

SOME YOUNGER ENGLISH NOVELISTS

By Hugh Walpole

TIME passes and nothing stands still; the literary procession reminds one of the last act of the pantomime when, in the reception hall of a palace of ivory and gold, down a magnificent marble staircase, come groups of the nations or the virtues or the vices, just as it may happen to be, and one band of ladies after another, stout or otherwise, march to the front of the stage, wave a little vaguely with their arms, move to the right and the left, instantly to be followed by another eager group.

In England since 1890 this movement has been especially apparent. First, the Yellow Book band, poets and artists and writers of the supposedly French conte, the whole a little foreign, a little affected, an important but frustrated impulse. Then in 1895 the creeping forward of certain men, Conrad, Bennett, Wells, Galsworthy, who in another ten years were to stand once more, as other groups had so frequently stood before, for the emancipation of the novel. Then when they were nicely settled and everybody, having accepted them, was anxiously scanning the horizon for the new group, up there popped that now almost notoriously prewar group of young men whom Henry James pontifically blessed, and Katharine Gerould complained of as a syndicate — Beresford, Swinnerton, Lawrence, Cannan, Mackenzie, George, and the rest. In this case the novel might have jumped into some quite new costume, had the war not caught it by the throat.

But suddenly in 1918 and 1919 “les jeunes” were producing nothing but poetry. The Mackenzies and the Swinnertons were pushed aside by the Sassoons and the Nicholsons. Everybody wrote poetry, either bitter or idealistic, either democratic or patriotic, and by 1920 there were so many thousands of small volumes of verse that there might have been several large bonfires in the centre of Trafalgar Square, the poets burning the works of one another, without anyone alive perceiving the loss of anything. The novel seemed for a moment to take a back place. Then the women rushed forward and saved the situation. Saved it or lost it, who knows?

It is of course far too early to say at this moment what they intend to do with it. I don't suppose that they themselves know. All I can say is that it is now, in this year of grace 1925, quite definitely in their hands. One can name half a dozen women who have all come forward in the last five years, whose personalities are now quite firmly recognized by anyone who has any interest in contemporary literature. The curious thing is that against these half dozen can be set no new men writers with the definite exception of Michael Sadleir, the author of “Privilege”, the famous Michael Arlen, and of course David Garnett. Six names of women novelists that occur at once to the mind are Rose Macaulay, Romer Wilson, Clemence Dane, Virginia Woolf, V. Sackville-West, and Dorothy Richardson. To these there

should be added the names of May Sinclair and Sheila Kaye-Smith, were it not that both those ladies made their reputation before the period of which I am speaking. They are, however, quite definitely the leaders of this new woman's movement in fiction. There are other names that occur to one — Rebecca West, Mary Webb, Stella Benson, E. M. Delafield — but none of these ladies has written enough to assure one definitely of her position, with the exception of Miss Benson, whose last two books, "The Poor Man" and "Pipers and a Dancer", are exquisite.

Here then are these ladies coming to the front in a regular phalanx, just as in the early Nineties Madam Sarah Grand, Mrs. Caffyn, Mrs. Steel, George Egerton, Ella Darcy, were doing. The first point of interest is — how does this new band compare with that old one? Has it, allowing for the difference of times and manners, something of the same aims and methods that those earlier writers had, and is it achieving something of the same success? One great difference immediately leaps to the eye. The ladies of the early Nineties were one and all propagandists. New and wonderful to them was the freedom of the modern woman. Who knew but that in another fifty years they might even have the vote? Women had been seen riding bicycles in knickerbockers, one woman somewhere had smoked a cigarette, and the mere whisper of the mystic words "equality of the sexes" made a novel sell like hot cakes. Those dear, old fashioned, cosy, comfortable days of "The Heavenly Twins", "The Wages of Sin", "The Yellow Aster", "Some Emotions and a Moral", and "The Open Question"! Where are the leaves of yesteryear?

Once again we have inequality of

the sexes, but this time it is the man who is subordinate. Special pipes of a delicate filigree texture are being sold in Jermyn Street for the use of ladies. Lady champions at golf and tennis and even football are paragraphed, followed and pursued from one end of the globe to the other. The ladies of the Lyceum Club, the biggest woman's club in London, sat breathless in rows the other day, their eyes glued to the tape, waiting for the issue of the Derby. We have women preachers in our best London churches, women M. P.'s, women barristers, and the women's college of medicine is so overcrowded that new buildings are most urgently desired. It follows naturally then that our new women novelists will not in all probability be deeply concerned with propaganda, they having, poor things, nothing about which they can propagand. It follows on that they are, much more than their older sisters, definitely concerned with art. Instead of the vote and divorce, they are preoccupied with technique, dialogue, realism, and the rest, and every one of the women whom I have named is experimenting with a form, sometimes new, sometimes old, but always the chief matter of preoccupation.

Take Miss Dane's "Legend", Miss Richardson's "The Tunnel", Mrs. Woolf's "The Voyage Out", and above all Miss Wilson's "The Death of Society", and see whether these books are not, in their technique at any rate, more audacious and enterprising than the work of any contemporary men.

Mr. Swinnerton, it is true, several years back produced a piece of perfect technique in his beautiful "Nocturne", but he did it quite unconsciously, the artist in him using the means which were best suited to the delicate theme. Then there is Brett Young's "The Black Diamond", another splendid

piece of workmanship. But again it was with the life and soul of his hero that Brett Young was chiefly concerned, and not with the length of his chapters, the corkscrew pattern of his dialogue, or the ingenious arrangement of his suspensive dots.

The second thing that one notices about these new novelists is their attitude toward their own sex. Time brings in its revenges, and one of the most curious results up to the present of the new position of women is that the women writers spend their time in exposing other women as no men writers have dared to do. What male novelist has ever been so scornful of his own sex as Rose Macaulay, Miss Delafield, or Virginia Woolf? The books of these ladies are simply packed with satirical pictures of silly women, women who think they are clever and aren't, women who think they are unselfish and are not, women who think they are chaste and are not. Especially in these books do we find again and again exposures of feminine egotism. Miss Delafield indeed deals in nothing else. Here and there in these pages fine women are to be found, like the heroine of "First the Blade", the elderly amorist in "The Death of Society"; but it is to be noticed that these finer women are more like men than any of the male characters. Indeed, it can be said without much fear of denial that where these women fail is in their portrayal of the opposite sex. This is no new thing. The same complaint has been made time and again of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot and Mrs. Gaskell and George Sand, but it is really surprising to look through all the books written by these new novelists and to search vainly for a real man who is a man. Take the men in Miss Macaulay's book "Dangerous Ages" — they amount simply to nothing at

all. Miss Wilson's man in "The Death of Society" is like a young girl hysterically in love with an older woman. The men in Mrs. Woolf's "Night and Day" are all elderly spinsters, and Miss Delafield's men are clothes props. There are, of course, certain exceptions. The little Russian professor in Miss Richardson's novel "Interim" is a masterpiece. Miss Sackville-West's two maimed brothers in her extraordinary book "The Dragon in Shallow Waters" are, in spite of their deformities, real men with men's thoughts and feelings. Miss Sackville-West, indeed, to judge from her novels already published, is much more successful with men than any of her sister novelists. With this feminine inability goes also a kind of feminine softness and looseness which makes many of these books, when we look back upon them, dim and faint.

Our younger men novelists may not be geniuses and the works that they produce may not be masterpieces, but in one way or another they do succeed in giving their work definite outline and concrete form, so that, for instance, looking back upon "Jacob Stahl" or "Sinister Street" or "On the Staircase" or "The Crescent Moon" or "Sons and Lovers", we remember those works and they do mean something definite to us. I am bound to confess that, entertained as I always am by every book of Miss Macaulay's, when I try to consider "Potterism", "Told by an Idiot", etc., I cannot distinguish one book from the other and have only a sense of continuous verbal felicities, sharp digs at one thing and another, and a most delightful humor. It is the same with Mrs. Woolf, whose "The Voyage Out" was brilliant but most strangely inconclusive; the same again with Miss Delafield, whose succession of selfish elderly women fade

into one unpleasant hawk nosed female; it is even the same with Miss Richardson, who until she produced her little professor had given me as a permanent possession little beside A B C shops and dentists' parlors. From Miss Dane, Miss Wilson, and Miss Sackville-West, a clear impression remains. It will be long before I forget Miss Sackville-West's Blind Man, Miss Dane's schoolmistress, and Miss Wilson's Martin Schuler, but even here not enough remains. There are threads of softness running through these works, a sort of enveloping mist, rosy indeed, beautifully colored, but obscuring the outlines of the distant scene.

Nevertheless, I would not for a moment deny the fine work that these women are doing. They are artists, they are independent and fearless, they are in most cases poets, they love their craft, they are carrying the English novel forward with waving banners and unfaltering purpose. They are I think a little inclined toward arrogance; they lack, in most cases, that final generosity of humor that admits every kind of worshiper into the temple; but it will be of no ordinary interest to see what they will do within the next ten years now that the English novel for a time is in their hands. Everyone must wish them luck in their brave enterprise.

WALKING

By Ruth Manning-Sanders

LUMBERING, lurching down the fields,
 Father goes with little son;
 Father's feet are heavy with mold,
 And stiff and tiny boots uphold
 The staggering feet of son;
 Son's legs, white as dough,
 Crisscross like drunkard's go;
 Father's legs have lost their marrow,
 Trudging over years of sorrow.

Father's legs they groan and creak
 Hid in earthy corduroy;
 Safety pins and bands that hurt,
 And wanton folds of woolen skirt,
 Son's legs annoy;
 So each year its burden yields
 Only for another one,
 As lumbering, lurching through the fields
 Father goes with son.