

The Book Table

Edited by EDMUND PEARSON

A Winter Crop of Novels

By H. W. BOYNTON

THE author of "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" can tell a story better than the next man, but prefers to lecture. Like a good many other lecturers of the day, he uses the novel instead of "hiring a hall." "The Pope of the Sea"¹ is sub-titled "An Historical Medley;" why "medley" is not clear. It is an informal history of the Popes of Avignon, hitched to a slim and perfunctory comedy of the amours of a young Spaniard and an Argentine heiress—all very Latin, sprightly, and cynical. Young Borja is a remote kinsman of Pedro de Luna, last of the Popes of Avignon, and thinks of writing a book about him. The lady Rosaura, at odds with her French lover, meets Borja in Avignon, and acts as audience for his lectures. Now and then he breaks off to attempt an ardent caress, is reprimanded, and takes up his tale again. At last, having got the whole chronicle off his chest, the lover wins the lady in the Latin manner. In short, what the writer has for us is a solid meal of history, with a spicy tidbit now and then to keep us in appetite. The history is interesting; the tale is naught.

"The Fourteen Thumbs of St. Peter"² is another adaptation of the novel to purposes beyond (or short of) pure story-telling. Primarily it is a study of Moscow under the Red régime. Secondly it is a fantastic yarn of international intrigue. The central theme is the attempt of the Reds to abolish religion in Russia. The head of the official "Atheist Mission" is one Piotr Petrovich, a handsome and energetic Jew. At the moment, his stunt is to discredit the Church with the populace by making her absurd. From shrines all over Russia, by fraud or force, he assembles his chief exhibit—fourteen thumb-bones of St. Peter. The yarn concerns the theft of these thumb-bones by the eccentric emissaries of certain foreign governments which think it important to "break" the "Atheist Mission." The story-teller is an Englishwoman who, choosing to investigate Moscow at

a perilous moment, finds herself taken into a queer circle of Bolsheviks and foreign "relief" workers. Several of these last are Americans who speak that quaint gibberish which is the usual Briton's idea of the American language. A book that ought to be more readable than it actually is; and what it lacks I don't quite know.

Susan Ertz, who wrote that fine novel, "Madame Claire," has proved to be a skillful short-story teller also. Some of the best of her recent tales are collected under the title "The Wind of Complication."³ The first of them, "Henry and the Muse," is by all odds the worst—a made-up yarn on the face of it. "Trumpery" and "The Country Walk" are sympathetic studies of youth (not specifically "modern" youth). "And Then Face to Face" is a most effective tale of devil-worship and its reward. "The Fatal Woman" is an equally disturbing story of a charming woman unconsciously possessed by a devil of ambition which makes her drive one man after another to his death. The other stories in the book are comedies of middle age, and the writer is at her best in them. They are unmistakably addressed to the matronly hearts of those hundreds of thousands who support our feminine "Journals" and "Reviews" and "Companions." "The Heroine" is a rather farcical episode of a stupid and pompous husband and a belittled wife, and how she brings him to heel. "To the Satisfaction of All" and "Just Little Things" lay stress on the fact that a husband, boresome and unromantic though he may be, is often a better person to tie to than the fascinating stranger.

"E. M. Delafield," whose first book, "Zella Sees Herself," roused such high hopes, seemed in her later novels to be running into a vein of acid satire, mainly directed against her own sex. She loathes the efficient, managing type of female, the intellectual or social snob, the domestic martinet—and the she-ass in general. Cathie Galbraith in "Jill"⁴ is a modified representative of this class. She is a handsome, thoughtful, well-

meaning woman, spoiled by utter self-complacency. Jill, the real heroine of the tale, is exactly her opposite. She has no advantages of birth or breeding, and seems to have little chance of happiness. She is, in fact, a girl whom we have met rather often in recent fiction. Her mother is no better than she should be. But Jill grows up in the demi-monde without becoming a member of it. She is not particularly ashamed of her mother's way of life, but her own instinct is for something different and better. Chance throws her under the protection of Cathie Galbraith, who wishes to make a lady of her—that is, to mold her into her own image.

This cannot be done; Jill has fine instincts, but no care for "culture" or convention. Her destiny is to devote herself to some man, and the man turns out to be Jack Galbraith, a notable casualty of the war. He has come out of it all right in body, but nervously a wreck and spiritually dead. He is a major, with medals, but London has no job for him. He has made a casual war marriage, and his wife proves to be a heartless butterfly. She cares for nothing but money and pleasure. They have social presence enough to live for some time on their debts. Then the wife goes off with a richer man, and Jack tries to kill himself, only to be rescued (miraculously) by Jill and made a man of. Somehow I do believe in Jill, and for her sake like the story.

There is not much to be said for "Wild Money,"⁵ by Freeman Tilden. It is a mechanical romance about a wicked old man who makes cynical and successful experiment of corrupting an enemy by giving him an allowance of \$10,000 a month. The enemy, hitherto a respected and self-respecting citizen, straightway becomes a worthless loafer and spendthrift, and all his family follow suit except one girl, who goes and reforms the wicked old man and makes a driveling sentimentalist of him, whereupon all of her own family return to virtue and happiness.

"Shadows Waiting"⁶ is a first novel by a writer of earnest and sensitive purpose. As first novels are likely to be, it is over-mannered and over-intense. It is a story of the inner experience of two

¹The Pope of the Sea. By Vicente Blasco-Ibañez. From the Spanish by Arthur Livingston. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York. \$2.50.

²The Fourteen Thumbs of St. Peter. By Joice M. Nankivell. E. P. Dutton & Co., New York. \$2.50.

³The Wind of Complication. By Susan Ertz. D. Appleton & Co., New York. \$2.

⁴Jill. By E. M. Delafield. Harper & Brothers, New York. \$2.

⁵Wild Money. By Freeman Tilden. Doubleday, Page & Co., New York. \$2.

⁶Shadows Waiting. By Eleanor Carroll Chilton. The John Day Company, New York. \$2.50.

young people born to mate with each other, but separated by intangible forces and obstacles on the "psychological" plane. The style is literary and "sophisticated;" as a tale, it is heavy reading.

Other Fiction

PRIZE STORIES OF 1926. (O. Henry Memorial Award.) Doubleday, Page & Co., New York. \$2.50.

The machinery here used for sifting and judging the enormous number of short stories published in a year in the United States is extensive. Over 2,000 stories were read. The chairman admits reading "with some assistance" about 1,600. The result was the selection of the sixteen stories included, no two by any one author. The three which stood at the head and received prizes were Wilbur Steele's "Bubbles," Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods," and Albert Wetjen's "Command," the last a short but excellent sea tale. There is in this volume evidence of the high level of short-story writing in America, and apart from critical rating of the stories, combinedly they furnish a capital source of enjoyment.

MONSIEUR. By George Challis. The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis. \$2.

Monsieur is a modern Canadian villain with a mediæval flavor; lord of an immense domain and dominating every one about him with merciless arrogance and cruelty. At one moment he is suave, at another he rages; he fears neither god nor devil. He reminds his gentle and despised younger son, into whose mouth the tale is put, of both Zeus and Mephistopheles—a combination which it is easy to guess affords thrills a-plenty to his unhappy family and others of a less undesirable nature to the reader.

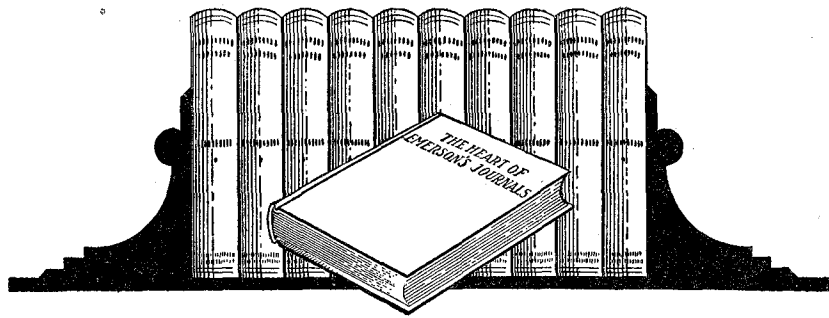
Biography

NAPOLÉON: THE MAN OF DESTINY. By Emil Ludwig. Translated by Eden and Cedar Paul. Illustrated. Boni & Liveright, New York. \$5.

The author of biographies of Wagner, Goethe, and Bismarck, and of character sketches of twenty other great men, now gives us a portrayal of Napoleon. It is not biography; and, though in the main chronological sequence is followed, it is not even a historical summary of Napoleon's career. It is an attempt to reveal the Corsican's "inner history," to tell what the man thought and felt, how he acted under the pressure of various stimuli, what he attempted to do, and what in his later life he deemed that he had achieved. The tone is, in general, laudatory, as it must needs be from the author's somewhat Nietzschean view of greatness. Napoleon showed "what a man can attain through self-confidence and courage, through passion and imagination, through industry and will," and therefore in these days when revolutions "again are opening every path to the man of supreme ability" he is "an example and a warning" to the ardent youth of Europe. Presumably what the ardent youth must avoid in their striving for Napoleonic greatness are the mistakes of Napoleon. The book has style, if by style is meant distinction of manner; but as a character portrayal it lacks clearness, and as an evaluation of the Corsican in a world that is trying to rid itself of Napoleons big and little it belongs to a past age.

PORTRAITS AND PORTENTS. By A. G. Gardiner. Harper & Brothers, New York. \$3.

Mr. Gardiner's skill in portraiture is again shown in this collection of sketches of well-known personalities. There are thirty-seven of them, and they comprise subjects from the most diversified fields of activity. The word "portents" is to be understood in a sense somewhat different from its usual significance, since each of



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