

With Booth Tarkington Two Hours or More

By RUSSELL DYER OWEN.

A TALK with Booth Tarkington makes one realize more perfectly why so many people like his books. Of course the impersonality of art and all that sort of thing is a sacred shibboleth; but we have our own opinion and we mean to stick to it.

When Mr. Tarkington stretches his slightly stooped and tweed clad self behind a veil of smoke and begins to smile and talk there is nothing to do but be perfectly contented for two hours and a half and then hate to go away. It doesn't much matter whether he wanders to old ship captains up in Maine, where he spends nine months of the year and collects ship models, on which he is learning to distinguish the crojick yard from the main to'gan's'l; his thoughts on boys, the league of nations, or why Germany went wrong. Tempered by the Tarkington personality it is all absorbing and exceedingly pleasant.

The Four Year Shadow.

It was hard this day to say whether the ship captains or the war held first place in Mr. Tarkington's mind. Let us hope it was the captains, for he confessed that like so many other men who have lived much abroad the war came to him as such a revealing shock that he has not yet freed himself from his obsession. He had lived in France and Italy and travelled often in Germany and with Owen Wister found that his conception of Germans was wrong and his admiration for them was founded on a false understanding.

"I have found there are a lot of things I don't know anything about," he said soberly. "This war is such an overwhelming thing, goes so to the roots of things. After other wars people have quickly reverted to their former ways of life; but now that this one is over its shadow seems still on the world. Men's problems now seem to be nearly as bad as the war itself, and most of them are taxes.

"I sometimes manage to lock myself in my room and with the aid of several cups of coffee write something of my own; but it has been hard to do. I couldn't write a war story; it would be like writing about a surgical operation in one's family."

Most of Mr. Tarkington's writing on the war has been of a much more practical kind, for like many other men of letters who perforce have been non-combatants he has done his bit in the way he could be most useful.

The War and Writing.

"The influence of the war on literature," he repeated in answer to a question that is being hurled without mercy at every writing man who is good natured enough to try to answer it. "Well, when that question came to me I began to look for historical precedents, so to say, and I could not find that art has ever received a stimulus from war. It will furnish a great material field for writers and that, I think, will be its chief service.

"The most remarkable thing it has produced is its poetry. There has been so much of it, and much has been written that has not been published. Some of it has been excellent, really good poetry, and there has been much good rhythm. A people find a rhythm before they can write good prose; it is primitive; and there must be something in the soldier's life, his marching, which brings it out.

"These men, many of them, will doubtless continue to write, and I should think



BOOTH TARKINGTON.
Character Study by a staff artist of "The Sun."

in this way may be developed one or two great poets, men whom perhaps we have never heard of. American? Yes, perhaps, or English; what does it matter?"

Sea Fever.

Mr. Tarkington told of the soldier from Maine who in his loneliness abroad found the cover of a technical paper with a picture of a ship on it and who carried it around in his shirt. It was the only thing he could find that reminded him of home.

"Love of the sea is bred in the bone," he smiled. "You can't get away from it. All that boy wanted was to get back home, back to the sea."

It seemed strange that a man from the middle West should so like the sea that it is one of the puzzles of his life why towns should ever be built four miles inland when they could be nearer the coast.

"My family came from the coast," explained Mr. Tarkington, "both branches. I remember when I was a small boy going out to the pond and making believe I couldn't see across, trying to believe there was more water there.

"I like the people there—on the coast. They are suspicious of summer visitors, but I have stayed so late in the winter they seem to think I must like the place and they have taken me in. I have one of them in a play this winter. I hope he doesn't see it. One time I had a play here and one of the old fellows was in town. I sent him some tickets and the next summer he began to boom away at me way down the street as soon as he saw me.

"Great play, fine, great!" he rumbled, and then I asked him what he liked about it.

"Why, I saw it the first time the curtain went up," he said. "She was right in the middle, every stick and line of her. Knew her the first thing. The old North Star. Great!"

"I wracked my brain to get what he was driving at and then remembered that the property man had dug up somewhere along the waterfront a picture of an old ship, the North Star, and hung it on the wall in the first act. That was all he saw of the play, but it was enough for him.

"They come in and look at my ship models and talk about them, supremely saying. I am full of ignorances," he said with another Tarkington smile. "but I am learning."

Penrod's Parentage.

It had been held back as long as possible, checked by the pleasure of hearing Mr. Tarkington talk about Maine, but it had to come out: How did he come to write boy stories?

"I wrote a book called *The Flirt* once and instead of having an ordinary villain it occurred to me to use a boy, a precocious, unusual boy. I tried it and thought I couldn't make it go; but Mrs. Tarkington insisted I could, so I wrote the boy.

That was the first. Anybody can write about boys," he added mildly.

Perhaps so, but at the moment one could only recall Mark Twain, Thomas Bailey Aldrich and one or two others who were successful. Mr. Tarkington proceeded to elucidate:

"I haven't written about any particular boy, nor even drawn from my own boyhood. I have tried to write about just the average American boy who grows up in the middle sized town. If you ever want to write a boy story, to get into the story telling frame of mind, you must remember that the average boy goes through every stage of development in the history of the human race. I should judge that he reaches the age of barbarism at about thirteen and a half," he said with a smile.

The Boy in the Man.

"A boy is nothing but a savage, and a man is nothing but a boy with a lot of repressions. I don't mean that the average man wants to ride hobby horses, but his impulses are just as direct and primitive as the boy's. He has learned to check them, that is all.

"It didn't occur to me until I began to write about boys, but I realize now that I have always looked at men in an effort to see what sort of boys they were. I have felt that if I could get behind the man and see the boy's features I would know the man."

Mr. Tarkington was leaning forward, earnestly propounding his theory, and you tried to recall some of the worst incidents of an average disorderly boyhood in the country. But if he knew the worst he overlooked it.

"I didn't write boy stories for boys particularly, but I have had some wonderful letters from them, really wonderful. There was one from a boy in Louisville. It read:

"Teacher told us we must each write you a letter and she will send the best one. Well, how are you? Yours truly."

The creator of Penrod sat back and chuckled joyously. The sheer desperation of it appealed to him. It was Penrod to the life, a tribute to his eternal veracity.

And so from boys to the sea captains again, and back to the war and what the young men who have been lifted from their little place in the world will be like when they come back from over there. It was natural to ask the exponent of American family life what effect the great adventure would have on them when they get home; but Mr. Tarkington confessed that he could only guess.

The New World.

"The one thing to be sure of is that these men and their descendants will be the ones most to cherish patriotism," he said. "That has always been so. There won't be many Bolsheviks among them. I remember when I was a boy Gen. Har-

rison called for volunteers to protect the arsenal during the great railroad strike. Old Union men put on their caps and went out, my father among them, and in a short time there was a regiment of trained men there. Many of them were working men."

One possible result of the war on which Mr. Tarkington has evidently thought much is the league of nations. Why it should be looked upon as Utopian is more than he can understand.

"Why not," he said. "All the allied nations agreed on one thing, that Germany was wrong. Why not agree on what is right. It is only necessary to find the fundamental truth on which international law might be based to guide all nations. Surely that is not impossible."

About all Mr. Tarkington reads now is on the war and its causes and the peoples who have been in it. At present he is tackling the colossus of Russia. But in looking over the magazines to see what his friends are doing, he occasionally hits upon an author who interests him. In this way he read a short story by Joseph Hergesheimer which impressed him.

"He has great grasp of his subject," he said, "with unusual descriptive power."

There seems to be nothing that Mr. Tarkington is not interested in, and he got around to the pleasures of planting just before it was time to go. You wondered how it would do to apply his theory of boys and men to himself. It worked beautifully. Yes, there was a little bit of Penrod, some of Willie Baxter and very much of a gentleman from Indiana.

"The Post of Honour"

A BOOK that boys will never tire of reading is *The Post of Honour*, a collection of tales of war time heroes told by Richard Wilson and published in this country by E. P. Dutton & Co. The author confines his work to the activities of soldiers and sailors of Britain and to deeds of valor performed early in the war, so it is by no means a complete record of the war's bravest exploits. However, the thirty or more incidents that are related deal with some of the finest examples of courage and self-sacrifice known to mankind and they should prove an inspiration to any lad.

For instance for strict devotion to duty no one has ever surpassed Jack Cornwall at the battle of Jutland. Only sixteen years old, he was a member of a gun crew all of whom but himself were killed early in the fight by a direct hit from a German gun. Sorely wounded young Cornwall clamped the speaking tube to his ear and stood in an exposed position awaiting orders until the fight was over.

He died of his wounds, but before he was laid at rest King George awarded him the Victoria Cross.

At the battle of Loos the Germans launched a gas attack and the King's Own Scottish Borderers were badly shaken up. There was danger of a panic. Then upon the parapet before their trench appeared Piper Daniel Laidlaw. Exposed to the German fire he marched up and down, blowing his pipes with vigor. Encouraged and their shaken nerves quieted by the bonny music they loved so well, the Scots rallied and in a moment swept over the top in a mad rush for the Hun positions.

Piper Laidlaw fell wounded. To him, too, was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Of such tales as these is *The Post of Honour* made up. It tells the history of the Victoria Cross; how Lord Roberts was first to win it, and a lot more interesting things.

Not the least celebrated of the brave deeds recounted in the book is that of the renowned Michael O'Leary of the Irish Guards, who single handed captured a German trench, killed the crews of two machine guns and captured the guns.

THE POST OF HONOUR. By RICHARD WILSON. E. P. Dutton & Co. \$1.25.

Lieut. Charles Divine's poetry is meeting with great success in the French capital, and autographed editions of *City Ways and Company Streets* (Moffat, Yard & Company) have been sold for large sums at charity fetes. Divine is now temporarily stationed in Paris.

A Book for Boys 16 to 96

T. R.

A Boy's Life of Theodore Roosevelt
by HERMANN HAGEDORN
HARPER & BROS., Pub'rs, N. Y. \$1.25

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