

# The Sun.

## BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

TWELVE  
PAGES

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, APRIL 20, 1919.

Copyright, 1919, by the Sun Printing and Publishing Association.

SECTION  
SEVEN

# W. L. George's "Blind Alley"

A Pessimistic Revelation of England During the War  
and After the War, With a Surplus of Sex Ugliness

THE orange Persian who shares the honors with his master on this page is Kallikrates, the only important character in Mr. W. L. George's entirely pessimistic *Blind Alley* who managed to keep any measure of poise throughout the war. The opening and closing scenes are devoted to him—most effectively—while in between are staged the turmoils and disorganizations of the war as they reacted on Sir Hugh Oakley of Sussex and his family.

Just as the English have always outdone us in political novels, they are now outdoing us in war novels which are largely political. Our politics do not fit nicely into novels. They lack atmosphere, perhaps because we are so young. Being young in the war as well and far away, we are at a distinct disadvantage. We could no more have produced *Blind Alley* than we could have produced *Counter Attack*. After all, Sassoon and George are fighting for the same end. They are both aggressive pacifists, although Sassoon fought and George tried to but wasn't allowed, and they are doing what they can to remove the glamour from our memories of the war. Every argument put forward by Mr. George has this in view.

He thinks this war "no tournament but an international bargain sale," its armies "marionettes upon a string twitched by excess profiteers," and the only hope of civilization, Wilson. Therefore, Wilson having been overridden by America's dream of domination, he believes that the solution is world revolution. Stephen Oakley, son of Sir Hugh, writes from the front after the death of a friend, "Quin's gone. Doesn't matter if it's heaven or hell, it'll be an improvement. Damn the world! I hope to have a hand in blowing it up when this job's done."

### II.

Looking about him in January, 1919, at the close of the novel, Sir Hugh saw that what looked like an open road was in reality a blind alley. He found blind alley everywhere. "Blind alley in the debt, so enormous that it could not be paid; blind alley in the chaos of the churches, whose ship was pitching; blind alley in the schools, where the old culture was being pulled down, though nobody knew what to put up instead; blind alley in the law, which let off one soldier for shooting his wife's lover, and gave another five years; blind alley in the rising cry for a greater population, balanced by the obstinate refusal of the state to give the illegitimate a status; blind alley in liberty now that letters were opened and the press censored, meetings supervised



and political pamphlets officially garbled; blind alley for those who came back, maimed, fit for half work."

For two years we have followed Sir Hugh through his varying moods. He had at first a conventional acceptance of the war which gave place to a superb disgust with all that he saw in the politics of his country. He became mildly pro-German but turned back to the cause of the Allies as the lesser evil. Then came the final conclusion that there would have to be something different from the old, dead world and that the change could only be accomplished by revolution. In all of this we are helped by a conscientious objector who suffers periodically imprisonment for his beliefs. As for Sir Hugh, he is not crushed by a great grief as was Mr. Britling, and so he cannot be uplifted. The process of slow torture is used upon him—the hardening of his wife's spirit by her enthusiasm for the war, the killing of youth in the spirit and the breaking of the body of his son, and the distortion of the morals and ideals of his daughters. Sir Hugh is charming and lovable, but we never feel sorry for him. He is more a voice than a person, and who, pray, feels sorry for Mr. George!

We now approach the crux of the novel—the inner shrine—the women. Whatever the war has done for England, whether it has been wholly evil in effect or the necessary purge that the dreamers claim, it has served Mr. George a good turn. To borrow his own phrase, some safety pin has been pulled out and the emotions of the women have begun to race beyond their government. This suits Mr. George exceedingly well. He has been able to tear down the women and remould them nearer to his heart's desire, if not to ours. He uses his own pattern in preference to God's, and he doesn't play by the rules. The war may have hashed women up pretty badly, but the result is not quite so depraved as this book would lead one to believe. Admitting that the casualties have been heavy, we still contend that it would have been fairer had we been allowed one good and generous woman. Surely in all the panorama of war time England one might have been discovered who was neither entirely beastly nor yet entirely spineless. The nearest approach is a creature of whom the best that can be said is that she resembled Kallikrates.

Sex ugliness easily becomes an obsession and the whole of sex psy-

chology has much the quality of the boomerang. Handle it long enough and it is almost certain to wallop you. Once Mr. George's strongest asset, it has become his most insidious enemy. The more acidulous he grows, the less weight his opinions carry. We feel tempted to say to him, as Cottenham says to himself: "You've pitched on a rotten hobby, old fellow. Why didn't you go in for gardening?" These women who move through his pages are strangely interesting beasts, we will allow, but they are not real. Their good qualities have been buried alive for the sake of emphasizing the bad. Their days are spent largely in slewing their eyes to right and left (or is it from right to left?) in greedy caresses and swooning surrenders. True, they undertake war work, but the new found freedom only serves to speed their thundering feet. Briefly, they have become thoroughly Georgian.

As hideous examples we have Sylvia and Monica, daughters of our typical English family. Sylvia was three times married in as many years. She lost one husband through the war, another through her own unfaithfulness, and trapped the third in desperation. She didn't love any one of them. Monica went into a munitions factory and fell under the influence of its manager. Her "weakness" (commonly known as strength) was overcome by such ardors as this:

"How delicate your hands are," Cottenham said, and began twisting her wrist. "One could snap your hand off," he said. "I'd like to do it. I like hurting you. I like pulling your hair and twisting your ears. I like to see you wince as I hurt you, and then feel you soften and expand under a kiss. I'd like to do grotesque things to you, swing you round and round by one ankle and throw you down in a tumbled heap. I'd like to throw you into a pond and haul you out with your hair full of mud and green slime—and cover you then with more ardent caresses—because you'd be more mine in the grotesqueness I had created. You're a lovely thing to destroy and spoil."

### III.

Kallikrates, sleeping in the warm darkness under the cabinet in the hall and coming out only when he desired, was fortunate! There are advantages in being an out and out animal but no one wants to be the sort of animal that W. L. George makes of his human beings. He thinks that *Blind Alley* is his best novel. There is nothing surprising in that. A novelist is likely to like his latest published book the best, provided he hasn't started another. We agree with him to the extent of thinking that it might have been his best if he had not let his hobby get the upper hand of him.

BLIND ALLEY. BY W. L. GEORGE. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. \$1.75.