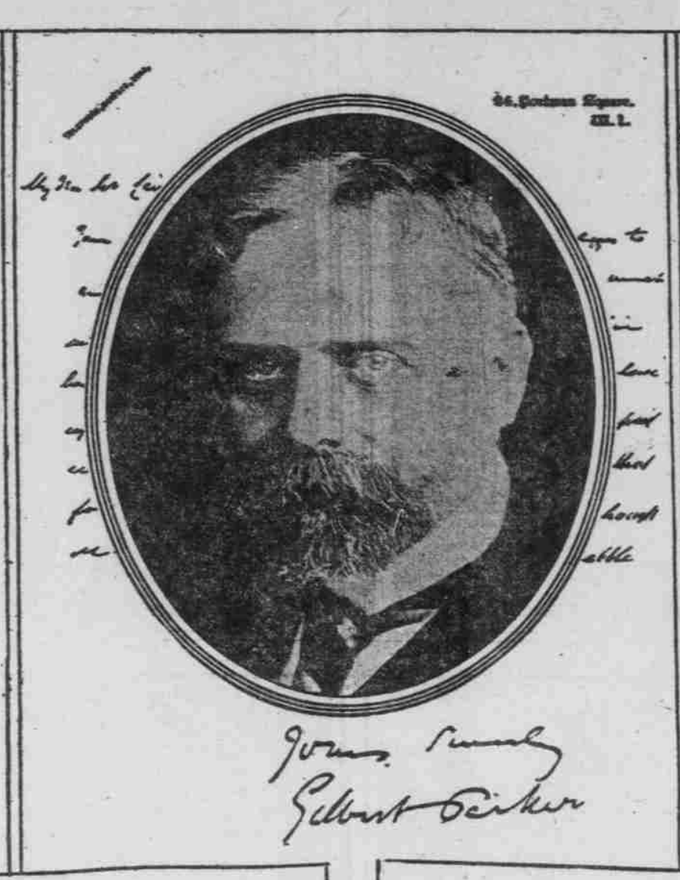
What's Next In Literature?—Opinions of Leading English Novelists

Sir Gilbert Parker, Marie Corelli, Oppenheim, Hornung and W. B. Maxwell Tell What Kind of Stories They Think Will Be Most Popular These Post-War Days



BY RAYMOND G. CARROLL.

DURING the war virtually all of the more or less famous British writers engaged themselves in the so-called propaganda work; those who were unable to get into the army. With the German signing of the peace terms and the whole world settling down once again to normal conditions the question naturally arises, "What are the plans of the British fiction writers?"

To the end of ascertaining if possible the present state of mind of the leaders in fiction, I addressed the following questions to some of the foremost:

First—What sort of reading should be prepared at this time for the world masses?

Second—Are wartime stories proper sort of literature to be presented either in the magazines or through the customary channels of books?

Third—Whether it is not important for serious writers to bestir themselves before the neighborhood picture theaters have entirely captured the time and interest of the average public?

To these queries I have received some interesting answers. Sir Gilbert Parker sent the following reply:

24 PORTMAN SQUARE, W. 1.—Mr. Dear Mr. Carroll: Your questions are not easy to answer, for at best the answers to the first two must be purely speculative and uninformed. But I've done the best possible in the inclosed.

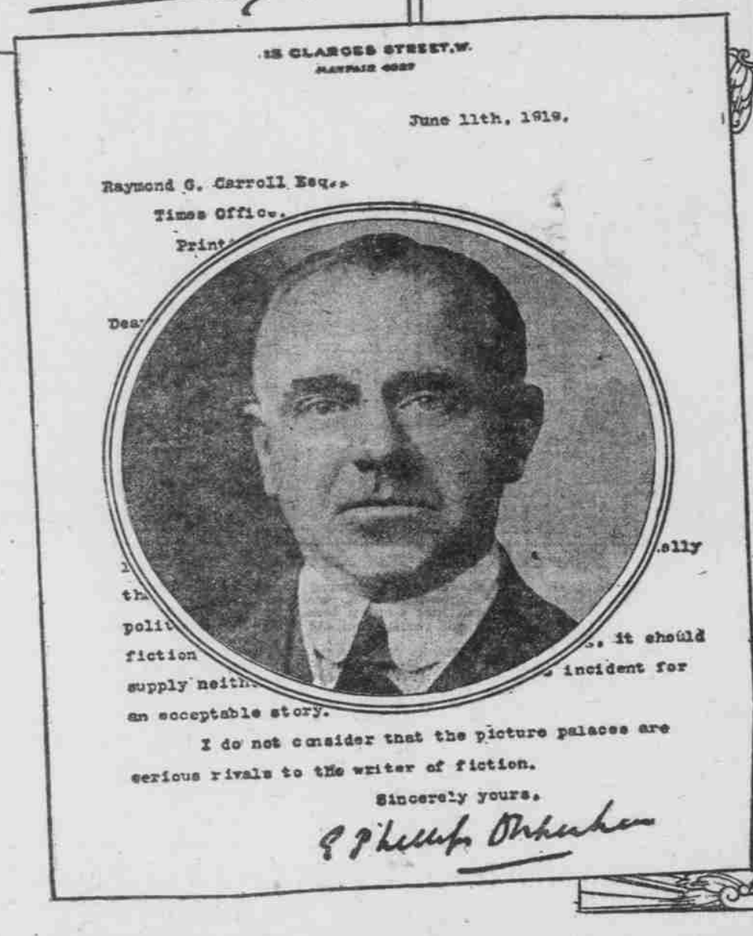
Answers to Questions.

First—The same as in the past, with an addition of historical matter, since the general public throughout the world has been roused and educated by the war to a keener historical sense. It is impossible to force the public into a system of reading, but a tendency can be cultivated, and the historical tendency is apparent.

Second—Personally I think that the public generally is for the moment tired of war-time stories and would welcome fiction far away from the hurly-burly and horror of war. Yet the taste for war-time stories will return and will provide for the next generation or two a field of interest inexhaustible and deep with drama and humanity.

Third—I do not think writers can deliberately "bestir themselves" to produce books. If they do, they will fail. Inspiration is the secret of success in all walks of life, but infinitely more than all in literature, otherwise it is manufactured stuff. My own view is that all authors who are worth while have been stirred deeply by the tremendous drama of the last five years (nearly), and big things will be the result. I have no fear of the picture theaters. In the end they will cultivate a greater taste for the drama in the regular theater and will also help to create or renew a taste for reading. I know that people read less than they did before mastering and "the movies" became popular, but that is only temporary. People will read more than ever they have done, as publishers know now, and I regard the future with confidence and hope. Yours sincerely, GILBERT PARKER.

The views of E. Phillips Oppenheim on war stories are expressed in the following letter which he sent me:



15 CLARGES STREET, W. Mayfair 4027.—Dear Sir: I have found your letter awaiting me on my return from Germany and beg you to excuse the necessary delay in acknowledgment.

Of the three very interesting questions which you propound, the second is the only one I can pretend to answer with any conviction. I feel very strongly that every serious modern novel, for a considerable time to come, will have to be in some sense a "war-time story." In so far as it reflects or depicts contemporary life, it cannot ignore the incidence and influence of the war upon the dramatis personae. That which has altered all our lives can only be avoided, in a study of contemporary life, by antedating the action; but the immediate pre-war days are now chiefly interesting in contrast with the days of the war itself, and this particular contrast has already been somewhat overworked in fiction. The modern novelist who would avoid the incubus altogether had best go back a generation or so and write a semi-historical novel, more Mr. Arnold Bennett.

On the other hand, I cannot think that a war-time story of the war itself—a novel of trench warfare—would now stand any chance of success unless a work of real genius. In every village there is a man who could cap the hero's most tremendous adventure out of his own experience; in fact, so much authentic adventure is in conversational currency that the fictitious type is likely to be discounted for many a long day.

The trouble is that it is difficult to conceive of a "hero" who has not fought in the war, but still more difficult to make him stand out in a world of heroes!

I doubt whether the gist of all this is of the slightest use for your purposes; but it is what I feel on almost the only points of interest that remain in life. Yours very truly, E. W. HORNUNG.

Marie Corelli sharply rebukes the tendency of the times in her caustic answers to my questions, which she sets down seriatim as follows:

MASON CROFT, Stratford-on-Avon Warwickshire.—First—Not a "sensational" press. The press should be a bettering influence; not a purveyor of evil and foolish suggestions as it is now. I consider half the mischief and discord between nations is the work of the press; of the lies it circulates, the jealousies it fosters, the wretched attitude it holds toward religion and education, apart from the pure silliness it encourages in women with regard to dress and behavior. Immorality is openly encouraged by the press; pruriant literature, low pursuits and indecent pictorial matter; the worst possible "reading" for the "world's masses," who are to be deeply commiserated for serving as the grist of this grinding mill of commercial exploitation, which takes no account of the degradation of human mentality but only of the dollars it can wring out of the destroyed matter. The press was the chief criminal cause of the war; it will again be the chief criminal cause of dissention between the allies should such dissension arise.

Second—"War-time stories" have for the most part been written "for the moment"—in slipshod English and bad style. War is too terrific a thing to be dealt with by writers who hurry a tale off the typing machine to make a few dollars. They are not the "proper sort of literature" as written nowadays; a real "war-time story" needs the pen of a Sir Walter Scott, a Dickens, a Thackeray; men who thought before they wrote; not the men of today, who write before they think. The "war-time" story of the present epoch will not be written perhaps for a hundred years. Meantime the public, which is still lashed and stung by the griefs and burdens of battle, should be given some other subjects to cheer, strengthen and uplift its mind.

Third—By "serious writers," I presume you mean writers who love their profession and seek to hold up its dignity. But for these there is a poor chance and I do not think they would trouble to "bestir" themselves into competition with the picture theater. The "average public" is being thrust back by a greedy commerce into old savage ways of ignorance, when "signs" and "pictures" were the only way of making them understand everything. Moreover, the "average public" is forever "on the go"—on wheels, in the air, motors, etc.—it never rests—and its brain, perpetually shaken to and fro in the whirl of machinery, is more or less addled. One has but to consider the delicate convolutions of the human spine and brain to realize the physical impossibility of clear thinking or comprehensive reading when that spine and brain are continuously jogged, shaken, pushed at high speed and "rushed" as they were never intended to be. "Serious writers" realize that the majority are ceasing to read (save for hurried glances at the afore-mentioned "sensational" press), and they do not attempt to write for the "squirrel-in-a-cage" turnabout man or woman. Education was never more talked about than it is today—but the Egyptian of Pharaoh's time was better educated than the British or American of "civilized" cities! Go where you will and speak to whomsoever you meet, the ignorance betrayed among all classes of the simplest facts of life is appalling and overwhelming. The people do not read; and here will come in a devastation unredeemed of. The "picture theater" is the delight of the staring savage to whom books are now nearly sealed—he thinks he can understand a picture, though that is becoming difficult—but so far as a book is concerned, he would rather "scoot off" in oilskins on a motorcycle at a tearing pace, with no particular aim or end, than open its covers. The names of great authors who have made the splendor of nations are almost unknown to modern men; they would not know the name of Shakespeare if it were not often repeated; and some are not very sure whether he was a man or a town! Ignorance is the being of this "educated" era!—and "serious writers" will do well if they can only hold back from the vulgarity of the moment and possess their souls in patience until the public wearies of the "mere noise of wheels" and emerges once more from childish barbarism to a sense of order, fitness and beauty.

MARIE CORELLI.

W. B. Maxwell gives the following as his ideas of the questions raised by the writer:

The reading that should be prepared at this time for the world masses ought to enforce the only real lesson that the war has given us. That is, the inherent power that all men possess of rising to great heights of self-sacrifice, courage, endurance; the supreme value of the simple gifts of life, such as love, home, healthy work; the utter futility of all outward and unsubstantial show. In other words, the literature of today should deal with the widest and most permanent truths and encourage thought that is at once lofty and simple.

Of course, exactly the reverse of this is happening. Long before the war our best as well as our worst novelists had gone out to meet the "man in the street," or average individual, with open arms. The average individual never thinks at all; what he utters as thoughts are what he has heard said by somebody else or read in a newspaper. And these are the thoughts that the popular novelist gives him. Contemporary novels are for the most part merely the newspaper bound in cloth; they deal with the events of the day, the hopes of the hour, the passing fashions of the moment. Like the newspapers, they are full of undigested facts, highly colored trivialities, monstrous irrelevancies. The emotions are kept on the surface; the unchanging laws of human nature are scarcely indicated; but they are "bright, chatty, up-to-date," and, as advertised by their publishers, "eminently readable."

Even when labeled "serious" they are what Ruskin would have classed as newspapers and not books; they do not soar above the work of our special correspondent's descriptions of the labor crisis, the law courts, the battlefields or whatever the "serious" subject-matter may be. One cannot conceive of people caring to read them again a few years after publication, or of being in any way the better for having read them at all.

On the commercial side, I would answer your second question by saying that in this too topical age war-time stories will continue to be good business until interest in the topic of the war has entirely faded. As a guess, I would say that this will not occur for about 18 months from now.

As to what serious writers should do, I have already hinted at my opinion. I do not think that in England, America or France there are any serious writers in the old sense of the word. There are writers who take their work seriously and themselves more seriously still, but there are none who are entering into serious competition with the great masters that are gone; none who are attempting to write not only for the moment but for all time.

W. B. MAXWELL.

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PEOPLE IN EUROPE UNABLE TO REALIZE WAR IS AT AN END

Thanksgiving Service at the Old Church Shows Joy of People Who Endured Hardships of Weary Years.

IN CORNWALL, England, July 10.—(Special.)—Even yet it seems hard to believe that peace has come to stay. It was so long deferred that some of our enthusiasm evaporated in that wait between the armistice and the signing of the peace. Now, at last, I can feel that my brave sergeant and the others who died for victory have not given their lives in vain. On Sunday eevning we had a Thanksgiving service at the old church.

The village band played the hymns and the service began with the national anthem and ended with the singing of the Te Deum, and a joyous peal of bells. The fine old building was crowded and the blare of the brass instruments made the very windows rattle and dance in triumph. Once it seemed to me that I even saw an old stone crusader in the chancel nod his head in satisfaction.

He also had won the good fight in Palestine hundreds of years ago. Many good Cornishmen were fighting in the Holy Land this time, and alas, some perished in the siege of Kut. The women of Cornwall are presenting the Cornish regiments with new colors.

* * *

Outside in the churchyard I noticed a cross erected some 60 years ago to the memory of many villagers who "died by the visitation of God." They really died of typhus caused by bad drains.

We have learned something these past 60 years. Now we not only pray to God, but keep our drains in good condition.

It was a pious idea to say "the visitation of God" and sit down comfortably and do nothing.

"Positively blasphemous I call it," said the nursing sister home from France, who was with me.

* * *

On Saturday the 19th, our big peace celebration takes place.

There are to be all sorts of giddy events including sports, dancing, a bonfire and fireworks. The band, of course, will play all day, or as long as its breath holds out.

Then there is to be a free tea to the service men and their families. Sister and I insist that our war services entitle us to join them, so shall proudly eat our big currant buns (weighing eight ounces each) and drink our tea in the best company in the world.

Only a year ago currant buns were currantless, and such as they were could only weigh two ounces. One at that weight had to serve for the whole meal.

I reflected the other day when I was enjoying strawberries and cream that two years ago at this time we were experimenting on pea-pod and wood-sorrel soup made after a Belgian recipe.

We tried to think that we liked it, too.

One of the nurses at the munition works last October had a devoted admirer who used to bring his beloved offerings of food. Where he managed to get butter and honey I do not know, but the salmon he caught himself and shot the pheasants. He was most popular with all the nurses as he had sense enough to bring sufficient to go around. Whether his particular nurse still smiled upon him after the armistice I never heard.

His gifts at that time were worth more than diamond tiaras and strings of pearls. We were getting primitive in those days.

* * *

Yesterday I asked the ex-munitioneer milk-woman if she was going to take a peace holiday.

She said: "No, milk won't stand for it."

It must be funny to change suddenly from a fierce business like making shells into a mild business like delivering milk.

One of the rather unexpected after-effects of the war is that English women seem to dress better than they did, although clothes cost more than twice as much as in the pre-war days. They wear better-looking shoes and stockings and seem to choose more becoming colors.

I dare say most worth-while women have been wearing uniform of one sort or another and are anxious to choose prettier clothes, now they have a chance. Here at the seaside the modern feminine garb of civilization seems to be a knitted jumper gaily striped, eked out with a woolen hat of sorts and an extremely short skirt.

I may say that it is as a rule a most becoming and sensible outfit. Some of the color schemes are most artistic. As for me, I wish that clothes, like wine and some cheeses, improved with age.

I am diligently embroidering lace butterflies and applying "motives" over the worst holes in my frocks.

Although I also have a smart knitted jersey and a hat of sorts, I can only own to being short of a new skirt, instead of owning a new short skirt! My observation of prices in the shops hereabout has led me to believe that all the descendants of the pirates of bygone days have taken to shopkeeping as a profession.

The proprietors of the little shops in Scotland which sold pink crepe de chine lingerie to the munitioneers must be rolling in riches now; also the fur coat vendors.

Profiteers, all of them.

* * *

Most of my letters from the United States boys are now either full of enthusiastic joy at being home again or full of enthusiastic joy at the prospect of soon being home again.

It positively makes me homesick, but I must stay a while yet in case I am needed to help in the after care of our wounded men.

One man wrote bluntly from France: "It seems good to get a parcel from this side, for it seems here that everyone wants to do you all they can."

It reminded me of the scornful outburst of one of my own patients: "La Belle France, they calls it, nurse; it's a place I wouldn't take my own mother to"—pause—then: "Anyway, we've shoveled the most of it into sandbags." Poor France! The real drawback to France was that it wasn't "home."

* * *

My sailor man is going to leave the navy, now peace is signed, and take up engineering again where he left off to go and fight. My big soldier is sick and tired of Saloniks, and will probably be sent back to India, where he came from, as he belongs to the regular army.

My friend the sister in charge of the naval hospital has received the order of the royal Red Cross. She writes:

"I did miss all my dear boys when I left the naval hospital. I think I should like to take up a matronship in a 'home for disabled sailors and soldiers,' and I would do my best to make them happy."

She was a dear and was my ward sister when I was there. She was promoted to "sister in charge" afterwards. ("A dear" would not describe very accurately the sister in charge of my time.)

* * *

My Oregon boy never got his cake after all, but as he got Oregon instead I dare say he is satisfied. Only one American soldier I know is left on this side and he sails from France today.

I have gained a lot of experience and a good many gray hairs since I left Portland over four years ago.

After so much sadness I find quite a childish delight in small pleasures.

I may have forgotten to some extent how to put on my clothes smartly, but I am, certainly not blase. I believe my American watch is homesick, for it refuses to go, and has completely gone on strike.

First it broke its mainspring and now the stem-winder has gone wrong. As a nurse is rather dependent on a watch to take pulses, I shall try and coax it to put up with exile a little longer.

If it remains obdurate I shall be obliged to borrow a watch from my patients.

I remember "Sister" asking me one day:

"Has any man got a second-hand watch to lend me for a few minutes?"

"You can have mine, sister," said a soldier, handing it to her; "but (reprovingly) it isn't a second-hand one!"

Then sister explained that she merely meant a watch that had a "second" hand.

Almost every watch in England has developed "nerves" during the war, probably caused by the concussion of the big guns.

Now the watches and clocks seem to think they are entitled to a rest cure.

They say there was never a watch or clock in France that kept good time. No wonder. Perhaps some of them held up their hands in horror at the rapid beating of some of the pulses they helped to take!