A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

AN ENGLISH NOSEGAY

By Blanche Colton Williams

"A WELL wrought volume!" The first sight and heft of "Georgian Stories, 1922" elicits approval. "An enticing lot of authors," follows a survey of the list set, border wise, on the jacket; "and their stories all of 1922, apparently," as the title page flashes by. Foreword, by G. H. P., and Editor's Preface further beguile and induct the reader.

But disappointment succeeds implicit promise. The dates of the several tales convey that the period covered is from 1906 ("The Coach", by Violet Hunt) to 1922. Where, then, are Kipling and Conrad and Jacobs and Galsworthy and Bennett and Wells? Did the compiler think better to illustrate the era of George V by omission of these authors? Charity urges that just possibly he did not obtain permission to reprint all the stories he would have liked to include. If he did, he is unique among collectors and is to be congratulated therefor.

A comparison of the table of contents with that of "The Best British Stories, 1922" (O'Brien and Cournos) discloses that six authors — out of twenty or more — appear in each: Stacy Aumonier, J. D. Beresford, Algernon Blackwood, Roland Pertwee, Elinor Mordaunt, and May Sinclair. Most readers and most critics will agree that matched one by one, or six by six, the examples in "Georgian Stories" are inferior.

This nosegay from an English garden is touched by blight. The soil and the elements produced perfection neither of form nor of color. Texture or quality alone gives promise of what might have been. There are (1) freak flowers, (2) fungi, waxlike as Indian pipe stems, (3) luridly flamboyant specimens, hectic from disease. Of the first sort, "The Criminal", by Beresford, derives from seed sown by the dark satire of Poe; "Perez", by W. L. George, in wavering back and forth between the real life of Walsingham and the tale he was writing, is a poor narcissus. Now you watch the plant, now its reflection in the turgid stream; they blend; you are annoyed. The second variety is represented by "The Coach" and by Blackwood's "The Tryst", both heavy with the odor of death. And the third class is typified at its height by Oliver Onions's "Io" and D. H. Lawrence's "The Shadow in the Rose Garden", studies of insanity. The garden has interest, but it is the interest of deterioration, of crimson autumn, not the green leafage of summer. But come out of the garden. Figures are dangerous.

The stories are rarely the best, though a number attain the average, of their respective authors. And perhaps Arnold Lunn has written nothing superior to "A Scrap of Paper", which retails a tragedy of morals in a boys' school, just as Sheila Kaye-Smith has not surpassed her "Mrs. Adis". F. Tennyson Jesse's "The Man with Two Mouths" is a thriller, not quite up to "The Black Mask", which frequenters of the Princess Theatre some years back will recall with a shudder, but it adequately illustrates her particular ability in melodrama. Somerset Maugham's "Rain" will live rather through the play.

No story can survive without two essentials. The first is motive, or the basis on which the narrative structure rests. The second is illusion, or the power to convict the reader, a power which results from holding him in the fourth dimension presented and into which he has entered. Not more than half of "Georgian Stories" will stand the double test, and this proportion allows generously for diverse tastes.

If one persists in believing that a story is just that — a story, a thing of action nicely coordinate to an end — then the collection contains only six or seven fair examples: those of F. Tennyson Jesse, Sheila Kaye-Smith, Arnold Lunn, and Somerset Maugham, plus Katherine Mansfield's "Pictures", Elinor Mordaunt's "The Perfect Wife", and possibly Alec Waugh's "The Intruder". If a sketch, or satire, or embryo exposition, a bit of fluff, or a series of events — if any of these is permissibly to usurp the coveted honor of "story", which in its nature is the most entertaining and therefore popular form of literature; if it is argued that neither motive nor illusion matters; if it is affirmed that the only desideratum in a work of art is a sense of satisfaction; then to the seven instances may be added others. Satisfaction dependent not upon narrative, but upon theme, poetry of expression, imagination, results from acquaintance with Ethel Colburn Mayne's "Lovells Meeting", Algernon Blackwood's "The Tryst", E. M. Forster's "Mr. Andrews", and May Sinclair's "The Bambino".

If the collection may be judged as unclassified literature, which reflects the times, then the times are out of joint. Even the optimist must admit that however extreme authors may be they cannot but reflect their own age.

On closing the book, the reader returns to his first impression, "It is a

well made volume"; and he adds, "externally".

Georgian Stories, 1922. G. P. Putnam's Sons.