

Steel and Oak

Potterism. By Rose Macaulay. Boni and Liveright.

One After Another. By Stacy Aumonier. The Macmillan Company.

"POTTERISM" has had a very uncommon reception in literary London with Frank Swinnerton leading the chorus of praise; it is quite likely that that reception will be duplicated in New York and Chicago. Whether, on the other hand, the great middle class reading public will be either stirred or stung by Miss Macaulay's gay yet ultimately tragic satire, remains to be seen. To call a man yellow in Peking would cause no commotion though you shouted at the top of your voice. To denounce Potterism in Birmingham or Topeka may leave large and respectable populations unmoved. Matthew Arnold had his battle with Potterism and barely scratched its hide; aesthetes and philosophers innumerable have sped their little arrows. The monster plunges on. Northcliffe or Ochs is in the saddle or—Bulmer or Potter. For Potterism is but another name for Philistinism, the same old human lust for "second-rate sentimentalism and cheap short-cuts and mediocrity" and "muddle and cant." But through the mouth of Arthur Gideon, her central figure, Miss Macaulay gives what is, perhaps, the completest and most incisive brief description on record. "Potterism has, for one of its surest bases, fear. The other bases are ignorance, vulgarity, mental laziness, sentimentality, and greed. The ignorance which does not know facts, the vulgarity which cannot appreciate values, the laziness which will not try to learn either of these things, the sentimentality which, knowing neither, is stirred by the valueless and the untrue; the greed which grabs and exploits. But fear is the worst. The fear of public opinion, the fear of scandal, the fear of independent thought, of loss of position, of discomfort, of consequences, of truth."

A group of young men and women set out to fight Potterism. Among them, honestly convinced, are John and Jane, offspring of the great newspaper magnate Potter and of his wife Leila Yorke, the novelist, who shares the popularity of Ethel Dell and Florence Barclay. The rest are Juke, who seeks an untrodden path to the ancient goal of Christian freedom, Katherine Varick, a new woman with a very old ache in her soul, and the half Jewish journalist Arthur Gideon, who, having a really incorruptible mind, is forced to play a Laodicean's part amid the fevered factions of the world and is killed because he wears no badge but that of humanity and has no party but the truth itself. Jane and John, though on a slightly higher plane, revert to type. Ease and worldly success seduce both. And that, indeed, is what makes Potterism so supremely insidious. The intoxication of the world's applause, the softness of creature comforts, are on its side. Once in a while the Potterite pays—as in war. But since the child of light pays too, and pays, in addition, for something he never wanted, his earthly reward is reduced to the satisfaction of his own mind. No wonder his kind is rare.

Miss Macaulay's narrative technique shares the keenness and distinction of her intellectual outlook. Each section of the book is told by one of its characters and thus the characterization is of a rare completeness and inwardness. The section written by Leila Yorke is masterly in its revelation of a third-rate mind rendered impenetrable by the shoddy goodness of its own intentions. But from the various narratives there arises not only a picture of these conflicting minds; there arises also a swift and tragic action saved from any taint of melodrama by a constant scrupulousness in the treatment of the psychical values involved. Thus Miss Macaulay's book is both brilliant and skilful, a notable story and an incisive criticism of life.

Mr. Aumonier has returned to the sources in life and art from which he drew his early stories. He has broadened his scene and enlarged his range of characters. But his essential method is that of "The Friends," and so "One After Another"

is easily the best novel he has written. Despite the exploits of the glowing and pathetic Laura, the book is a quiet one. But its quietude is that which comes from a deep absorption in the common and concrete things of life. Once more Mr. Aumonier has his early solidity, his sane earthiness, his thick and crusty masses of reality. What, in the end, affects the mind most strongly is the picture of The Duchess of Pless, the old public house in Camden Town, and the life and death of Purbeck the publican. Purbeck is almost the last of his kind. The world, as his children who love him feel very clearly, cannot endure him any more. Even in his own time the stiff-necked old Puritan caused himself and others endless and needless misery. But Mr. Aumonier has made him a massive and memorable figure—hale, earth-rooted, carved as of oak.

Purbeck, queerly enough, married a Spanish woman, and his two children felt the effect both of that anomalous marriage and of the changing world into which they were plunged. Tom goes through life well enough, though with adventures along the road that would have sickened his father; Laura tarnishes the beauty that was in her—the inner beauty of her mother untempered by her father's strength—and becomes all healthless body and ruined nerves. A third generation appears in the person of Tom's daughter—a cooler, clearer, better-poised generation that will know how to live far more competently than the distracted children of the old publican. By this sharp definition of the generations blended with his brooding sense of life's fundamental continuance, Mr. Aumonier has made his book as suggestive as it is entertaining and as philosophical as it is concrete.

L. L.

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