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AN ENGLISHMAN FREES HIS MIND

Blunt's Diary Is Full of Interesting Indiscretions

IT IS not often that a man in intimate touch with the social, literary and political leaders of his time writes down his honest thoughts about them and their actions for a long period of years, and then publishes during his lifetime what he has written. For this reason the astoundingly frank "My Diaries" of Wilfrid Seawen Blunt, which A. A. Knopf has published in this country, is one of the most important books of the year. A first American edition of it was issued in December, but it was sold out in advance of publication, so that those who neglected to order it as soon as its publication was announced have had to wait till the second edition appeared a few days ago. The book is in two large volumes, bound in slate-blue boards with a cloth back and paper label and have that appearance of dignified seriousness which comports well with their contents.

W. S. BLUNT

It may be well to recall that Mr. Blunt is an Englishman, born in 1840, who inherited a large fortune when his elder brother died; that he is related to several of the most distinguished families in England; that he entered the diplomatic service in 1858 at the age of eighteen, and left it in 1870 because of his indignation at the British treatment of little nations; that he married Annabelle Lovelace, granddaughter of Lord Byron; that he is an Irish Home Ruler and was imprisoned in Ireland for two months in 1888, for calling a meeting in a district in which meetings had been forbidden; that he is a sculptor, painter, poet, dramatist, historian, traveler and breeder of Arabian horses, and, above all, a defender of the small and dependent peoples against the aggressions of the powerful nations.

A man of such varied intellectual occupations could not write an uninteresting diary.

MR. BLUNT, however, is not concerned with making his book interesting. The diaries were not written for publication anyway. He has the serious purpose of disclosing the selfishness, greed and trickery with which the Old World has been governed in the hope that the policies which culminated in the Great War may be abandoned. Indeed, he holds England and France and Italy and Russia jointly responsible with Germany for the war, because they were jointly responsible for the conditions which brought the war about.

The diary is divided into two parts, the first of which is devoted to what Mr. Blunt calls "The Scramble for Africa," and deals chiefly with the Egyptians and South African questions. The second part has for its sub-title, "The Coalition Against Germany." But there is no connected and ordered narrative. The scramble for Africa is described in entries preceded and followed by gossip about statesmen and men of letters and the like. The general reader will be likely to find Mr. Blunt's gossip and his appraisal of the men of his time more interesting than his propaganda in behalf of Ireland and Egypt and the Boers.

He is franker than Margot Asquith, and more indiscreet, for he prints the uncomplimentary remarks of others about their own acquaintances.

MRS. ASQUITH is one of his intimate friends, and he has many complimentary things to say about her kindness and her social charms and her intellectual brilliance. About Mr. Asquith he is rather cynical, expressing his amusement at the transformation of the north country nonconformist into a man of society in London, playing bridge and drinking, and up at all hours of the night. He says that Asquith "went all to pieces" at one time, but pulled himself together when he became Prime Minister.

As to Balfour, he quotes Mrs. Asquith to the effect that his mind is metaphysical and not political, and that he regarded this life as of very little importance, as merely a prelude to another life. "It is for that reason," Mrs. Asquith is made to say, "that he has no profound convictions about politics; they attract him only as a game which he thinks he plays well, and which amuses him much as a game of chess might do, but he does not really care for the things at stake, or believe that the happiness of mankind depend on events going this way or that."

Winston Churchill, in the course of a conversation comparing Asquith and Balfour, says Asquith "is simple-minded and good, Arthur (Balfour), on the contrary, is in his nature hard; he could be cruel. I call him wicked. He is very courageous. * * * The difference between him and Asquith is that Arthur is wicked and moral and Asquith is good and immoral."

Mr. Blunt expresses his own opinion about Rosebery and Gladstone and Disraeli. When Rosebery became Premier he remarked that "He is an astute Whig of the Palmerston type, and the Radicals have got what they deserve." He called him a stock exchange Premier, who would protect the British bondholders everywhere. When Gladstone retired he expressed no regret, but said that the old statesman had "betrayed too many good causes not to be an evil-doer in my eyes."

Of Disraeli he wrote: "You cannot persuade me that he ever for an instant took himself seriously as a British statesman * * * His Semitic politics were genuine enough." And he tells how Disraeli's father, on being fined £50 by his synagogue for unorthodox writing, withdrew from the Jewish congregation, joined the Church of England and had his children christened. Benjamin was then ten years old.

His comments on men of letters are as free as those on statesmen.

ALFRED AUSTIN, who became poet laureate when Tennyson died, he describes as "an absurd little cock-sparrow of a man," who never wrote more than two or three good poems. Meredith as a novelist irritated him, but as a poet was not so bad. Shaw is a brilliant dramatist, whose appearance repelled him at first, with a "face pasty white, a red nose and a rusty red beard, and slatey blue eyes." But when Shaw began to talk his appearance was forgotten. William Morris he regarded as the greatest man in England when he died. There is much about Oscar Wilde, and his drunken last years in Paris and his death are described. Francis Thompson is characterized as the greatest religious poet since Herbert, and several pages are given to Wilfred Meynell's description of how he rescued Thompson from the street and had him cured temporarily of his opium habit and how his death was not made known to the public until arrangements had been made to have appreciative notices of his work appear simultaneously in several London periodicals.

And so it goes, with entries about almost every Englishman of importance for the last thirty years, all of whom Blunt knew or knew about. He despised the imperialists and when news of the Jameson raid reached him he wrote that he hoped the raiders might be hanged. He regarded Cecil Rhodes as an arrant humbug and Rhodes' support of Home Rule for Ireland could not make him forgive the South African for his imperialist dream.

The diaries reveal Blunt as one of those high-minded men, intolerant of the makeshifts of statesman and indignant at every invasion of the rights of the little peoples. During the Boer War he made an entry setting forth his belief that "the British Empire is the greatest engine of evil for the weak races now existing in the world—not that we are worse than the French, or Italians or Americans—indeed, we are less actively destructive—but we do it over a far wider area and more successfully."

These extracts from the book give a better idea of what it is like than could be conveyed in any other way. They show its temper and its scope, the temper of the idealist and a scope wide enough to include all the interests of his contemporaries. Although the English edition appeared only two years ago it has already begun to be used as a source book by men writing the history of the period covered. It will be more frequently used in this way as we get farther from the events.

That the reader may not get the impression that it is a solemn and serious book, unrelieved by any levity, I close this rambling notice by quoting from the entry of May 14, 1907, when he went to the Royal Academy exhibition with Meynell. He writes: "Sargent is the especial object of his (Meynell's) admiration. The ladies he paints, according to Meynell, generally bore him so that he is obliged to retire every now and then behind a screen and refresh himself by putting out his tongue at them."

G. W. D.

A SAGA OF WHALING

"She Blows—and Sparm at That" Is Both Briny and Epical

Hunters and sportsmen who glow warmly when they brag of their bags of grouse, or of battles with game tarpon or of felling the massive elephant, have much of profit in store when they pick up William John Hopkins' story of the seas, "She Blows—and Sparm at That" (Houghton Mifflin Company). It is a story of the greatest and most exciting of all hunts—whaling—and is told in autobiographical form with a clearness and intensity that make it verge on the classics of Melville or other singers of sagas of the seas.

Supposedly the story of a four-year whaling cruise by a youngster who leaves New Bedford in 1871, it pictures every detail of whaling—its monotonous routine, the sudden thrills, the danger of battles against whale and elements, the glamour of sea life. All these are interwoven into the story with a master's hand. The veriest landlubber can start out on the cruise with Mr. Hopkins and end it an experienced whaler—except for the tanned cheeks and the other concomitants of a whaling voyage. There is a thread of a romance running through the story, but it never becomes obtrusive and even the patent theatricalism of a fight with pirates that closes the story can be forgiven as can the author's faux pas in attributing the Chicago fire to the cow of "Mrs. Kelly" instead to the obstreperous bovine of the clan O'Leary.

"She Blows" is a master story of the sea worthy of Conrad, Melville or others of that gallant band of writers whose numbers, alas, are all too few.

Unconventional History

James L. Ford's "Forty Odd Years in the Literary Shop," which the Duttons published a few months ago, has brought to its author a most interesting mass of letters of appreciation. Innumerable actors, actresses and managers have written to him to say what pleasant reminders of their early years they have found in his pages; one of the most distinguished of American historians has sent a letter to say that he has found these chronicles of the lighter phases of metropolitan life well worth reading; a bishop and half a dozen clergymen have assured him of the interest with which they have read the book; editors and dramatic critics have born testimony to the truth of his pictures of Park row; women of social distinction have expressed their interest in his accounts of life on Coney Island, the East Side, and in the haunts of criminals.

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Mr. Fuller has written a comprehensive and popular work on a subject that is abstruse and mysterious, even to the educated. He has clarified many puzzling matters and has been able, thanks to profound knowledge of the subject, to discuss technical matters in a clear, understandable way. His book, however, is not a guide to self-treatment and does not perform the ill service of inducing the layman to be his own prescription artist. Its ground is not human ills but the materia medica, about which an unnecessary haze of ignorance has gathered.

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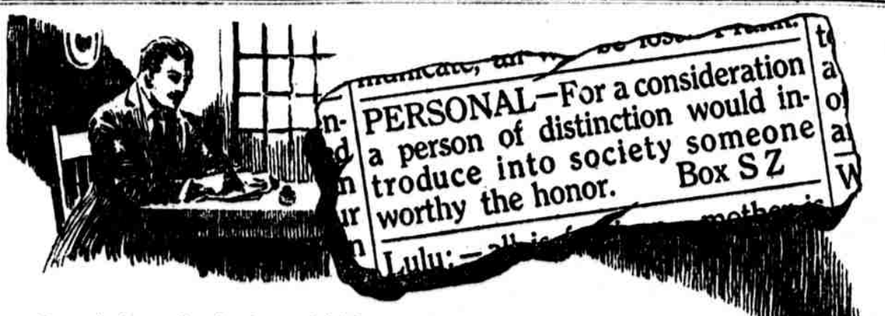

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