A GROUP OF BOOKS WORTH READING

By Heywood Broun

EDNA FERBER'S new novel "The Girls" (Doubleday, Page) represents a triumph of feeling over form. Miss Ferber has chosen as a plot scheme the tricky and troublesome formula of three generations. The device compels her to reproduce life again and once more in practically the same terms. Existence has, to be sure, its rhythms and its repetitions, but they seldom fall into patterns exact enough to suit the convenience of the novelist. Without attempting a definition, form ought to be something which sits as easily upon a writer as an old hat. Indeed there are times when it is eminently proper to doff it altogether. These are the moments in which Miss Ferber excels. Only let her go bareheaded and there is every evidence that breezes are blowing. The stiff plan of her story is forgotten once she begins to let her characters shift for themselves without regard to arriving at any definite point at a given time. There is emotion in "The Girls" and with it a persuasive clearheadedness. It is eloquent in its appeal for the right which the new generation seems to insist upon before all others —the right to be wrong. The book follows the development of a female line from its place in the home out to sunlight. Before we are done we know the chief figures of the novel intimately. Some of the minor sketches are meagre. Miss Ferber has not quite forgotten that she is a writer of short stories and she is inclined to be satisfied at times with fast blocking in of two-dimensional folk. She tries occasionally to make a sentence or so do the work of a paragraph. She relies on these occasions on what F. P. A. has called "complete characterizers". Man with all his subtleties is no fit subject for such easy definition. Miss Ferber is fine enough to take her time, and when she does "The Girls" seems among the most vigorous pieces of work done recently by any of the young Americans.

Apparently the war is still too much a part of life to be accepted unqualifiedly as a field for literature. It is so much easier to cry "Pro German" and "Bolshevist" than to discuss art forms, that "Three Soldiers" (Doran), this novel of the reaction of certain characters to the A. E. F., has not received much consideration without taint of political and economic feeling. There are those who think that John Dos Passos ought to be sent to jail and others who hail him as the first of native authors to tell the truth about the war. We are not disposed to class the book either among lamentations or revelations. It does not seem to us a book which may fairly be accepted as a starting point for generalizations about the army. It was not written to be read by a Congressional Committee or anything like that. "Prove it," some few critics have asked, which seems to us just about as ridiculous as if the reviewers of another day had greeted "Tom Jones" with cries of "Add it up" or had demanded of Zola that he demonstrate the square root of "La Terre". Mathematics ought not to enter into the consideration of "Three Soldiers" any more than politics. It is not important whether there were ten men in the army like Andrews or ten thousand. We feel sure that there must have been at least one, which is ample for the purpose of any artist. Nothing which has come out of the school of American realists has seemed to us so entirely honest. There is not an atom of pose in the book. It represents deep convictions and impressions eloquently expressed. Indeed the eloquence sometimes carries the writer a little beyond the province of realism. There is at times a little more lyricism than is quite compatible with life in the army or elsewhere. Yet it is captious to deplore the occasional imaginative excesses, since nothing but imagination has enabled Dos Passos to reduce so vast and diffuse a thing as the American invading army into a definite personality. The army is the chief figure in the story. When the novelist asks us to meet and regard it there may be many who will object that an old friend has changed beyond recognition.

That does not matter beside the fact that Dos Passos has brought the millions into such definite shape that we are enabled to get close enough to the huge affair to look squarely into its eyes.

Generally speaking, a new novelist must crawl before he walks. Stephen Vincent Benét in "The Beginning of Wisdom" (Holt) experiments with some of the elementary means of locomotion but then he makes a sudden leap and begins to dance. And his dancing days seem to us much the best things in his book. As an ironist we find him a little self-conscious and plodding, but once he gets to the chapters concerning Philip and Milly he writes with extraordinary ease and beauty. This interlude which summons more emotion than anything else in the book is, curiously enough, the most graceful portion of the novel as well. Once the young Yale student has fallen in love, Benét is willing to cease his somewhat prying analysis and let the boy have his fling. The episode is delightful throughout. Milly, who said it with fox trots, is one of the most appealing heroines we have met in a year among the books. It is rather a pity that Benét felt it necessary to let her die so early in his tale. He has nothing else quite so interesting to offer. The story of the adventures of Philip during the deportation of the I. W. W.'s is interesting, however, and seems to have been derived from first-hand observation. The moving picture incidents on the other hand seem echoes of somebody else. We have no means of knowing whether the California film camps are within the scope of the author's experience, but he manages to make them merely places in a novel. Benét may be identified as a disciple of F. Scott Fitzgerald but it is more than probable that he will go further. The intense gloom of premature pessimism seems more of an attitude than a genuine point of view in the case of this young novelist. He can live it down,—indeed he does. He poses only when he remembers to do so and he shows that he has the ability to lose himself in a character. It does not avail a man to gain the whole world of technical proficiency unless he can abandon at some point or other all interest in his own soul in his enthusiasm for that of somebody else.

It would seem as if an author might justly assume that the study of life should be simplified by taking just a little slice of it. This is the assumption which Constance I. Smith has made in her striking novel, a first one we understand, called "Ten Hours" (Harcourt, Brace). The theory that one may jump into a foot of life and thereby avoid the danger and trouble of going all the way down to the bottom is not altogether sound. The shorter the interval of time the more prodigious must be the writer's capacity for seeing and understanding. "Ten Hours" is often thrilling and again and again convincing in its story of one extraordinary day in the life of a middle class Englishwoman. There is one stunning dramatic situation in which the woman has to make up her mind within a few minutes to stay or to go. The door which Nora opened at the suggestion of Ibsen beckons her enticingly. Suspense is admirably arranged. Then Celia decides. Her choice does not matter to us here in any such brief criticism. But the scene matters and it seems to us that Miss Smith has handled it rather too much in the fashion of a dramatist. It has been allowed to become the big scene, which is a condition marring to the best interests of a novel. The one scene overtops the rest of the story. The author has been a little impatient to reach it and has accordingly skimped the rest of her story a little. We do not hear or learn all the things which ought to belong to us after a crowded ten hours. This is a book of promise in which performance is by no means inconsiderable, but the author is not yet sufficiently sure of people to subject them to the exacting test of the close-up.

Booth Tarkington seems to us to lead almost every other American in technical finish. His facility is so great that he has been known to trade upon it. There was a time when he was in danger of establishing himself as just a funny man. That passed beyond recall with "Alice Adams" (Doubleday, Page). No more poignant tragedy has been written in the year. We could even count back quite a way, but already we have deplored the existence of the statistical in literature. Moreover, we have only ten fingers. The tragic method of "Alice Adams" sways us utterly because it is a tragedy in which nobody dies, nobody goes mad, nobody commits suicide. Indeed the people who go down are still fighting at the

end and that is characteristic of man in the face of adversity. They dream even after disaster. The study of Alice herself is masterly in its insight and the picture of her father is just as good. Ironically enough, it has been said that Booth Tarkington did not like "Main Street" and planned "Alice Adams" as an answer. To be sure he has bettered the contentions of Sinclair Lewis but nothing has been offered in rebuttal. The dinner on the hot night completes one of the most devastating pictures of American life which has ever been drawn. And incidentally no living writer can do more with temperature than Tarkington. F. Scott Fitzgerald in a short story called "The Ice Palace" made us feel almost as cold as we ever feared to be, but Tarkington cannot be matched for bringing home humidity. "Alice Adams" is a book to move the heart and wilt the collar.

The most striking and characteristic thing about Rose Macaulay to our mind is her ability to laugh at things and still preserve them safe from ridicule in the land of desire. "Dangerous Ages" (Boni and Liveright) is mostly about the young feminists whom the world has nursed in its bosom. Miss Macaulay understands keenly the points at which satire may be directed against them. She mocks at their deadly seriousness but as she mocks she marches along shoulder to shoulder. Here is the most persuasive propaganda in the world for feminism. Generally speaking, the man who smiles is immediately thrown out of any forward looking group, but now we may all follow the example of Rose Macaulay and ride along in the band wagon even though we do not obligate ourself to join in every cheer down to the ninth and last long rah. Unlike "Potterism" the new novel is but slightly concerned with plot. Miss Macaulay knows now that she can talk her way through and she does. It is almost the best talk in the world and no story is required. The weakness of the book, as in the other, is the fact that the people are just a shade too brilliant to be real. They live in a world in which there are no dishes to be washed.

Harvey Fergusson has accomplished a capital first novel in "The Blood of the Conquerors" (Knopf) by the comparatively simple process of keeping his eyes open. This is a book which owes its appeal neither to people nor to talk, but rather to land. Mr. Fergusson not only goes back to the soil but he burrows into it. Like the vagrant sculptors of Atlantic City he chooses for his medium sand. After reading the book it is difficult to resist a temptation to step aboard the first train for New Mexico. As one who has passed through that huge territory, which seems to have been devised as a hazard for some cosmic golf course, we can testify that the virtues which Fergusson sees do not leap up at the eye. He has been satisfied with no casual glance. He has wooed the countryside and by and by it has told him its secrets. We do not mean to suggest that the book reads like a travel agent's prospectus. There is vivid description of the conflict of American and Spanish civilization. The hero comes from the old stock. He is admirably realized and understood by Fergusson. Unfortunately the author has not been able to get nearly so well acquainted with his heroine. She remains a lay figure, a lost doll in the middle of the desert.

"Privilege" by Michael Sadleir (Putnam) mystifies us somewhat. Its point of view and its conception of just what is important in the world coincides rather closely with that of "the Duchess". There is a somewhat similar wagging of the head over the scandals in the big house and the goings on of his lordship. Mr. Sadleir boasts in his introduction that true talk has not for an instant been within his intent. He wants more of a gesture than life can afford. The thing which puzzles us is that although all this is repugnant to us, the story is amazingly interesting. Sadleir can afford to venture into the grand manner without fear of ridicule because he does it magnificently. Perhaps we shall be compelled to say against our inclination that "Privilege" is a good book, but we shall not hesitate to qualify that by adding—and a stunt.

May Sinclair's "Mr. Waddington of Wyck" (Macmillan) is perhaps the finest study of a windbag known to literature. No pretender has ever been punctured so cleverly; and yet so great is the art of Miss Sinclair that she presents her fearful bore

convincingly without once letting the reader get fully into his clutches. You feel just as safe as if he were a caged lion within heavy bars. All the fun is yours and none of the danger.

Readers who remember A. S. M. Hutchinson as the author of "Once Aboard the Lugger" will hardly recognize him in his most recent novel "If Winter Comes" (Little, Brown). This is a new man, but he is again delightful. Almost all the larky spirit is gone. There are pranks but they are not quite lighthearted. Indeed the book is almost the tragedy of a whimsical man in a world far too matter of fact for his fancies. Only the ultimate heroine and, we trust, the reader understand him. "If Winter Comes" is fully as humorous as "Once Aboard the Lugger", but this is a deeper current with less splashing. The most conspicuous gain is in feeling. The book chimes all the hours. Few novelists have ever succeeded in knowing and in loving a character as Hutchinson has loved Mark Sabre. The book is not a great novel because the author does not possess sufficient understanding to go all the way round. He has not breath enough to animate the rest after making Mark Sabre live. Mabel, Mark's wife, is carefully observed and seems a person as far as all surface indications go. All the reportorial work about her is excellent. She is a convincing scold, but Hutchinson does not know and does not tell just why the clash between her and Mark was inevitable. There must be something to be said for her point of view, but it is not said. The opening of the book is brilliant. It is as graceful a piece of writing as we have seen in a season. Indeed Hutchinson throughout keeps for himself a high place among the stylists. It seems to us that invention slackens a little toward the end. The story of Sabre's most dire time of trouble is not altogether convincing. Too many things happen to him in too short a time. He becomes at these times a little less a real person than a direct descendant of Job. One feels that the creator, or the novelist, or somebody in authority has set out to tantalize him. In such case he becomes not of the ordinary sort but a person set apart. As such we lose intimacy with him which is not regained until the time of tribulation ends with a turn toward happiness which savors a little of repentance just as the earlier misfortunes seemed to us to represent revenge.

The modern American novel has so consistently given itself to realism for the last two years that it was not only desirable but inevitable that somebody should speak up for romance. This might have been a person who burned or somebody cool and shrewd who calculated. It seems to us that Donn Byrne detected an opening in the literary field and that he has dashed through it much as a Harvard halfback might dart through the Yale line. Once through he makes a pretty run, but the play is less the result of inspiration than good coaching. Donn Byrne seems to us consciously and determinedly romantic in "Messer Marco Polo" (Century). He has done an excellent job and actually achieved beauty in this rapidly moving story of the Venetian who went to China, but except in rare instances the job is not so good but that one can detect Mr. Byrne in the act of straining every muscle. It is not a book quite calculated to put your heart in your mouth because there is a temptation to emulate the author and keep your tongue in your cheek.

Owen Johnson has managed to get some first-rate talk into "The Wasted Generation" (Little, Brown). For a time he approaches the true problems of the day in fictional manner. This approach is interesting in itself and seems to promise more, but eventually the reader discovers that the intellectual front of the novel is merely intended to conceal a far different sort of business in the rear. To us the major portion of the book seems a melodramatic and conventional war novel. We had hoped for something more because of the auspicious beginning but we fear that Mr. Johnson has created a literary blind tiger. He has made a gesture of something different but before he is done his vast public is regaling itself once again with the stuff which inebriates but does not cheer.

Once to every Englishman comes the urge to write a novel about "the black country" and the blasted fields around the pit heads of the coal mines. No English author, to the best of my knowledge, has ever resisted and accordingly the total of "black coun-

try'' novels is large; but ''The Black Diamond'' by Francis Brett Young (Dutton) is an exceedingly good one. It treats of youth and sex and such things without becoming either painstaking or lyrical. Besides, the reader who is not interested in sex, or has read about it somewhere before, can console himself with the fights. Two of the best brawls which we know of in the modern English novel are included in ''The Black Diamond''. There are some rousing chapters about football as well. As in all novels of English mining towns certain compulsory incidents are included. There is the inevitable accident and the equally inevitable moment when the burly miner comes home intoxicated and beats his wife. But some of it is much newer than this and almost all of it is capitally conceived and written.

Word of mouth information about the folk at Washington is generally much more valuable and interesting than that which is printed. Edward G. Lowry has taken note of the small and intimate details concerning our public men and has put them into print in ''Washington Close-Ups'' (Houghton Mifflin). They remain as lively as anecdotes. It is pleasant to know that Hiram Johnson is ''perhaps the most inveterate movie fan in America''. This fact explains many things in the political career of the gentleman. We are also thrilled to find out that Frank Hitchcock ''never sweats'', but it is a little more difficult to read international significance into this. Our only complaint about Mr. Lowry's book is that he is much too kind. Again and again he diverts himself from saying that some great figure or other has no intelligence and confines his comment instead to the excellent disposition of his subject.

The anonymous author of ''The Mirrors of Washington'' (Putnam) has been less mindful of people's feelings. He is not so much a gentleman with a duster as a person with a mop. The portrait of Harding is devastating and from the point of view of this reviewer eminently fair and just. In such a book praise takes on an added value and Bernard Baruch should be much heartened by the fact that he is practically the only person in Washington for whom the author has unqualified words of approbation.

It is rather startling to find a member of the younger generation finding his theme in the life of an old schoolmaster in a New England village. It is still more surprising to find the book capitally carried through. It is a slim volume which Robert Nathan has produced in ''Autumn'' (McBride), but he has managed to find room for emotion within his rather scanty pages. In spite of the fact that the task is well done we are not convinced that it is not a penance book. We do not believe that the theme or the manner is one which came unbidden to Mr. Nathan.

This collection of short stories by the conductor of ''The Sun Dial'' is another manifestation of the versatility of one of the foremost journalists of our day. But it is hardly enough to say that Don Marquis is versatile. There is no suggestion of stunt writing in ''Carter'' (Appleton). ''Old Man Murtrie'' is among the finest of native short stories.