

THE QUESTION OF AGE LIMITS AND SOME RECENT BOOKS*



If one were to ask the question, what are the age limits between which our fellow human beings are of chief interest to us, our first impulse would be to regard it as a futile and rather silly way of wasting time. Our off-hand answer would probably be that life is interesting in its entirety; that we cannot single out any particular age or class or sex as being of particular interest, because it is the sum total of humanity, rather than its parts that really matters. But however sound this may seem in theory, a little study of our makers of fiction shows that it does not work well in practice. What the great majority of men and women, old and young, are interested in is not, on the one hand, the words and thoughts and actions of children, nor, on the other, the words and thoughts and actions of the very old:—it is the vital, intimate interests and emotions of people in their early prime; of women in the years when their hearts are young, of men in the years when their faculties are alert and eager, the years when the big work of the world is being done.

It is easy, at this point, to raise the objection that many a novel of serious import and of wide popularity has been written, involving on the one hand the lives of children, and on the other hand those of men and women standing very near the full sum of allotted years. It is

*On the Branch. By Pierre de Coulevain. Translated by Alys Hallard. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company.

The Unknown Quantity. By Gertrude Hall. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

A Girl of the Limberlost. By Gene Stratton-Porter. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

The Crimson Azaleas. By H. de Vere Stackpoole. New York: Duffield and Company.

The God of Love. By Justin Huntly McCarthy. New York: Harper and Brothers.

Lord Loveland Discovers America. By C. N. and A. M. Williamson. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company.

Friendship Village Love Stories. By Zona Gale. New York: The Macmillan Company.

easy to point to a very familiar type of story, in which the first chapter introduces us to the hero or heroine somewhere near the hour of birth, and follows the subsequent course of their lives, either to their death or to some arbitrarily chosen intermediate point that the author is pleased to regard as the real crisis of their lives. *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss*, it will probably be suggested, are well-nigh as remarkable for their portrayal of the hopes and disappointments of childhood, as for the more serious tragedies of maturity, and somebody is almost certain to point quite triumphantly to Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* as a book peculiarly suited to the taste of the mature and thoughtful mind, which nevertheless not only concerns itself with a heroine of rather tender years, but sees all the rest of life consistently and exclusively through her somewhat circumscribed field of vision.

All this is perfectly true; and true because it gives us not exceptions but merely consummations of the statement made in the first paragraph. The childhood of Maggie Tulliver and of Jane Eyre—and we might add of David Copperfield and of Henry Esmond—has its real interest not in picturing the children that they are, but in foreshadowing the men and the women they are destined to be. If George Eliot, for instance, had broken off her narrative in the midst of those early years at St. Oggs, how often would it, in the natural course of things, be taken from the shelf? Would it not, perforce, be classified among the juveniles, and yet prove too ponderous to appeal to the age which still enjoys *Alice in Wonderland* and the *Jungle Tales*? And *What Maisie Knew* is, if you only look at it in the right way, as far removed as possible from being either a child's story or a story about a child. It is a story about grown men and women who have sinned and suffered, and whose transgressions and penance are peculiarly magnified by being seen through the uncomprehending eyes of childhood.

And similarly, wherever you find, in

fiction, great prominence given to the very young or the very old, it is safe to say that if you honestly seek for it you will find that the structural interest of the children is due to what they are going to be, that of the aged, to what they have been. Or, if not this, then it is that lesser interest of contrast, by which the helplessness of childhood, the impotence of age, is made to emphasise the strength and courage of life in its prime. But let us make no mistake about just what we mean by the age limit of the principal characters in a novel. A story written in the first person may very well begin somewhat after this fashion: "I am an old man now, my dears; I have been a grandfather more years than I care to count, yet well I remember, in those far off days the brave adventures that I had in peace and war, and that I am here about to set down." Now a novel which begins like that may possibly give one a shudder of apprehension; but the apprehension will be in regard to its literary quality and not at all in regard to the dotage of its narrator; although seen from a distance it will still be a story of men and women in their prime.

But the real question at issue is whether we can assign, for the sake of having a working rule, anything like a definite age limit for what shall be regarded as the prime of life in hero and heroine. There was a time when a large part of our English fiction, making the love interest the one predominant feature, chose to begin with a flirtation and end with a marriage; and since, to the outside spectator, the romance surrounding courtship diminishes very nearly in inverse proportion to the square of the ages, it is not surprising that there was a sort of unwritten law that hero and heroine should both be very young, and both good to look upon. In one sense, Balzac's *Femme de Trente Ans* marked an epoch, in having thus daringly advanced this unwritten age limit, just as Charlotte Brontë marked another epoch in daring to make her heroine unbeautiful. To-day, the heroine of thirty, of forty, even of fifty, has found favour with the reading public—although the last-named case is distinctly rare. But one cannot recall a single successful novel where the interest of the book cen-

tres in the emotions, the experiences and the views of life of a woman who, from the beginning to the end of the story, has already crossed the threshold of old age.

This whole question of age limit is suggested this month by a rather remarkable

book, *On the Branch*, by a French woman who chooses to mask her

identity under the pseudonym of Pierre de Coulevain; a book that in France has already sold well above the hundred thousand mark. Not merely for this reason, but because also it possesses an uncommon distinction of style, a rare maturity of thought, and a delightful broadness of view toward life in general, it is a book that cannot be carelessly dismissed. Nevertheless, it is a book which transgresses, more or less deliberately, many of the established rules of good technique; it gives you the impression that the author does not care what other writers have done in the past, are doing to-day, or are likely to do in the future. She simply writes straight ahead, putting down what she pleases, in whatever order it happens to come, tranquilly assuming that the reader will be just as indulgent, just as attentive, just as enthusiastic, whether she makes orderly progress with her story or goes off on a side track regarding French politics, woman's emancipation, astronomy or the Church of England. To a reader who is sensitive to matters of good construction the book causes an exasperation that makes a steady reading to completion well-nigh intolerable; one is forced to lay it aside, every now and then, in order to get one's ruffled temper into harmony once more—and yet, there is no escaping from the sense that it has behind it the force of a rare and cultured personality. The really surprising thing about it is its established vogue in France, the home and source of all that is technically best in modern fiction.

The plot of the book is neither complicated nor especially original. The heroine, Madame de Myères, does not learn, until the very hour of her husband's death, the hour of her first great grief, that her husband has been untrue to her, that her rival is her married cousin, Colette, and that the dead man, lying

there before her, is really the father of Colette's little son. The discovery of this double treachery embitters the woman, isolates her from her family, drives her into a life of restless roaming, a life in strange cities and cosmopolitan surroundings which, little by little, broadens and mellows her and prepares her for an eventual reconciliation and peace of mind. And this final state is attained only after she has forced herself to befriend the son of her dead husband to save him in his hour of grief, and while working for his happiness, to find her own in the affection he bestows upon her. This sounds as though it might make a strong and rather firmly knit structure; the trouble is not with the plot but with the method. The book is written after the loose, haphazard fashion of a daily journal. At its opening, Madame de Myères is fifty-seven years of age; and it is the thoughts, the feelings, the hopes and fears of this woman of fifty-seven that we are asked to take an interest in throughout four hundred closely written pages of autobiography. Of Economy of Means, the author might just as well never have heard; obviously she scorns it. People too numerous to count appear upon the page, then disappear, friends, strangers, Frenchmen and foreigners, while the scene shifts from hotel to hotel, from Cannes to Paris, from Paris to Bagnolles-de-l'Orne, to Aix-les-Bains, to Porte Joie, interrupted by a brief visit to England. And she is so busy discussing the people she meets, the books she reads, and the books she writes—for the heroine is a famous novelist—the places she visits and the big problems of contemporary life that she has not time, within the first eighty pages of the book, to do more than hint vaguely that there has been a tragedy in her life. Then, all of a sudden, while visiting in England, she finds herself tumultuously pouring out the whole painful, long-buried tale into the ears of a kind old English statesman, himself tottering on the brink of the grave. The reader does not know, the Englishman does not know, she herself does not know why she should have chosen him for a confidant. One may hazard the guess that the author thought it was about time to get an inkling of the story before the

public, the Englishman happened to be there, and so she pressed a button, so to speak, and set her heroine to talking.

Throughout the book, the essential story is told in very much this sort of way, in spasmodic instalments. And, with the best will in the world, one finds it very difficult to see the book as one well-rounded, unified story, and to prevent it from breaking up into its separate parts. The first episode, that of the husband's faithlessness, seems really such a remote matter, so diminished by distance as scarcely to be worth the importance attached to it by a woman who, years ago, ceased to be the woman she had been when it happened—a woman from whom the whole brief episode remained successfully hidden for ten years after its occurrence, and who does not open her lips to tell us about it until fifteen years later, not until the child is a man of twenty-four, with serious love entanglements of his own. The author tries hard to resurrect the dead and buried emotions of that remote period, but she cannot quite do it. She shows us too plainly Madame de Myères as she is to-day, with her calm, broad sanity, her wise outlook upon life, her steady pulse beat:—and we say, it is impossible that a woman like that has been unable, in fifteen years, to rise above the narrowness of that earlier self. The two pictures do not fit together. And this is in a large measure the reason why the book breaks in the middle. In Madame de Myères, herself, as she is to-day to the world at large, a woman of delightful culture and cosmopolitan tolerance, it is easy to find much to admire. One feels that her writings might be worth reading, whether they should take the form of essay or of novel. But Madame de Myères, as the heroine of her own story, fails to hold the stage. She is simply a magnifying lens, through which we see quite clearly two separate stories, the tragic story of her earlier self, and the happier story of her godson. But in neither of them can we think of Madame de Myères herself as the chief actor, or understand, except by an intellectual effort, the poignant emotions that she seems to wring from them.

The Unknown Quantity, by Gertrude Hall, is a pleasant and tender story,

dominated by a commendable seriousness of purpose, and rising at times to that dignity which comes from seeing life with sincerity and truth. In terms of the literary shop, Miss Hall has done technically a very good job; and while she has not attempted to treat life on a large scale, and has been content to picture a few simple unpretentious people, at the same time she has a rather big idea for a working basis. In point of age limits, she has a rather ample margin to spare; her heroine is a widow still in the early thirties. From the beginning, it is clear that she has seen much trouble. A frail, friendless little woman, with a child and a mother-in-law dependent upon her, she has watched her small capital dwindle month by month, has seen her old home dropping apart for want of repairs, and finally sold at a sacrifice; and all this time she has known the day must come when she will have to face the world and toil for a living. It happens that she is of the type of woman who, apparently weak and helpless, will nevertheless show a surprising endurance; and who, because of her unconscious appeal to masculine sympathy, will obtain chances that stronger, bigger, physically more attractive women will not get. It happens that the first person to whom she applies is the son of her father's old family lawyer; and he, though not of the impressionable sort, finds himself haunted by the mute appeal of that pale-faced black-robed little figure, pathetically courageous in her helplessness. He suddenly discovers what has never before occurred to him, that it is absolutely essential for his mother to have a companion, and that the little widow is the one person in the world to fill that position. The rest of the story is simply a working out of the effect of propinquity upon a young woman whose first experience of marriage had been so unfortunate that she has had little desire to repeat it—but the situation is further complicated by the exceptional nature of her wrongs. Briefly, it was a case of platonic friendship of a rare and beautiful sort, misunderstood by her husband and also by the other man's jealous wife—who brought suit for

alienation of affections. The suit was dismissed, but the husband chose to remain unconvinced and to cast her off. And the story hinges upon man's injustice toward woman in his willingness to accept at second or third hand hearsay evidence against her, in spite of decisions of a court of law, and in spite of the fact that jealousy can always trump up plausible grounds for bringing an unfounded suit.

Still another volume of the current month which hinges upon the wrongs done by a husband now long dead is *A Girl of the Limberlost*, by Gene Stratton-Porter. To a majority of the readers, this underlying theme will probably remain of secondary importance. They will find an unalloyed pleasure in the delightful outdoor atmosphere of those rare and beautiful woodlands that the author has already made familiar as the stage setting of an earlier volume, *Freckles*. To those who know the intimate charm of the wild life of field and dell, the rare and deeply hidden flower, the miracle of colour on the wings of some seldom-seen butterfly, the reason why Elnora Comstock's mother lives in poverty in the forest lands bordering on the swamps; why she hates her only daughter, and refuses to give her decent clothing or a penny with which to pay for schooling, all seems a matter to be brushed aside as a rather painful matter that is not worth while remembering while we are well and happy. The essential fact is that here is a dauntless young woman determined to educate herself; that in the face of all obstacles she finds a way of going daily to the distant high school, in the nearest town; a way to obtain the hats and dresses and shoes she needs, and the money she must pay for books and for tuition. All this she does through her intimate knowledge of woodland life, her ability to track down and capture the great night moths that fly in June, to obtain their eggs and rear perfect specimens by the score for which collectors, the world over, were glad to pay big prices. The book perhaps lacks somewhat in plausibility; success comes a little too easily; the rarest and most expensive moths have a most unrealistic way of generously flitting into her grasp

at the psychological moment. And in addition to this, there is that commonplace of romantic fiction, the handsome and wealthy stranger who has come from his city home to the wilderness to win back health—and who succeeds in winning a wife at the same time. But those who really care for woodcraft will not be troubled by such small matters as these; while, as for the other class of readers, they will fall back upon the tragedy of the mother's life, her long years of bitterness in regretting the husband drowned in the swamp before her eyes—the husband whom she might have saved excepting for the grim fact that the hour of his death was the hour of the daughter's birth. This is the reason why for eighteen years she hates Elnora with an implacable, remorseless hatred, finding a cruel pleasure in thwarting and humiliating the girl. And it is not until Elnora has surmounted practically all of her difficulties that the mother discovers that the husband she has mourned was not worthy of a single regret, that at the time of his death he was on his way to keep tryst with another woman, and that the cause of his drowning was because he was sneaking, thief-like, along the edge of the swamp, in order that his wife should not see him go. The book skirts the boundary line of melodrama, but there is real strength in the character study of the mother.

The question of age limits can hardly be said to enter into such an elusive and fantastic story as *The Crimson Azaleas*, by H. de Vere Stacpoole, a story in which the heroine's real age, birth and parentage are involved in mystery. It is merely a charming and exotic idyll, a sort of toyland story of Japan, in which real values are turned to topsy-turvy that right and wrong become curiously twisted, and one find one's self crediting miracles and shuddering at shadows. The sober, practical side of the book concerns a partnership formed by two hard-headed Scotchmen in conjunction with the biggest rascal in all Japan, for the purpose of selling bogus curios to unsuspecting tourists. The mystic element of the tale concerns a dainty Japanese child, a mysterious little

waif found by the Scotchmen in an azalea patch and subsequently adopted by one of them. The curious circumstance of her origin is this: The Scotchmen have met a blind and most repulsive beggar who has offered to do a magic for them, and to bring a dragon out of the woods. While he is busy working his magic, by means of circle within circle, Leslie, the younger Scotchman, mischievously traces the sign of the cross in the dust, accidentally touching the beggar's heal. The effect is rather horrible; the blind beggar goes into a curious attack of emotional insanity, epilepsy or devil-driven fear, and starts on a mad, aimless course, colliding cruelly with every tree he meets, exactly as though a host of unseen demons were surrounding him and opening up their circle in such a way as to drive him headlong against the trunks. Later in the story, when the body is found, the Japanese authorities laconically return a decision to the effect that "he has been beaten to death by the trees." To Leslie, this incident has no connection with the appearance of the child; but to his friend, M'Gourley, who is better versed in Japanese superstition, there is no doubt that the child is the product of a magic gone wrong, that "there was something forming in yon wood, something dom bad and you flung it out of the forming element, and the wraith of some dead bairn was wandering about and was just suckid in." For a number of years it matters little what was the origin of Campanula, as Leslie's adopted waif is called. We have a very pretty, straightforward narrative of native Japanese life, full of quaint customs and a soft glow of local colour. Then the outside word intervenes in the shape of an Englishwoman who was once a part of Leslie's life, has since married another man, regrets her bargain and would like to win Leslie back again. One cannot help feeling this part of the story to be hopelessly out of key; it jars badly like a rasping discord. Of course, what the story needed was simply the call of the outside world, something that would take Leslie away and bring to Campanula a sense of the inevitable. To give that outside call definite shape had the effect of displacing the chief accent. Neverthe-

less, the ending is a finished bit of art. What becomes of Campanula we are never told. Perhaps the blind beggar whom the trees beat to death never comes to life again; perhaps the sound that Leslie hears at night is not the tapping of the beggar's staff, but only a loose lath swayed by the wind. But the fact remains that when Leslie, in desperate loneliness, returns to Campanula and to his real happiness, he finds she is gone—and the last trace that remains of her on earth he finds in the midst of the azalea patch where she first appeared.

The God of Love, by Justin Huntly McCarthy would appeal to readers who

"The God of Love" love blithe romance and the blue Italian sky, and who can forgive a modern novelist for taking

liberties with the perfect story of Dante's *Vita Nuova*. A Romeo and Juliet type of tale, set in the imperishable beauty of old Florence, in the days when the city was rent asunder with warring factions, and each man's castle was an armed fortress, is material enough from which to make a brave tale full of colour and poetry, requited love and baffled hope. But this is not precisely the sort of tale that most people care to associate with the honoured author of *The Divine Comedy*; and that is why to a good many readers *The God of Love* will seem like an offence akin to blasphemy.

The Williamsons certainly have perfected their formula for producing

"Lord Loveland Discovers America" the so-called "best-seller" even when we see perfectly well the cog-wheels of their machinery, and understand perfectly well each tried and trusted trick, we cannot help cordially admiring the cleverness of it all.

They know so exceedingly well just what they are trying to do, and they are so triumphantly successful in doing it. Take, for instance, their new volume, *Lord Loveland Discovers America*. Here is an English lord who comes to America, a self-confessed heiress-hunter. He meets a girl whom he would like to marry,

but she is poor; and because he knows even less about himself than about America, he resists the temptation. It is necessary to educate Lord Loveland—and the authors do so in the following manner. It happens, no matter how—any one who cares to may learn by reading the book—that the people in America do not seem to appreciate the honour of Lord Loveland's visit. His bankers refuse to honour his letter of credit; his various letters of introduction are spurned, the management of the big New York hotel where he is stopping demand instant payment of their bill, and since he cannot pay eject him at night, clad only in evening clothes and a steamer cap. An experience in the bread line, on the hard benches of a city park, and a week's service as waiter in an east-side eating-house are factors in the author's very thorough scheme of educating Lord Loveland into a human being, capable of finding interest in his fellow-men, and qualified to become the husband of a decent American girl. On the whole, a clever piece of work of its kind.

To those who found a rare and lingering delight in the delicate artistry of Miss

"Friendship Village Love Stories" Zona Gale's *Friendship Village*, her new volume of *Friendship Village Love Stories* will need

no special encomium. We meet again the same old friends, together with a few others, none the less welcome because they are new; and we bask for a few pleasant hours in that exhilarating human sunshine that radiates straight from the heart of people who are real and true and big of soul. *Friendship Village* may have no definite location upon the printed map of the world; but it abides permanently in the memories of countless readers who in the enjoyment of its chronicles have been able temporarily to forget the latitude and longitude of their own personal cares and sorrows. Let us by all means give cordial welcome to this new instalment to the end that still others may follow without stint.

Frederic Taber Cooper.

SIX BOOKS OF THE MONTH

I

A. B. FAUST'S "THE GERMAN ELEMENT"*

Speculation as to the traits and qualities of the true type of the present and future American is a matter whose fascinating interest will naturally be much increased by some knowledge of the proportions and character of the component elements. And, moreover, such knowledge is at the present time not without considerable practical value, since the immigration question, with a view to restriction or discrimination, is one that before long must be seriously and actively considered by the people of the United States. Such a work, therefore, as that of Professor Faust, placing before us in convenient form the results of an immense amount of research into the history and character of an element of which more than one-quarter of the present population of the country is composed, becomes of more than passing interest and importance. The time seems ripe for its appearance.

Professor Faust describes the chief contributions of the German race to the American stock as "the humble virtues which constitute, nevertheless, the backbone of good citizenship, such as respect for the law, honesty and promptness in the discharge of business obligations, dogged persistence, industry, and economy"—certain qualities which, in the opinion of some of our critics, should be more widely diffused through the American race. The author records the fact that what he calls the "original anti-grafter" was a Pennsylvania German; and, indeed, the story of Christopher Ludwig is worthy of note, since it has tempted more than one historian of the Revolutionary War to turn for the moment from the more direct path of narration. When appointed superintendent of bakers for the Continental armies, Ludwig was required, as were his predeces-

sors, to furnish one hundred pounds of bread for every hundred pounds of flour. Now, because of the added weight of water, one hundred and thirty-five pounds of bread could be baked from one hundred pounds of flour, and this amount is what Ludwig furnished, although his predecessors had taken advantage of the ignorance of the commissary department and had furnished the equivalent weight of bread for flour.

The example of high sincerity of purpose and uncompromising attitude of conscience in opposition to material interest is one that always excites applause, whether exhibited in individual or national character. Such a spectacle was afforded on more than one occasion by the German colonists and their descendants when confronted with the condition of slavery, and the similarity of their actions is one of the most convincing arguments for the real and lasting value of the Teutonic contribution to the American race. The fact that Germans, although surrounded by other peoples who had come to enjoy the blessing of personal liberty and who held to similar views regarding the brotherhood of man, should on occasions widely separated in time have stood out alone against the practice of slavery is a matter too significant to be disregarded. While the English Quakers of Pennsylvania remained indifferent to the negroes' condition, their German brethren in 1688 took the first formal action against the barter in human flesh ever made within the boundaries of the United States; in Georgia, fifty years later, while the Methodists of the colony were content to uphold George Whitefield's complacent policy, the exiled Salzburgers at Ebenezer proved their higher and more consistent moral standard by a futile though none the less sincere effort to prohibit slavery. Again, a century later, on the eve of the great struggle, the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill undoubtedly struck the German conscience more than any other as an outrageous breach of faith, and had its most revolutionary effect upon the German element in the United States.

*The German Element in the United States. By Albert Bernhardt Faust. 2 vols. Houghton Mifflin Company. 1909.