

... With ... BOOK and VERSE

By "John O'Dreams"

Jottings

MANY modern novels describe in considerable and boring details "smart" parties. A legitimate field, no doubt, for present-day fiction, but, like everything else, extremely tiresome if there is a surfeit. Mr. Powell's "Afternoon Men" adds another to the list, but arresting, in spite of its milieu, because of its distinctly promising style. It is true we have the silliest of silly people, some of whom nearly fall in love, and some nearly commit suicide. A few endeavour to be artists, and one and all are fond of gin. Yet with these materials the author has managed to construct an attractive book, its satire being all the more poignant because so cunningly hidden. Mr. Powell's future literary career should be interesting.

AS all the world knows, Mrs. Pankhurst and her daughters won their position in history by their adoption of militant tactics in place of the constitutional and peaceful methods of the earlier agitators. The campaign they led will never be forgotten. It was remarkable for its ingenuity, courage, and perseverance, and for its discipline. In no campaign, outside the annals of warfare, have these qualities been so conspicuous. Not even fiction can provide a parallel.

In her book "The Suffragette Movement" Sylvia Pankhurst has given a brilliant explanation of the part played by the militant suffragettes. She has not adequately explained the hostility of Asquith or the indifference of MacDonald. Miss Pankhurst's book has to be regarded principally as a source of information for use by future historians. Her evidence, like that of all ex parte witnesses, has to be weighed before it can be accepted. But she is a good witness. Without restraint she has written down her impressions and variations of her colleagues and contemporaries. What she says about the pre-war politicians of all three parties, much of it damning character, throws new light on dark patches in the politics of the period. Most readers of the book, I imagine, will be left wondering whether the victory of votes for women was worth the sacrifices of the struggle. The answer is an emphatic affirmative. Proof lies in the new legislation which has been enacted since the armistice. Never has there been so short a period in which so many changes have been made in the interests of women and children, as witness, for example, widows and orphans' pensions and the developments in maternity and child welfare. Therein can be found justification enough and to spare for the women's movement.

Our Fortnightly Book Review

FIRST ATHENIAN MEMORIES

By Compton MacKenzie

THOSE who know Mr. Compton MacKenzie only as author of brilliant novels and delightfully amusing studies in social absurdity will be amazed at the versatility shown in recollections of his war years, beginning with those vivid "Gallipoli Memories," and followed by the volume now under review, which is an account of social and political life in Athens in 1915.

Invalided from active service for the time being, Mr. MacKenzie took a post in the Diplomatic Service, and this extremely interesting and entertaining literary olla podrida is the result of his experience of the grandeur that was Greece, truly at that time a country of violent intrigue, dazzling light and Cimmerian shadow, hatred and despair and hectic pleasure. But, turning from the plots and counterplots that prevailed, many will read with delight his digression into memories of his youth.

Under treatment in a Greek clinic, perforce exiled from world of action, he lives in the past: "The white room of the clinic was thronged for a moment with shapes and rich with colour. . . . Leander pink, scarlet and lilies of the Magdalen cox, authentic blazers, vivid Rambler ties, black and white of Soccer team." And again: "The rhododendrons in Brankome woods . . . the darkness under pollarded lime-trees beside the lake at Lucerne . . . mauve violets among the melting snow of a square in Interlaken. . . . And Geneva, shimmering silver in the haze of summer. . . . Chasing butterflies all day long across the red soil of the Lyonsais, and reading in Tachnitz editions a novel a day . . . the dewy lips of Rhoda Broughton's delicious heroines, hard riding with Henry Kingsley, amazed adolescent thrills from 'The Yellow Aster.' . . . Balzac and what seemed a revelation of life . . . my own first story written in a jasmine arbour."

These recollections, however, are merely embroideries, the prime purpose of the book being to set out the state of things prevailing in Greece at that disastrous time. Surely never was there so much muddlement, confusion, cross-purpose, and deceit. Espionage and counter-espionage were rampant, the city being criss-crossed with a network of spies from Royal entourage to lowest slum.

The book is crammed with exciting incident, and the whole tale spun with an engaging frankness, for Mr. MacKenzie throws discretion to the winds, and records impressions and opinions with amazing lack of caution; always, however, retaining a clear eye for beauty of mind or spirit. "She stopped in the glittering dust, and, raising her arm above her head, spoke with such passion against the proposal of the Entente to cede Cavalla to Bulgaria that I forgot she was a mortal girl not yet twenty, and could have fancied I was listening to Pallas Athene herself pleading before Zeus the cause of her beloved Greeks. She was tall. Her complexion was the burnt rose of an old vase. Her profile was fit for a goddess, and a less impressionable person than myself might have imagined that she was speaking with the inspiration of divinity. Perhaps while she was declaiming against the iniquitous hypocrisy of great nations I began to weave a romance about her; but if I did it could not have been as rich a romance as that which in reality wove round her, for this was the beautiful girl King Alexander married and who is now her Highness the Princess Aspasia of Greece."

Mr. MacKenzie is an acute critic of innumerable potentialities and powers with whom he comes into intimate contact, and his summing up is entirely without fear or favour, and oftentimes vastly entertaining, despite devastating perils and tragedy that stalked the streets of the classic city of which so many have dreamed dreams. The author's practised eye and pen have enabled him to compile an absorbing story. His allusions to Venizelos, the "inspired Cretan," are of extreme interest, and he is very critical of French policy. Ambassadors, kings, and rulers of Kings, it is all one to Mr. MacKenzie; in they go into his net, and emerge embellished by comment induced by intuitive divining of the secret springs of action and wide knowledge of human affairs. His picturesque phraseology and long acquaintance with the service of diplomacy and tortuous windings of political intrigue, together with his great gift of narrative and fascinating flair for digression, combine to make him a prince of chroniclers.

ALTHOUGH "Prisoners Under the Sun" is a German novel, most of the characters are English, and behave as Englishmen may be expected to behave in what are sometimes accurately described as the great open spaces. In the Sudan, it seems, life can be exceedingly difficult, and men living away from their fellows may quite easily lose their reason. Herr Bauer tells his story quietly and sanely, and it reads like the truth. There are three white men in love with the same white woman; and there is a native woman as well. The theme is old, the setting new. An interesting book, not least on account of its detailed pictures of life in strange surroundings.

ON the "jacket" of Mr. Douglas Sladen's new novel there is a photograph of a very beautiful statue which may be seen in the British Museum. It is now supposed to have been the portrait of a slave by Praxiteles, and it forms a fitting prelude to Mr. Sladen's story of Arethusa, a high-born Grecian girl who is carried off by pirates from Syracuse and sold into slavery in Asia. She is ultimately captured by Alexander the Great, who comes near to making her his queen, and her various adventures in and out of the harem are picturesquely described. To capture the atmosphere of those ancient days can have been no easy task, but Mr. Sladen has made a close study of his period, and he brings that strange, pleasure-loving civilisation very near to us. It is a dramatic and dignified story.

"LOBSTER QUADRILLE" by Theodora Benson and Betty Askwith, is nothing if not modern. In it we meet Nina and Tony, married lovers, who find each other as amusing and charming as in days of courtship, in spite of grown-up daughter Caro, who is a ravishing beauty and spoilt girl, intensely determined to have her own way in everything, including her marriage with a brilliant, uncouth Socialist. Him she adored, and for a time the ill-assorted union was a happy one. Naturally enough, they soon tired, not of each other, but of the different worlds to which they belonged. No snob, but fascinating, young, gay, and of the world worldly, Caro did her best with her restless impossible husband, with his great ambitions and deplorable lapses into those faux pas which spell consternation in the polite world. Love was not enough, susceptibilities were ruffled, good taste outraged, and the mondaine Caro flees for consolation to a man of her own world, and all ends more or less well. A hackneyed theme, but the novel is written with vim and grace, and a sure touch on the way of a man with a maid, and vice versa.