Pass

IF Miss Alcott had made the youngest of her *Eight Cousins* thirty-eight years old and had advanced correspondingly the ages of the other persons of the story she would have had such a group—so far as years go—as appears in Louis Couperus's novel, *Old People and the Things That Pass*. The two about whom the story moves are both in their nineties, and most of the people near them are past 60. The past of the nonagenarians weighs heavy upon the present of the younger folks. It is things that do not pass but obstinately persist that keep the story and study going.

Couperus and Alcott: The age of the "characters" is a minor difference alongside of the others that exist between these two so oddly conjugated books. Of course nothing could bring into such collocation the names of two so dissimilar writers as these except such an accident of comparison as springs from the interest, in each of the two books, centring about a group of relatives. Louisa May Alcott is not exactly the one among American authors whom we should take as a criterion if we were to try, by pairing an American work with *Old People*, to get at the essential likeness or unlikeness of the story tellers of the two countries; but the accidental and somewhat startling conjunction does emphasize the contrast between the American and the Dutch manners of reflecting life in fiction.

Couperus's people in this book are again of the sort he revealed so pitilessly (maliciously?) in his *Small Souls* books. The matters most prominent in the record of their lives are a strongly persistent heredity, leading to odd or bad marriages, or matings without the formality of legacies. And the core of the tale is a crime—a crime committed sixty years before the story begins by the aged ones who drag out their last days in the shadow of tragic memories, while their neighbors speculate variously about *The Things That Pass* before the old, tired eyes.

Mr. Couperus cuts deep with the scalpel of psychology. His touch is sure, terribly sure. There is no wasted motion, no unnecessary slashing of the tissues. Stroke by stroke the keen blade lays aside the enveloping matter, until we see clearly just what the operator wants us to see. The performance is slightly diabolical; admirable in its simple efficiency—beneficial, possibly, but never very enjoyable to normal, healthy minds. Mr. Couperus is not sarcastic, but he is satiric.

Mr. Couperus writes at times with an amazing sense of sheer power and at times with extraordinary beauty. But there is no soaring of the spirit. It is intellect we see at work; cold, sure, direct—never warm, never wavering, never losing sight of the mark. A severe, uncompromising art; a logic absolutely faithful to its premises. Perhaps American literature would be the better for having a little more of that art and logic. Certainly Dutch novels would be the better (at least, in translation, for American readers) for having a little bit more of the American humor. But then American literature, they tell us, is not even yet quite grown up!

And we, at least, hope it never will be—in our time, at any rate—if, in order to be grown up, it would have to measure down to the standard set for it by some of our young rebels against constituted authority and the scheme of things in a world that might be improved but never will be by them. And, if we "get" these young people right, Mr. Couperus's latest book is just what they would recommend to us as a model.

OLD PEOPLE AND THE THINGS THAT PASS. By LOUIS COUPERUS. Translated by Alexander Teixeira de Mattos. Dodd, Mead & Co. \$1.50.

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