



"DEATH WAITS" BY PERCY SMITH

A Modern "DANCE OF DEATH"



PERCY SMITH, in some notes he set down in relation to the seven etched plates en-

Percy Smith's series of grim and terrible etchings based on the starkness of 1914-1918

this "death motive," as operative commentators style it, Mr. Smith has combined the literal with the imaginative in his plates. His soldiers are

titled "The Dance of Death: 1914-1918," wrote "The function of Art is to keep alive the spirit of great happenings." And he continued, "whether these happenings were pleasant or unpleasant to humanity, whether the happenings created unhappiness or happiness, is not the point."

With this as an art faith, it is natural that this young English etcher should have chosen Death as the theme of his soldier experiences in Belgium and France between 1915 and 1917; for the enormous lists of fatalities are the overwhelming "spirit of great happenings" left to us by the World War. Moreover the Macaber element in art, that was born of the all-pervading association with the idea of death due to the horrors of the Hundred Years' War and the Black Plague, has a recurrence after every great conflict in one form or another.

In common with every artist who has employed

the men of the British and, in one instance, the German armies. They are the men he saw in the trenches, in dugouts, on the march. They are as matter-of-fact as soldiers always are. And always they are moving to the measures, sounding in their ears, sung by Death for his unending dance.

Above all else man's terror of death pervades these plates, it is their dominating emotion. Although the artist makes no pretensions of preaching or advancing any views, in theme his etchings are powerful and grim arguments against wars. It is the feeling of the inescapable hand of Death that makes this artist's compositions so vivid, so realistic, so compelling in their Macaber quality.

The sense of Death's arrestive moments is to be noted in the print "Death Forbids," when the skeleton with hood thrown back puts out an admonitory hand. His compelling, forward-going

Etcher's "Death" Shows Terrible Caprice



"DEATH
FORBIDS"

BY
PERCY SMITH

*Not man's will
but Death's own
is master here*



"DEATH
REFUSES"

BY
PERCY SMITH

*When he is indif-
ferent, his cruelty
is keenest*



"DEATH INTOXICATED"
BY PERCY SMITH

power is present in "Death Marches," the figure swathed in its robes, the serried ranks of squads bent in their effort to reach the goal their invisible commander has set for them. Most impressive of all, for sheer gripping power and horror, is the "Death Awed," Death halting his dance long enough to contemplate the most repulsive fruits of his work, shocked into a momentary attitude of infinite regret for the desolation he has wrought.

But, in the artist's perceptions and interpretations of the Dance, this is only momentary. In the succeeding print we see that "Death Refuses" the boon of his release for the suffering, wounded men in the trench. Again "Death Ponders" beside the prone figure of an infantryman on the battlefield, shrouded, mysterious, portentous of restrained power to blast another life forever. "Death Waits" reveals the figure, amidst barbed-wire entanglements, meditating in grisly silence over what new terrors he may bring to his human devotees. And finally he is seen as "Death Intoxicated," himself dancing in ghoulish glee, the most real of all the apparitions Mr. Smith has created in the average man's conception of Death in relation to War. Here the "Dance of Death" becomes reality. He dances, intoxicated, and the poised

bayonet of the soldier indicates he shall presently drink again.

It has been said of this artist that he "appears to have freed himself from the tradition of Holbein," the reference being to the wonderful series of drawings that Holbein did in 1538 for the prints generally known as the "Dance of Death." This is true in the sense that there is no humor in Mr. Smith's series of etchings, nor occasional satire as in the work of the greatest of all creators of this form of pictorial symbolism.

But Holbein's terrible realism may be noted here. It is suggested in the details of the shell-blasted trees in "Death Forbids"; in the details of the soldiers' uniforms in "Death Marches"; in the duck-boards and that ghastly pair of flesh-filled boots in "Death Awed." Again we see this realism in the huddled soldiers and the trench-ladder in "Death Refuses"; in the dreary, shell-torn earth in "Death Ponders"; and in the wire-entanglements of "Death Waits." If Mr. Smith had not introduced these details of realism into his compositions they would not move us as they do. Death would then be a mere abstraction and not the tragic companion of Mars the artist sets before us.

"Subject does not really matter in Art," Mr. Smith observes, "so long as the truth is in it, and



the people's memory must be constantly re-awakened if they are to gain by experiences. By being reminded of the truth of a great happening and what men went through, people ought to be inspired to a greater imaginative sympathy with humanity in general, and I hope to make my art a true revealer and interpreter of humanity."

Surely no one can study these prints without being inspired "to a greater imaginative sympathy with humanity in general" and particularly for the men who figured in "The Dance of Death: 1914-1918." It is seldom that an artist achieves so successfully, so completely, his conception as Percy Smith has done here, nor with such a simplicity of method. For his technical processes are of the simplest, everywhere shunning effect merely for effect's sake, working only to one end, to make his plates a pictorial and imaginative epic of the "great happenings" of the war in which he suffered and endured with millions of his fellows.

It is also no small measure of accomplishment for so young a man, an artist who has been concerned with advancing the art of lettering (which requires marked precision for its best effects), that these plates do not show the influence of any

"DEATH AWED"
BY PERCY SMITH

school. Since their appeal is universal, Mr. Smith has kept himself free of every limitation, gaining the feeling of universality thereby, naturally and directly.

The fact that his figures are chiefly those of British soldiers does not lessen this effect. In the United States, in Germany or in Russia, this series will have as profound an appeal, as direct and positive a reaction, as in England itself. This conviction is inescapable for the reason that the subject is one of world-wide appeal to the sense of awe and mystery always awakened by the contemplation of death. It is another proof of the impression these plates have made that they should be linked with a fame so great as that of Holbein's. He set the seal of his imagination on his work and created a tradition that artists since have tried to emulate with scant success. But Mr. Smith's creative ability places his work in a more triumphant category.

If the terrors set down by Percy Smith were not true, men would not go to war seen through the tear-dimmed eyes of those who love them. The art that functions in "The Dance of Death" serves to "keep alive the spirit of great happenings."

[Illustrations courtesy of Greatorex Gallery, London]