"Ian Hay" Tells of New English Literary Spirit

After Eleven Months in the Trenches Author of "The First Hundred Thousand" Sees a Tremendous and Vital Change

By Joyce Kilmer.

THE romantic novel has been justified. No longer can critics bring against the tale of wild adventure and heroic action the charge that it is untrue to life. For life itself is wild and romantic, past any imaginings of the maker of fiction, in these days of war.

It was Ian Hay who told me this, as we sat in the lounge of a New York hotel—Ian Hay, whose "The First Hundred Thousand" has done so much to give English and American readers an intimate knowledge of the humors and tragedies of daily life in Kitchener's Army. Yet a search of the hotel register would not reveal the name of Ian Hay. The real name of the author of "The First Hundred Thousand" is Captain John Hay Beith.

Since 1907 he has been known as a writer of tales of English life, some seven novels with his signature having appeared before the war. The last of these, "A Knight on Wheels," was published three days before war was declared. At that time he was in the Officers' Training Corps. He applied for a commission in the first battalion formed in Kitchener's Army, and went to France as Lieutenant of the Tenth Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in May, 1915, in the first division of the new army to cross the Channel.

He was continuously in action until April of this year, when he was sent back to England to join the instructional staff of the machine gun corps. Among the actions in which he engaged was the battle of Loos. He was present at Loos the first three days. For his conduct in this battle Captain Beith was awarded the Military Cross.

I asked Captain Beith what changes he had noticed in the literary tendencies of England after his return home from eleven months in the trenches

"The thing that struck me at once," he said, "was the utter disappearance of the man who wrote about the things that don't matter. I don't know what has become of him—perhaps he is at the front, perhaps he is writing about the things that do matter. At any rate, you do not find in London's literary life today the sort of man very conspicuous before the war, who was tremendously busy writing about absolutely unimportant things.

"You see, the amount of attention given to sports and pleasures of all sorts is much less than it ever was before. Many of the newspapers publish absolutely nothing about sports. And the amount of dramatic criticism printed is very small. There is very little writing about abstract subjects—very little thinking about abstract subjects. We are too much concerned with great facts to bother about the abstract."

"Do you think," I asked, "that this effect is beneficial?"

"I think," Captain Beith replied, "that the war's effect on literature and on everything else is in general most salutary. Take the matter that I have already mentioned—the sports and pleasures of different kinds. Before the war the newspapers were full of elaborate discussions of topics of the most trivial kind—games, tango teas, and all sorts of nonsense. There seemed to be nothing to talk about or to write about but these things. Now such things are bad form—no one thinks or talks or writes about them.

"I have been particularly impressed by the change which the war has brought about in the lives of the women. All the women are doing something of real value to humanity—you could not say that three years ago. You could understand a young society girl's willingness to undertake some romantic form of service, like putting on a picturesque uniform and nursing handsome young officers back to health. But the strange thing is that the young society girl is content to do the humblest sort of work. She never gets a chance to nurse a wounded soldier, that sort of thing is done by trained nurses. The young society girl washes dishes and waits on the table in a soldiers' canteen, or makes munitions."

"I thought that this was done by paid workers," I suggested.

"Most of it is," said Captain Beith. "But the Government wants to keep munition work going on constantly night and day. So when the paid workers are resting the voluntary unpaid workers take their place—working Saturday and Sunday, for instance.

"You see, this change in the activities of the women has a direct bearing on



Captain John Hay Beith ("Ian Hay."
(Photo Underwood & Underwood.)

what I have been telling you about, the change in the character of the newspapers. It works out in this way—every woman is interested in at least one man in the army. What she wants to understand are the things which concern him. So she talks not about clothes and hats and the new dances, but about machine guns and trenches and French and Belgian cities. The result is that to supply this demand there has come into existence a literature and a journalism dealing with just these things. The newspapers tell us about the things we want to know—war and its mechanics. Nowadays the women of England are actually able to understand a map—a thing unprecedented in the history of the sex.

"As soon as I got home from the trenches I was struck by the complete transformation of England. People have utterly ceased to think about themselves. The whole country is mobilized."

"You mention only the periodical literature," I said. "What about the novels—what sort of fiction is being produced?"

"Nowadays," said Captain Beith, "the average novel has to do with the war, directly or indirectly. Usually the hero is a soldier. It is noticeable that the novel is more heroic in theme than it has been for years. Three years ago a novel in which one of the characters died in battle was considered absolutely unreal. 'Things like this don't happen,' the critics would say. 'Men don't die in battle in this day and generation. This is sheer melodrama.'

"But now people are dying in battle, and every one is aware of this fact. The war has justified the romantic novel—I might even say that it has justified the melodrama. No writer can fill his pages with descriptions of action too violent and heroic to seem real to people accustomed to the violence and heroism of the war. We now see that the minute psychological analyses of uneventful lives which were called novels three or four years ago are unreal, and that the romance is a genuine reflection of life. The romantic novel has come back, and this is due to the war.

"It is the big things in life that matter nowadays, and the writers are aware of this. They no longer spend their time and energy writing about abstruse philosophical questions or things æsthetic and remote from life. The writers are specific and contemporary. Take Chesterton, for example; he writes about the mind of the Prussian, or something of the sort, nowadays, and has more readers than ever before.

"The writers have shown up very well since August, 1914. They all have the same sane patriotic point of view, except Shaw and a few people like him who want to be different from everyone else. One never hears of Shaw in England nowadays—no one will read his books, and no paper will publish his writings. There is a tendency on the part of prominent novelists like Arnold Bennett to visit the trenches and write about what they see. Of course, they are not exactly strategists, but what they write is very well done, and it is enthusiastically received.

"One important result of the war is that it has turned the minds of the English people to scenes and events beyond their shores. Now the average working man has, for the first time in his life, a full consciousness of the fact that England is not the universe. Formerly, he used to buy a newspaper because he wanted to find out whether he had won or lost his bet on the football match—now he buys it because he actually takes a keen interest in international politics.

"This is the change that has taken place in the minds of the people left in England. And when those 5,000,000 men get back to England from the trenches, with their horizons enlarged by their experiences, there will be a tremendous change in the English attitude toward literature and journalism and life in general."

"But what will these soldiers read?" I asked. "Will they be interested in stories about the war? Are they interested in them now?"

"The soldiers read stories about the war eagerly," said Captain Beith. "And one of their reasons for reading them is very interesting. They read them because one of their chief pleasures is to pick out technical mistakes. Nothing pleases them more than to read an account of a battle and find that the writer has stated something incorrectly. They greatly enjoy finding these mistakes and talking about them.

"The war has actually made some writers. And it has produced poets. Not the long-haired, soulful type—they are extinct—but men like Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell. Patrick MacGill has done some fine work. Then there is an Oxford undergraduate who has written 'The Adventures of a Dispatch Rider'—excellent work.

"Many men who have not written before have found at the front that they could write. The reason for this is that they have found themselves confronted by something great and elemental for the first time in their lives, and the emotion caused by this has demanded literary expression."

I asked Captain Beith how he managed to do so much writing in the trenches.

"It wasn't the easiest thing in the world," he answered. "I wrote in pencil on odd scraps of paper whenever I could get a moment, and sent the penciled scraps to Blackwood's month by month. The only time I came near missing a post was after the battle of Loos. I came out of that battle on Sept. 28, and had to get my article containing an account of the battle to Blackwood's by Oct. 12. And during that time we had to move to some particularly unpleasant trenches at Ypres. The copy went in on scraps of paper, written partly in the trenches and partly in a ruined farmhouse just back of the line.

"I was very well treated by the Censor. He didn't alter more than six lines in the whole thing. And after the book was finished he wrote me a note thanking me for giving him so little trouble."

Captain Beith says that the coming of the "Willies," the great engines of warfare, descriptions of which were recently cabled to this country, was known some months ago, although it was kept secret. They are not, he says, the farm tractors made in the United States, which some writers have supposed them to be. They are made in England, and some of the principles of the farm tractors have been incorporated in them. The farm tractors have been for some time in use to haul big guns.

Captain Beith has been sent to this country to manage the British section of the Allied Bazaars, to be held in various cities of the United States during the coming Winter. His duties are to direct the Bazaars and to give lectures about them. They are in aid of charties directed by two American women married to titled Englishmen. One of these is the Fund for the Widows and Orphans of Sailors, directed by Lady Beatty, the wife of Admiral Beatty. She is the daughter of Marshall Field. The rest of the proceeds of the Bazaars will go to Lady Paget's large military hospital in the South of England and to her Fund for Blinded Soldiers. The General Manager of the Bazaars is Captain Norman Thwaites.

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