SOME STORIES OF THE MONTH*

BY H. W. BOYNTON

ONLY last year Professor W. L. Phelps said, in THE BOOKMAN, "Every line in the books of Miss Wilkins reads as though it had come out of the author's actual experience. She is primarily truthful, and never prepares an artificial effect—never sacrifices reality for sensation." Even at that time there were bits of Mrs. Freeman's work which must have escaped Professor Phelps's eye. She had made several clumsy and flimsy experiments in the direction of romance of the pretty sort. The attempt to harness her staid and penetrating art to the skittish fancy of Miss Florence Morse Kingsley has been singularly unlucky. *An Alabaster Box* is a figment whose effect, such as it is, is purely artificial. Mrs. Freeman's part in the enterprise would seem to have been to overlay the unstable fluff of the narrative with a stout fabric of New England dialect. The story itself has been painfully put together. You may fashion a pillow out of the silk of milkweed, if you have patience to gather and clean and pack, but it will be a slimpsy affair in the end, and none the better for a cover of the heaviest ticking. The truth is there is little life or nature in this book, little truthfulness and not a great deal of amusement. It is pretty frankly fabricated, "built around" a situation. A country banker betrays his trust and ruins his clients, and is sent to jail. There is nothing novel in this, for, if we are to believe the story-tellers, most American country bankers are frauds and embezzlers. The fresh situation consists in the return of the banker's daughter to "Brookville," and her attempts by means of charity and public service of all kinds, to make atonement and restitution. She is not under her own name, and is making fair headway, when the father's release from prison and return to the village gives away the truth. Then comes the test for the girl's two wooers, which the feeble and snobbish young parson fails to pass, and the honest son of the soil passes with ease. The jail-bird father takes himself off, and the village rises and calls the damsel blessed, and all is well. The situation is good enough, the plot might be vitalised, but there is no creative breath here, no sincere characterisation. It is a pity that Mrs. Freeman should lend her name and her left hand to work so shallow and perfunctory as this.

Her own New England, the scene of the early tales, is an affair of black and white, of strong crude forces and repressions. Such is the New England of Mrs. Wharton in *Ethan Frome* and *Summer*. But while Miss Wilkins's voice had always a certain raw tang of the native, altogether lacked grace and flexibility, *was* the voice of rustic New England, Mrs. Wharton has had the task of subduing her rich and varied and worldly instrument to its provincial theme. She has succeeded: *Summer* shows all the virtue of her style and none of its weakness. Here is no rou-

*An Alabaster Box. By Mary Wilkins Freeman and Florence Morse Kingsley. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Summer. By Edith Wharton. New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Helen of Four Gates. By an Ex-Mill-Girl. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

Bromley Neighborhood. By Alice Brown. New York: The Macmillan Company.

The Joyful Years. By F. T. Wawn. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

The Empty House. New York: The Macmillan Company.

The Inner Door. By Alan Sullivan. New York: The Century Company.

The Long Lane's Turning. By Hallie Erminie Rives. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.

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tine elegance, no languor of disillusion, no bite of deliberate satire. As in *Ethan Frome,* this writer who has come perilously near being the idol of snobs shows herself as an interpreter of life in its elements, stripped of the habits and inhibitions of the polite world. The story lacks the tragic completeness of the earlier one, has indeed a species of happy ending,—an ending, at worst, of pathos not without hope. The scene is the New England village of North Dormer, once as good as its neighbours, but now deserted and decaying in its corner among the hills. It is vignetted in a few sentences at the beginning: "A little wind moved among the round white clouds on the shoulders of the hills, driving their shadows across the fields and down the grassy road that takes the name of street when it passes through North Dormer. The place lies high and in the open, and lacks the lavish shade of the more protected New England villages. The clump of weeping willows about the duck pond, and the Norway spruces in front of the Hatchard gate, cast almost the only roadside shadow between lawyer Royall's house and the point where, at the other end of the village, the road rises above the church and skirts the black hemlock wall enclosing the cemetery." The Hatchards are the great people of the place, with an elderly spinster still solvent and in residence, and a Memorial Library bearing musty witness to that distinguished and now extinguished author, Honorius Hatchard, who had hobnobbed with Irving and Halleck, back in the forties. Another old family are the Royalls. Their present representative is the middle-aged lawyer who, after showing promise elsewhere, has returned to North Dormer while still a young man, for the apparent purpose of going to seed there at his leisure. Above the village, though at distance—fastness of a strange community of outlaws and degenerates—towers the craggy mountain from which, years back, Lawyer Royall has rescued a child. As Charity Royall she grows up in his household, and after his wife's death becomes its unchallenged ruler. Her little liking for Royall himself he has destroyed by making, in his "lonesomeness," a single false step toward her. Her own lonely lot in unyouthful North Dormer is lightened only by the vague dreams of girlhood. Then the fairy prince comes in the person of a young architect from the city whom certain local relics of fine building have attracted to the neighbourhood, and whom a swift romance with the girl Charity holds there. She becomes his mistress, he deserts her in her "trouble," she turns desperately to the haunt of her people, "the Mountain"; and is rescued for a second time and finally by Lawyer Royall. In her marriage with the aging man whom she has scorned there is, we really believe, some chance of happiness, or at least content. Young love is dead, but old love is ready to creep into its place. Mrs. Wharton has often been accused of bitterness; let her critics note that the whole effect of this powerful story hangs upon our recognition of the power of simple human goodness—not "virtuousness," but faithful, unselfish devotion of one sort or another—to make life worth living.

Until the end itself, *Summer* has seemed to be moving, as *Ethan Frome* moved, toward some grim catastrophe. So with *Helen of Four Gates,* a dour and terrible tale of rustic England, the England of Hardy and of Phillpotts. We look for some such crash of fate or passion in the outcome, as, for example, in that of *The Whirlwind* of the latter chronicler. It does not come. At the eleventh hour, through the tiniest of loop-holes, escape is achieved. But until that hour it is a cruel tale, gloomy and haunting as *Wuthering Heights,* or, let us say, *The House with the Green Shutters.* Four Gates is a North of England village, narrow, self-centred, bound by its own conventions. The strange figures in it are old Abel Mason, a well-to-do farmer of bitter nature and violent moods, and his daughter. Mason confesses to a drop of madness in his veins, and predicts that the girl who

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bears his name will show it in time. In reality she is not his daughter, but the child of the woman who has thrown him over for another man. In vengeance the old man lives for the sake of torturing this child, whom everybody believes to be his own. She has given her passionate heart to Martin Scott, Mason's "hired man," as they say in New England—an honest fellow, but less courageous than she. Over them both Mason dangles the sword of Helen's hereditary madness. Finally Martin's courage gives out, and he leaves Four Gates and Helen. In despair the girl permits herself to be married to an ex-tramp whom Mason has hired for the purpose, and the advanced stages of her torture begin. Presently she finds herself with child, is filled with despair and loathing, but in the end determines to see it through, to meet whatever fate may have in store. Then comes the return of Martin Scott, a broken man, and her dead heart rises to welcome him. But it all seems black and hopeless; that the child of her hate is born dead does not release her, Martin himself is on the verge of death. Then the very might of her love wrests him back. They determine to take their hour of happiness and to meet the inevitable end together, when fate or Providence turns kind, and they are enabled to salvage some years, at least, of happiness, from what has seemed the total wreck of their lives. Here, as in *Summer*, the rising inflection at the end of the tale is a heartening thing for the reader who has braced himself for unmitigated tragedy. If there is artifice in it, that is a kindly artifice such as, we must recognise, the Powers themselves do not disdain to employ on fit occasion. Nature does not always work by rule of the average probabilities.

For Miss Brown rural New England is a scene of more varied colour and contour than for Mrs. Freeman or Mrs. Wharton. And with all her fidelity to detail she is essentially romantic. The neighbours of Bromley are Yankee to the bone, but in the end they have to do what their literary sponsor's warm fancy demands of them. Bromley was "a country neighbourhood, part of a New England township of that name, where everybody took back to English ancestry and clung with unthinking tenacity to old habits of thought." A few old families had always been in the ascendant, among them the Neales and the Greenes. Now, there is Thomas Neale, the prosperous farmer, a man used to having his own way, a martinet in his relation to his wife and his two sons. He covets the little acreage that several generations back had been carelessly cut from the Neale property by a too-generous Neale ancestor and given to the Brocks. Coveting it, he will stick at no means of getting it, down to bullying the new-made widow of the latest of the Brocks. Ardelia Brock is a silly woman, and might have been easy prey for Neale but for her daughter Ellen, who is of sterner stuff. Secretly on their side are Neale's wife Mary, a woman of heroic mould, and his son Hugh, who loves the virginal Ellen. The sordid motive of "property" is to the fore, it will be observed, as the motive which governs only less generally in the New England than in the Old. It dominates also in the relation of the brothers Greene, the elder of whom has defrauded the younger of his heritage; and, by way of Aunt Tab and her wood-lot, it brings about the physical downfall of Neale himself. Thomas Neale, to tell the truth, is a figure almost as inhumanly consistent as Abel Mason in *Helen of Four Gates*. Mr. Phillpotts would have tempered both of them, brought them within range of our sympathy. Neale's authority is based upon a colossal pettiness. He turns his oldest son out of his house for walking home from a dance with the inhibited Ellen. A man sore-stricken in body, he will not speak for months, even to his wife, because his sister has sold her own property without his consent. He is the type of Yankee who systematically bites off his own nose to spite his face. We believe in him as a type; as a man he is nothing but a

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bogey, since Miss Brown does not permit us to find anything likable or tolerable in him. It is hinted, to be sure, that there is the seed of something pure and generous in his relation to his wife which may in time grow to respectable maturity, but we have little hope of him. Mary Neale is the really strong character of the book, a woman of heroic gentleness, a Ceres whose bounty is inexhaustible. Ellen Brock, too, is a fine portrait of proud maidenhood. The story in which these people are involved has too conscious a "plot," but that seems the fate of Miss Brown's extended novels. For the rest, this is a book animated with zeal for the defence of the world against tyranny. Miss Brown has a hearty scorn for our official neutrality and our general indifference during the early years of the war. She represents her Bromley as a community of dullards and slackers, lighted by the torch of one or two prophets who really see what is going on in the world, and what Bromley's part in it should be: "Since the war began," cries old Sally Wheeler, "I really believe I've seen up into the stars, and down through the middle of the earth. And the thing I've seen clearest is the sacredness of the soil you were born on and the duty you owe the dead that worked on it and died for it. You can't be unfaithful. You can't. . . . I believe there's something over and above what we call America, and that they can't down. The politician that only wants to get votes out of her—he can't down her. And these men round here that don't know there's a war going on till you scream it at 'em—they can't down her. And when the minute comes she'll get up and—my God, Ellen Brock! she'll take the sword."

We are brought into the trenches before we are done with *The Joyful Years,* and trench life is pictured vividly enough; but it is, after all, chiefly a convenience for rounding off what is essentially an old-fashioned love story. There are only three persons of much account in the narrative: Cynthia Bremner, young and fair; Shaun James, middle-aged novelist, one of the poor but distinguished sort, and Peter Middleton, well born but also poor. Cynthia's father and mother, Sir Everard and Lady Bremner, are the disdainful British aristocrats of immemorial story. They suspect Shaun James, for whom Cynthia has sworn friendship, of wishing to marry her, and he is, of course, ineligible. Therefore, with the well-known fatuousness of their kind, they thrust young Peter upon her by way of diversion, believing that his youth and impecuniousness make him absolutely "safe" as a companion for any daughter of theirs. But young love laughs once more at bank accounts, and the upshot is a runaway marriage, abetted by the self-sacrificing Shaun. Some play is made with the modern motive of the young girl's revolt against the "economic" slavery to which she is held by her Victorian parents, but the fact that she has no cheque-book or latch-key of her own appears to have small actual bearing upon the story. In due season the proud Sir Everard, again true to form, forgives the errant couple, contenting himself with making his daughter a mean allowance. Peter, however, has meanwhile budded forth into a promising caricaturist, and the way seems fairly clear for the young couple when the war breaks out. Shaun at once enlists and begs Peter, for Cynthia's sake, to consider him his representative at the front. This will not do for Peter, who, though he hates war and believes himself a coward, must play the game for England. The trenches show him as brave as his comrades, and presently relinquish him, not too seriously crippled, to the arms of Cynthia. The tale is told in very leisurely and feminine fashion, and its endless descriptions are touched with a sort of mild eroticism; it seems that we shall never get to the end of the heroine's physical charms.

The Empty House is a book of more serious character, a novel of pur-

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pose, or, as we now say, of ideas. Its problem is the difficult one of woman's direct responsibility to the race, of the right relation of wifehood and motherhood. The concrete instance is presented with vigour and sincerity. A girl grows up facing an awful example of what marriage may bring to a woman. Her father boasts of being "an old-fashioned man, with old-fashioned ideas about a family." In spite of warnings, he holds his wife, year after year, to the business of child-bearing. When she finally dies at her post, the women, and his little daughter, who has overheard the womens' talk, hold him responsible as her murderer. The girl lives in the fear of marriage, and resists the love which leads to marriage. When she finally succumbs it is with the explicit understanding that there are to be no children. After marriage neither she nor her husband is awakened to any desire for children, and for a time they are sufficient to each other. Then the man begins to be absorbed in his job, as men will be, and the wife, having no job, is discontented. Presently, doting upon him as she does, she begins to be ambitious for him and to interfere, openly and secretly, with the business of his life. He must succeed, he must show himself the peer of other men of their set. Pitting her will and cunning against his will and enthusiasm for honest work, she contrives to put him under an intolerable strain which in the end kills him. Long before the end she has heard the truth, unbelieving, from the lips of a German scientist who sums up the disease of American women as a disease not of sexlessness, but of unsatisfied sex. In refusing children they perpetrate "a crime against nature, a biologic sin." From wishing to love without consequence or fulfilment, this type of woman is condemned to love more always, to be destroyed by loving, and, very often, to destroy her mate. "The more she has not children," growls the great man, "the more by nature she must have him. He is her necessity—her life. . . . She must drive him; she must love and have his love—each according to her nature. By extravagance, by lightness, by interference, by too much anxiousness of love. Each according to her nature—but all for sex, for love. And if for one man only, then so much the more dangerous. She seeks, she drives; often, many times, she drives him—for love. She kills him, often in his business, literally—as by her hands." The woman does not believe it; but it is all happening to her, and the end is not spared. And there is nothing left for her, since she has put all her eggs in one basket and smashed them all at a stroke, as if deliberately. A story with an idea, a moral if you like, and yet not a tract, for these people have the breath of life in them, are real as the action is real, however slightly both may be outlined.

Among current problems which the story-tellers are trying to interpret, the case, or the pickle, of capital and labour is now a familiar one. Several recent novels may be recalled which have dealt more or less hopefully with this theme. The trouble with most of them is that they attempt to solve the problem by means of some infallible key or specific. This is not true of *The Inner Door*. It is a book of spiritual quality, an interpretation, not a solution. Its spirit is embodied in the devoted and mystical Sohmer, who sees so far beyond the scene of the moment, and aspires to something so much higher for "his people," the workers, than any improvement in hours or wages. A great rubber factory in the Canadian town of "Brunton" is willed by its owner to his daughter Sylvia, who has just reached womanhood, with the instructions, "Keep the wheels turning, and hang on to Pethick." Pethick is the manager, a man who has risen from the ranks, but whose whole strength and soul have long been given to increasing the profits of the business at all costs. Sylvia is already betrothed to brilliant young Kenneth Landon. She is, however, to spend a year abroad before their marriage. Kenneth wishes to

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win his own spurs in the meanwhile, that he may not be merely the amiable husband of a rich woman. Immediately after her departure circumstances change his plans, and he enters Sylvia's factory as a common workman, under an assumed name and without her knowledge. Chance brings him into the Sohmer household, and here he falls under the influence not only of the benignant Dane, but of his daughter, who has inherited his singleness of mind and greatness of soul. In the factory Kenneth sees at once that everything is ordered for the profit of the owners at the workers' expense. There are malcontents, some of them moved by selfish considerations, a few, like Sohmer, by their desire for justice to all men. The manager, Pethick, is ruthless in his expedients for speeding up the output without increasing the outlay of the mill. The issue is one of those indeterminate clashes of force which result in a momentary readjustment through compromise. It is not reached till after the martyrdom of Sohmer. He himself has looked for no sudden triumph of right: "This thing we both want," he says, "is like a tree, not a volcano. One cannot in any way see it grow, but it grows nevertheless. And so in it the work of any one man is not to be found by itself, but all men satisfied must be to have it seem that their work is lost." So he goes out of life, quietly and greatly as he has lived, feeling his effort not in vain. Meanwhile a bond has grown between Kenneth and Greta Sohmer; in the end it is revealed to Kenneth that she and not the worldly and shallow Sylvia is his real mate, the companion of his future adventures in the service of his kind. There is nobility in this book, with its vision of a future for humanity beyond our turmoil. "Today the world is tired," says Sohmer, with his high simplicity, "and our rest is not rest at all, but for another struggle only a preparation. But some day there will come the one thing that the world has not yet tried, and yet waiting for it has been so long. . . . God."

Drink is the theme underlying the somewhat artificial structure of *The Long Lane's Turning*. It is a story of romantic contrivance based upon the working out of a preconceived idea. If it were crudely done, one might dismiss it as a tract of melodramatic colour. That astounding coincidence which brings together in a far place Harry Sevier, and the former client whom he has wronged, and the girl Echo, and the villain Craig, demands an unquestioning credulity of which the higher art of fiction and of drama has no need. Nor is it safe to scrutinise the possibility of the culminating scene, in which the masked Sevier converses undetected with men who are his own intimates and supporters. This, in short, must be taken as a romance—an arrangement rather than an interpretation of life. Its substance need not be rehearsed here. The action involves (involves overmuch at times!) a number of interesting persons, and whatever flimsiness may be discerned in the plot, there is none in the style. Here also we have a summing up of the matter from the lips of the central figure, Sevier, the jail-bird who is nevertheless to be governor: "There was an Eye that watched and a Hand that overruled," he said slowly. "Even the evil and the hatred—the temptation, the sin and the pain—the penalty —it overruled them all. Drink made the man who shot Craig a criminal—yet but for that burglary you might now be Craig's wife! Drink sent me to Craig's house that night—yet but for that journey I could not have saved you. Drink closed the prison door on me, but only there—I know it now!—could I have mastered it! And if I have won in this campaign and if I sit—with you, my darling!—in the Mansion on the Hill, it is because of what I learned within these walls—the knowledge of what drink has done to men!"

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