

The Pen and the Sword

By THOMAS N. ASHTON

THE "awareness" of writers of fiction is undergoing an enlargement. These lords of letters sense a drift in public taste toward informative writings and, in consequence, are apprehensive over their jobs and incomes. Not a few are panicky as they envision propaganda perforce interwoven with the romance of plots. This drift of public taste spells an obligatory education in fundamentals among all literary entertainers who feel the urge to write lasting literary monuments to their names.

It is an encouraging sign, in one sense, and a cause for alarm in another, just as woman suffrage merely multiplied the number of prejudices at the polling booths in consequence of a wider application of a democratic principle. Writers are merely human beings with an aptitude for a specialty. Pry them loose from their ruts and they revert to type in regarding effects as causes. Among their untold numbers may be one or two who will have sufficient self-control to avoid rushing into an ism without a reasonable comprehension of differentiated isms.

Panic is the proper word in describing the first effect resulting from the enlarged "awareness" among authors. The fear is manifest as they argue that the cobbler should stick to his last and leave propaganda to political propagandists. Happily (for the cause of humanity), writers are as easily persuaded, by touching their pocket-book nerves, as are other specialists. Economic dress is no respecter of wage earners.

Tillotson believed that "We ought to be glad, when those that are fit for government, and called to it, are willing to take the burden of it upon them . . ." Dryden was a student of Tillotson and Maugham is a student of both. Maugham's "awareness" has enabled him to see the whole picture of social endeavor and has made him less certain of his usefulness to his fellowman. He says:

"Thinking that not the whole of life was long enough to learn to write well, I have been unwilling to give to other activities time that I so much needed to achieve the purpose I had in mind. I have never been able intimately to persuade myself that anything else mattered. Notwithstanding, when men in millions are living on the border-line of starvation, when freedom in great parts of the inhabited globe is dying or dead, when a terrible war has been succeeded by years during which happiness has been out of the reach of the great mass of the human race, when men are distraught because they can see no value in life and the hopes that had enabled them for so many centuries to support its misery seem illusory; it is hard not to ask oneself whether it is anything but futility to write plays and stories and novels. The only answer I can think of is that some of us are so made that there is nothing else we can do. We do not

write because we want to; we write because we must. There may be other things in the world that more pressingly want doing: we must liberate our souls of the burden of creation. We must go on though Rome burns. Others may despise us because we do not lend a hand with a bucket of water; we cannot help it; we do not know how to handle a bucket. Besides, the conflagration thrills us and charges our mind with phrases."

Maugham pens lucid lines. His frankness leaves us in the dark as to which ism he would pursue if economic adversity obliged him to cater to the public's quest for informative stories and novels. He has given us no reason to believe that he would weave Single Tax into his plots. His early home-life and his matured preference for his own company has anything but Socialistic inclinations. We suspect that Communism would find short shrift in his literary romances. Under the law of reversion he would probably fall back upon monarchism despite the economic misery which has flourished under that form of government during all of his life.

Other authors have not been so financially fortunate as Maugham. They cannot avoid the pressure from industrial depressions, yet they must write if they would eat, and they must write what the public desires. If Maugham's abnormal success gives no indication of rational thought upon the subject of taxation, what may we expect from his contemporaries who have less "awareness" and less reserves against a new and distasteful literary line? In other words, what chance has the philosophy of Henry George amidst the intelligentsia of letters?

Verily, it appears that Fate is riding hell-bent to unmask all who long have hidden their limitations behind the cloak of culture. If the unmasking discloses more than one or two real Single Taxers in the entire field of civilized letters we shall, indeed, be overwhelmingly gratified and delighted. This joy will be greatly tempered, however, as we witness the probable flood of propaganda plots and stories romancing through the stratospheric dreams of Socialism, Communism, Fascism and all other isms which easily capture a restless people.

Life has been one long and pleasant dream for those of us who could afford to work at only such jobs as pleased our fancies. We have left to our governors the operations of government whilst assuming that we had competent leaders. Time and consequences have exposed astounding incompetency. While it lasted it was comforting to believe that we were not our brothers' keepers, that we should permit the world to wend its way as chance dictated, but the Law of Consequences has a far different lesson in store for us.

The pen is mightier than the sword, and the pen-pushers are scanning the horizon of economics by request. We hope that they may discover the story, plot and romance penned in the pages of "Progress and Poverty".