

The Old Woman's Money

By JAMES STEPHENS

Author of "The Crock of Gold," etc.

AT some time every writer grows curious as to literary happenings in lands beyond his own, and he sets away on the grand tour. His first harborage is probably France, for the rumor of that country has been in his ears since he freed them of a nurse's chatter. Next will come Russia, a land of which school-boy psychologists will never cease to prattle, and then Germany will demand his attention and bore him. And so, having hinged the knee at many foreign shrines, he will return homeward, marveling that in all the world there is nothing to be read.

In this perplexity he will remember that there is only one foreign land left in the world, and recalling the fine promise of Emerson, Whitman, Lowell, and several others, he may adventure in the direction of the United States of America. There he will be confronted with the angriest of his disappointments. Other literatures may disgust him or leave him cold, but the writings of America will make him angry: he will get there the cinematograph without its comfortable silence, and he will hear baby language shouted through a megaphone. He will discover that the fine promise has not been performed, and he will wonder what horrid circumstances have conspired to change that of fifty years ago into this of to-day. Perhaps, after revolving the matter he will counsel American writers to get rid of the old woman as speedily as they can, and to put the boy back to discipline for a few years more. If his remarks are harsh, it may be that he divines a proud future for America despite the fact that the old woman and the boy have allied

themselves against the genius of their country.

The sole means by which a stranger can satisfy his curiosity about foreign lands is through literature. Writers are the unofficial historians of their own country, and from their pages a national psychology emerges, sharp and clear if the writers are competent, obscure and blotchy if they have not learned their craft. Are Americans quite as hypocritical, sentimental, greedy, and foolish as their writers proclaim? It is a subject on which the American people themselves must pronounce judgment, but in the psychology which has been projected for foreign study these ugly vices overshadow whatever of virtue is limned beside.

This is distinctly the fault of the writers. That there are many virtues in American life no person can doubt who has read even a little of her history. That there is a real idealism growing strongly in company with, and despite an equally real materialism, is also true, and that these salient points do not adequately emerge from her literature is true also. American writers have not learned how to write; their thoughts are superficial, they have no critical intelligence, and they have the sad courage of all these disabilities. Just as the capitalist seeks a short cut to wealth, the novelist seeks a short cut to art. There may be an easy road to both for those specially endowed people who are millionaires or artists by the grace of God, but for other people both art and business must be learned from their foundations upward. The writers of America, following English mediocrity, have

learned the mechanism of the novel fairly well: their trouble is that while they can all tell a story, none of them can write one, and they believe that construction is the whole art of story-telling! It is an important part truly, but it is not the most important. The secret of good writing is to be found in the words used by the writer and the way he uses these words; but before any American writer I know of can escape from mediocrity he or she must jettison their present vocabularies and provide themselves with new ones. I have read no American author recently whose work was not solid with *cliché*, and even when these are not verbal, they are mental; they are implied if they are not expressed. This last sentence, for the benefit of the uninitiated, is a *cliché*.

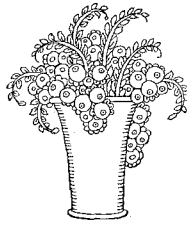
There is an uglier vice than this: it seems that much of American fiction is an unconscious appeal to the middle-aged woman. Its literature has become brutally feminine. Instead of being sensuous it is sensual, and often indelicately so. After hunger, there is no subject in which an artist or a philosopher might more fruitfully interest himself than the sexual relations of humanity, but the philosophers have avoided it as completely as they could, and the writers, intent on construction, have expressed sex as a liaison, and compressed it to a formula which is very easy to handle. This formula is called "the literary triangle," and is composed of two women and one man or two men and one woman; but it does not say the last word on sex, it does not even say the first. The sex mystery, all the reactions of which are mental, is not to be settled by this pill, nor is it to be arranged by treating sex as sexuality. That grease is thick on American literature, and it would not be so unpleasant if it were expressed less sentimentally; and sentimentality is a weed growing only in the gardens of the ignorant or the hypocritical.

If one were asked what is the dominant tone in American literature and life, the answer would be "youthfulness"; but this youth has attained to all the vices of age,

and has conserved few of the charms proper to its period. It is a very disingenuous youth indeed. This insistence on "boyishness" is unhealthy; more, it is depraved. These boyish boys and girlish girls of the writer and the artist are the indications of a real cancer in American public life. Perhaps in portraying them the writers and illustrators are describing their environment, and are exposing something which is as true as it is detestable. The cult of youthfulness in America is a national calamity far graver than anything for which Europe has to mourn. Youth has nothing to give life but its energy; it has even less to give literature, for literature is an expression of the spiritual truth which runs parallel with every material experience. It is not the retailing of petty gossip about petty people; and when this youthful energy is divorced from the control of maturity, nobody can benefit from it excepting that middle-aged woman for whom American literature is now being written.

It may also be that the fault does not lie so much in the writers as in the country. America, perhaps, is not in a position to make or to receive literature. It has not yet had the leisure to evolve a social order, to conserve its traditions, and form a life habitual to itself, and against the background of which every facet of the national existence may be judged. Without a social order there can be no literature: for that the house must be in order. For literature is something more than art; it is the expression of philosophy in art, and it is at once the portrayal of an individual and a racial psychology. A writer is not one who portrays life; he is one who digests life, and every book of his is a lecture on the state of his mental health: he should be careful, then, how he babbles.

American writers must discover or create a vocabulary which is not a jumble of worn-out phrases; they must ruthlessly cut out the boyish boy and the girlish girl, and they must deport that middle-aged woman who seems to be their paymaster, or is it paymistress?



War and Drink

Showing how Despotic Russia has Set Tolerant
England a Notable Example

By JAMES DAVENPORT WHELPLEY

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"NO vodka?"
"Not a drop."
"Do you miss it?"

"Sometimes. Yes, sometimes one feels one's stomach cry out for it like a young calf. But we are better without it."

This was the answer of a young Russian peasant soldier when sounded as to his opinion of prohibition as now enforced not only in the Russian army, but throughout the empire. And he was in a way the spokesman for millions of his fellow-soldiers and countrymen in that he thus briefly summed up the opinion of the nation.

With the coming of war in Russia, France, and England, steps were taken by the authorities to curb the worse forms of over-indulgence in alcohol, and in some places with a vigor which would have been impossible in times of peace even in absolute monarchies. Each of these governments handled the problem in characteristic manner, and the peoples responded after a fashion most illuminating as to national character.

By imperial decree the czar imposed prohibition upon an army of ten million men and a country-side where strong drink was an ugly feature of every-day life. Vodka is a fiery brandy made from rye or potatoes and contains about forty per cent. pure alcohol. It has been the national drink of the Russian people for generations, and its manufacture and sale are government monopolies. In the last fiscal

year the Russian Government derived an income of \$400,000,000, or one fourth of the national revenue, from the sale of vodka. By a stroke of the imperial pen the nation was deprived of its liquor, and the Government lost a quarter of its revenue at a time when money was sorely needed.

The political courage of such a measure was magnificent. A people whose life, intellect, and morals were being undermined by excessive use of alcohol were suddenly deprived of the poison that, if they had been asked beforehand, many would have said most emphatically that they could not exist without.¹

Coupled with this absolute prohibition for the time being is the promise that never again will the Government engage in the sale or manufacture of liquor, and the people believe that when the war is over some plan will be devised whereby the liquor traffic will be conducted much as it is in Western countries, only with far stricter and more healthful control. Many hope and believe that it may come back into life in the form of a local-option law, for the idea has already been seriously and favorably discussed by the authorities. In this event, prohibition has come to stay over large areas of Russia. In some important cities, notably Petrograd and wherever martial law prevails, the Government has now gone even further, and

¹In "The Outlook" for December 16, 1914, Mr. George Kennan gives a large share of the credit for prohibition in Russia to the people itself.