

Book Reviews

By John Philip Morris

If any one of the seven faithful who read my reviews each week is so fortunate as to have an income of \$25,000 a year, they might just as well stop reading this one right here and detour to the Society page.

Such a one could not have any sympathy or understanding with my viewpoint of BLACK OXEN, and must stand arrayed and agreed with the author, Mrs. Gertrude Atherton.

BLACK OXEN disregards the existence of us hoi polloi. Mrs. Atherton's characters are the sort where even the men's whiskers are gilded and where the women live in that elysium where the woman's three deadly Ms—money, maids and meanees—cease to trouble.

And yet BLACK OXEN is not a book of snobs. The characters are innocuous and simple in their thoughts and deeds. Its all in the superciliousness of the telling.

Coming again to our mutttons, the Eternal Verities, let me say that no great book can be tropical, and a novel built upon the thesis of a popular lad can not endure long enough to be more than a summer cloud upon the sky of literature.

A book can be built on an improbability and be an interesting and an absorbing book. Wells earlier works proved that. A book may be built on an impossibility and a great fallacy and be a great book. Dante did it centuries ago. But, to be great or even good, such a book must ring true and carry conviction and must have something to offer besides the banal drizzle of contemporaneous chatter and the synthetic philosophy that an unlearned author grinds out to fill the gaps between conversations.

BLACK OXEN tells us nothing, BLACK OXEN answers none of the thousand frantic problems that are today confronting us. BLACK OXEN has been "raved" over as a wonderful study in character but I for one cannot see it, and Mary Zattiany and Clavering, I feel, will be forgotten with the turning of the last page.

Mrs. Atherton has a high place in the literary world. She has stormed the walls of fame with a long ladder of books. She is a wealthy woman and she doesn't care who knows it. She is far above my criticisms, and even if Cousin Ira has been made a Swedish Knight and even if J. Ogden has given the whole world an absorbing interest in our name, she may well say of a John Philip Morris—what is it?—still, what a good time William Makepeace Thackeray would have had dissecting Gertrude and how he would have revealed in her peculiar psychol-

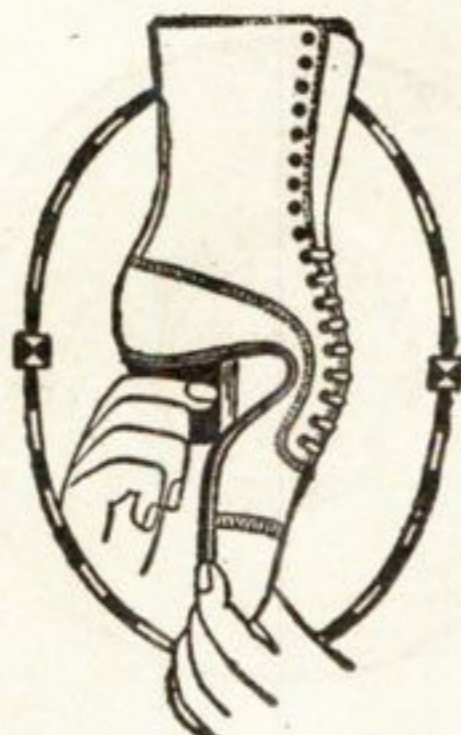
ogy and her social inhibition.

Stuart Chase says that there are one quadrillion, eight hundred trillion words printed each year in the United States. The ten million or so used up in BLACK OXEN, might have been used to draw other loads. I may be peculiar but, honestly, I was disappointed, dreadfully disappointed in BLACK OXEN, those beasts that draw the long years and the longest and blackest to me seemed the eternities that it took me to read BLACK OXEN that I might tell you that I had done so.

John Philip Morris.

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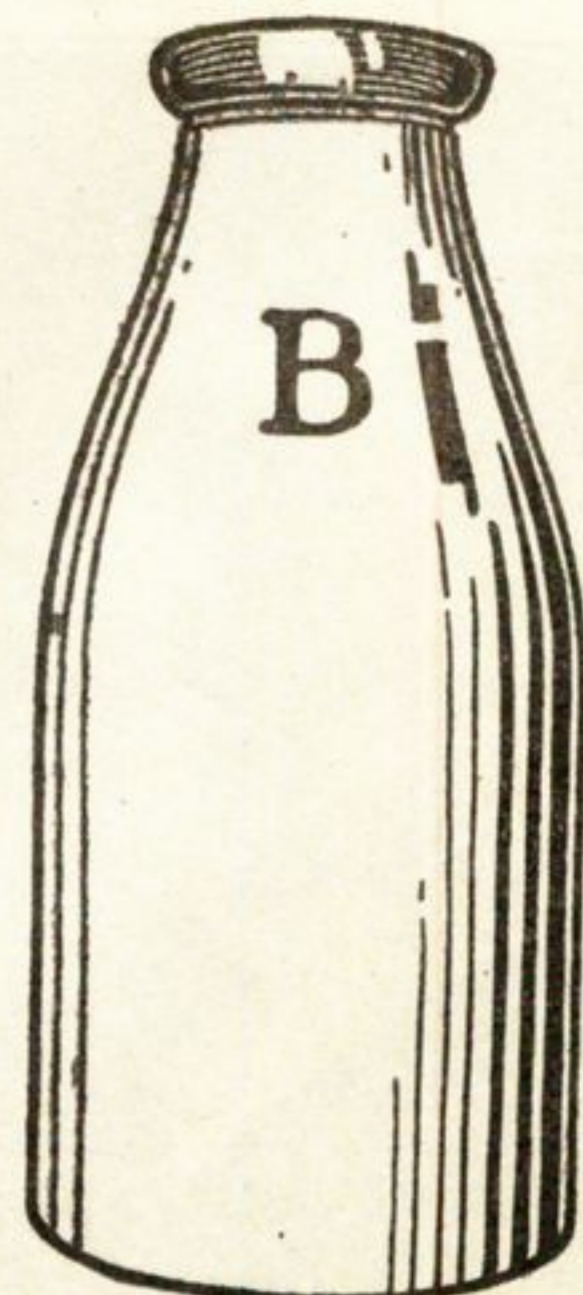


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