

“MINE OWN PEOPLE”

IN The Outlook of May 18 we announced our third prize contest. We asked those of our readers who felt like entering it to write six hundred words on the subject of “Mine Own People.” We asked the contestants to tell us what they really thought of their own families. “Do you agree,” we said, “with Oliver Herford’s dictum: ‘God makes our relatives; thank God we make our own friends?’ We should like to know what kind of environment you live in; does it stimulate you or does it depress you? Would you have chosen it if you had had any say about it? Tell us truthfully of your revolts, if any, against your home life; also of your enthusiasms. If you are a woman, what do you really think of your men? If you are a man, let us have a critical estimate of your women folk.”

Some of the letters were tragic; some of the letters were bitter; but, nevertheless, we found them a deeply interesting self-revelation. Pen-names conceal the

identity of most of the six hundred and seventy-four aspirants who entered.

The object of the contest was to stimulate frank criticism of American life, and the result is an engrossing running story of American manners and human contacts, of enthusiasms and revolts, of all kinds of reactions to environment. This collection of letters is an illuminating survey of current life, emotions, yearnings, strivings, and restraints. It contains nearly half a million words of intimate observations and reflections—it is an almost staggering, close-up, composite picture of a multitude of lives.

It is curious how letters of self-revelation in American literature vary. The autobiographies of Dr. Grenfell and of Dr. Trudeau, both genuine pieces of literature, are happy and optimistic in spite of the fact that both of these men have seen more of the tragedy, sordidness, and misery of human life than falls to the lot of most observers.

But the autobiography of Charles Francis Adams, which has ancestry, cultivation, and wealth behind it, is the very refinement of despondency; in fact, at the conclusion of his biography, Mr. Adams tells us the story of an Oriental despot who, at the end of a reign of fifty years, said that he could only recall fourteen days of unalloyed happiness in the entire period. Mr. Adams, who was writing at the age of eighty, comments on this story by saying: “Like this Oriental ruler, as I look back over my more than fifty years of active life, I can only recall fourteen days of unalloyed happiness, but, at that, I have had more than any other member of my family.”

Some of our contestants, to all of whom, by the way, we are greatly obliged for their response to our request, are Trudeaus and Grenfells, and some of them are Adamses.

With this brief comment we submit the results to our readers.

FIRST PRIZE

MY CAVALIERS

BY ANNE MARSHALL

THIS is Monday. I spent Saturday in the city, tramping about in the rain, shopping for various members of my family, but especially for the youngest brother, who sails this week for a year in Europe. He is having too good a time to waste any hours in shops; besides, “Sis knows just what I like.”

I had a few minutes to spare and went to see a doctor. He was a childhood friend, this doctor. He lived next door, and he remembers very clearly the dark, silent little girl who looked on at the play of her five big blond brothers. He knows how the father and mother adored these boys and planned for their future and saw to it, in spite of the scarcity of money, that they had all the fun boys want—trips, horses, bicycles, and all the other things. He knows that the little girl’s future wasn’t discussed, that her gifts were few and useful, but, in spite of that knowledge, it doesn’t seem natural to him as it does to me that the boys should have taken their cue from our parents and have forgotten too. This often happens in the South. The Southerner still to a large extent regards a woman as a servant or a beautiful toy, rarely as just a woman.

The doctor remembers how he lost a quaintly fanciful little playmate when I was twelve. The mother died then and I was told that I was the head of the house and that I must consider myself responsible for the youngest boy, a

stormy, willful, hot-tempered child. He knows how I have worshiped the boy, how I have fought that temper of which the Southerner is secretly proud and from which his women and servants suffer. It was with this doctor’s help, and unconsciously as far as the boy was concerned, that I brought to him a realization of the weaknesses of the Southerner, of the dangers of his sensuality, his hard drinking, his gambling, his egotism that so often smothers ambition. Probably I’d have failed in all of it had he not in a fit of temper struck me in the face with a club and marred dawning beauty. For a long time after that he was remorseful, thoughtful, and very affectionate. The Southerner can be adorably tender, and for just a bit of this tenderness his women forgive much.

The Southerner flatters much in public and when wooing; in private he is frank. A Southerner worships beauty and resents a lack of it in his women. The Southerner of Anglo-Saxon descent is a brute, an inheritance from his far-away Teutonic ancestors. My brothers called me “Scarface” until they were old enough to be ashamed of it; but the name left a deeper and more lasting scar than any on my face. A sensitive, introspective person invariably withers in the Southern home.

Next to beauty, wit and the ability to flirt are demanded of the Southern woman. My brothers didn’t see these qualities in me and they didn’t believe that others could find them. A Southerner is chivalrous, but he is also loyal to his friends and he does not permit friendship to be imposed upon. There-

fore I was dubbed a “lemon” and the men were warned off.

I had a good mind, but the Southerner considers that a liability in a woman. I wanted to go to college, but it had never been done in our family, and the Southerner is very conventional. Of course my brothers are college men. Southern men of our class always go to college, and they major in highballs and minor in poker. I was needed at home. Woman’s place is in the home. The oldest boys were through college; they liked to entertain a great deal, and competent servants are scarce in the South.

I made many efforts to escape, but always I went down in defeat before my lack of funds and before their oratory. The Southerner considers a woman incapable of handling money, but is most generous as far as charge accounts go. The Southerner is a born orator; from him the spoken word is mightier than pen or sword.

Then came the war. The Southerner loves a fight, and all of the brothers enlisted. The father settled down into chronic invalidism. The doctor who had been the boy next door came home on a furlough and brought with him a homeless friend. Within ten days all the world had changed for me. Love had come. Gayly we told of our intention to be married at once. It was like throwing a bomb into their midst. They were willing to give their lives for their country; surely I was willing to forego a little happiness in order that their minds might be at peace, knowing that I was at home caring for our father and helping their wives with the babies.

Again their words defeated me. My beloved died in the Argonne.

On Saturday I shopped in the rain and I saw the doctor. Sunday I was up at dawn to prepare an early breakfast for a fishing party. The cook didn't come and there were eighteen for dinner. The Southerner is sentimental. He loves the home of his ancestors and delights in gathering his children about him there. In the midst of the dinner I had a hemorrhage. Later I told them what the doctor had said.

"Tuberculosis."

I didn't add, "Overwork;" I didn't tell that his face had made it unnecessary for me to ask how far the disease had progressed.

Monday. I have packed two trunks to-day, my own and that of the youngest boy who is going to Europe for a year. I am going to Saranac to-morrow.

I heard the boy say this morning:

"Poor old Sis! We must get her off at once. Of course it will be hard on her—she has been such a stay-at-home. But she is a menace to all of us here."

The Southerner is very romantic. I'll be good material for another tradition—the little sister who lost her lover in the Great War and died of a broken heart. Perhaps the next baby will be named for me.

SECOND PRIZE

A TRAGEDY OF RACE

BY N. USAMI

I look out on life, as it were, with a double lens.

My father was born in Kyoto, Japan, of pure blood, the loyal subject of the Mikado. Trained in the University of Tokyo, he came early to America and settled in California.

My mother was daughter of a clergyman, was wooed by my father, and finally they became man and wife.

I was born in a beautiful valley of California, bounded on the west by the high coast range and thus protected from the trade winds.

The land of my father is very rich and brings forth fruit abundantly. Our crops are varied and profuse, from lemons to great acreage of potatoes.

Being the only child, my parents have taken much care of my education and showered their affection upon me. Both have much strength of character.

My life has been made up of a double idealism and a double patriotism.

The love of my father for the country of his birth is strong and abiding. When trouble would come between my parents, he would say in calm but strong speech that he thirsted for the day when he would go back to Kyoto, and he would recall the happy days of his life in the University of Tokyo. Then I would also feel as he felt and would so express myself. His country became my country and I was birth-proud.

My mother would make answer with much spirit, but not at all bitter, and

assert that America was God's own country, that on its soil she would live to the end, and that, when death overtook her, under its soil she would ever rest.

When she would thus speak, I would regret my feelings towards Nippon and, springing to the side of my mother, would take her part.

Those days, however, were few, for there was much deep love between them, and whatever sorrow came, and it was much, it came from another source.

Many times there were when I would discover my mother weeping in quiet corners of the home, and then I would nestle close to her and bring what comfort I could. But I did not dare to ask why she thus wept and mourned and looked so miserable and distressed.

But it happened one day that she told me the secrets of her heart and they opened my eyes to all her troubles.

Her father and mother had disowned her, and that is why she never mentioned their names in my presence. A feeling of great hatred to them entered my heart, and it is still there, fiercer than ever. Mother's God is a God of forgiveness, and I hope he will forgive the nursing of that feeling which I don't want to part with. Father's God is harder to understand, but if he can't forgive he is no God.

When mother took ill unto death, I hurried from the University of California to her side and was never out of her presence. To me she turned for her every want. Her religion was as sacred as a dram of radium and as silent and powerful in its working.

Once did she ask me to read to her words that were often on her lips, and I opened her Bible and read these words: "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up." She wished to bury that sorrow with her, but I took it from her as a great weight.

With her life has gone out the light of my life.

"Mine own people!" How hard for one to speak of that which one has not. My heart, my mind, my soul divided!

As I look in the mirror and note the slant of the eye, the jet black, coarse hair, the strange tinge of cheek, I feel as if I would take wings and rest in the land of Hirohito.

When I recall the great spirit of my mother, her holy passion, her god-like devotion to her only child, her loyalty to my father, I long to kneel in a quiet spot and pray to her.

Thus I am a man without a country.

The few men and women who first entered our lives seemed to fall away from us, one by one. The pride of mother would not allow her to call them back, and father looked on with a strange smile on his lips.

Almost alone I pursue my work in my University, and, while I love her as mother, we live alone.

Thus I am a man without friends.

The greatest kindness that has been ever bestowed upon me was the work of a young Hebrew in my college life. He

has done more to soften my heart than any power other than my own mother.

At times the appeal of Shintoism reaches me like a faint, far-off cry, then the God of the Hebrews is heard in the life of the young man who befriended me, and then the God of the Cross comes home, in the spirit life of my mother.

Thus I am a man without a personal God.

Yet life is sweet and beautiful, and the spirit of living things, of love, of kindness, of enthusiasm, sustains me.

I am what I am. Working within me has been a biological law beyond my control which has made me what I am.

THIRD PRIZE

THE ROBINS' MINUET

BY ARIES

MEDIOCRITY is the most diverting condition in life. My dog is not a neurotic prize-winner, but he is mine, and I love him. My father is not an indulgent millionaire; he is just "Father." And as for mother—well, words fail sometimes, don't they? Mother has self-manicured nails, does much of her own washing because the laundry is not properly reverential of our purple and fine linen, and reads intelligently whenever she gets the chance. The remaining member of our family is myself.

Once I intended, before sex intruded into my life, to be a pirate. At sixteen I wanted to be *une grande amoureuse*; and now I am just a high school teacher of English. Just! That is the way some people put it. But I glory in my life and its mediocrity. Confuse not mediocrity and stupidity, for the former has variety that mere genius could never attain.

Could you imagine any mere genius doing the following?

I rise at five o'clock to plant peas in a very private back yard, come indoors and get an exciting breakfast on a new electric stove, try out a new kind of inexpensive face powder, pack some home-made sandwiches for lunch and for economy, help mother with the dishes, walk six blocks to a remarkable car-line with novel service, wait patiently because three baby robins are dancing a minuet near by, and hopefully board the car when it arrives. Next I greet most of my eighty-two co-workers in our large high school, walk to my room (my very own domain, gay with priceless knick-knacks—priceless because most of them never cost a cent), instruct five classes of winsome adolescents in the gentle arts of debate, public speaking, and the literature of America; hover like a cautious guardian in a big study hall teeming with five hundred personalities—each one of which presents possibilities of conduct ranging from the angelic to the devilish. At the end of the last bell I hasten to the school library to attend a parent teachers' meeting, and meet Johnny's mother, who is troubled be-