

# MRS. ATHERTON'S SCOOP

By Charles Hanson Towne

THE poets have given the novelists many beautiful titles for their books. William Dean Howells was fond of turning to his Shakespeare, as "The Quality of Mercy" will bear witness; and Mrs. Atherton has done well to snatch from Yeats a phrase from "The Countess Cathleen" as a name for her latest novel, dealing as it does with the inexorable tide of time. I do not know when I have come across a happier selection of a title. It gives the theme, without betraying its workings out. I know she had difficulty in finding the words that would express the story's intent; but when she finally hit upon "Black Oxen" she discovered, without doubt, what she sought; and Yeats should be proud to be put to such practical service.

For this novel by America's most amazing literary personality is the fin-

est of a long line of brilliant achievements. It will create a new place for Mrs. Atherton; and it will be discussed everywhere. There are those who contend that she belongs to an earlier school; yet here she reveals, in every sentence, her capacity to absorb the spirit of her time; and none of the smart-aleck whippersnappers of the hour, with their cheap flappers and jazz, could have done what she has so triumphantly accomplished.

She takes a daily newspaper columnist and makes of him her male protagonist, putting him down in a New York of prohibition and Geraldine Farrar and gay parties in the heart of the town; she brings from that background of Europe which she knows so well an extraordinary heroine, a volcanic, impulsive creature, and projects her into a tempestuous love affair which could hardly be matched for drama and suspense; and she calls her bohemians the "sophisticates" — oh, happy relief from "intelligentsia" and "intellectuals"!

The moment that the mysterious Mary Ogden, who had married an Austrian count, appears at a metropolitan opening and rises from her seat during the intermission to gaze about her, continental fashion, through her opera glasses, the drama begins. Lee Clavering, in his early thirties, is consumed with curiosity. So is the rest of the house; and soon the whole city rings with rumors of this strange young beauty who, time and again, attends the theatre alone.

Of course Clavering, the last word in progressive newspaper men, manages to meet her, after the ancient gossips, in roundabout and direct ways, have hinted their beliefs. Mrs. Atherton avoids the temptation of a mystery story — her material is of far sterner fabric; and the reader is al-

most instantly made aware of Mary Ogden's curious history. Piece by piece it is revealed, first by one or two minor characters and ultimately by the woman herself. When Clavering learns the bitter truth, it is too late to stem the torrent of his passion; he is unequivocally in love, with no desire to withdraw his promises. A mere sensationalist would have saved this dénouement, making it the green firecracker in the pack; but here again Mrs. Atherton shows a superb theatrical sense by utilizing this incident only as her first act curtain. The rest of the novel, with its multifarious characters, covers a goodly space of time on two continents, with ingenious holdings off, and the construction of delectable bypaths which lead to all sorts of surprising events.

To reveal the secret of Mary Ogden's magnificent and eternal youth would be unfair both to author and readers. It is sufficient to say that Mrs. Atherton has seized upon a scientific theme and developed it for her purpose with an adroitness hard to realize until one has plunged with her into the labyrinths of an engrossing subject. Women — and men too — will revel in her sharp, penetrating analysis of a discovery that is universal in its human appeal. Her story, however, never for a moment gets out of her hands or out of bounds. Always the novelist, she does not permit science to usurp the story's place on the printed page; her characters are living people who emerge from type and talk and act like men and women today.

It is indeed a notable book—a thrilling piece of reporting, which might have been finished at midnight and put upon the morning presses. As a getter of a fiction "scoop" Mrs. Atherton will make every other writer furiously envious. She stuns one by her sheer

cleverness; but her art never wavers. "Black Oxen" is by far her greatest story, and to me, at least, the most absorbing novel by anyone which I have read in a couple of years.

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Black Oxen. By Gertrude Atherton. Boni and Liveright.