

Short Stories

By GRAHAM GREENE

The Woman Who Had Imagination. By H. E. Bates. (Cape. 7s. 6d.)

General Buntop's Miracle. By Martin Armstrong. (Gollancz. 7s. 6d.)

Children With Fire. By Ashley Smith. (Eyre and Spottiswoode. 7s. 6d.)

After Such Pleasures. By Dorothy Parker. (Longmans. 7s. 6d.)

THE short story in England has suffered from the complete absence of any tradition. With the exception of Henry James, no writer of importance, until a few years ago, had given his full time to a consideration of its technique. Certain novelists showed themselves on occasion competent short story writers, generally under foreign influence. Indeed, the English short story became for some years simply an enlargement of Techev's themes. Miss Katherine Mansfield is the obvious example: a writer of so little original talent that it is impossible to conceive what form her writing would have taken if she had not come under the Russian influence.

The influence of a great writer is as dangerous as it is valuable: it is valuable in so far as it is a purely technical influence, dangerous if it is a spiritual influence, especially the spiritual influence of a writer of different race. No writer without losing his independence can adopt another's outlook, as Miss Mansfield adopted Techev's. There seemed some danger that Mr. Bates might follow the same road. He had mastered Techev's technique, in particular that accumulation of objective detail, of which the real importance is that it precedes a sudden abandonment of objectivity. For this was Techev's legacy from the conventional *conte*; the point of his story was often contained in the last paragraph, but the point, instead of being the conventional surprise, was a change of tone from the objective to the subjective, a spiritual summing up of the mood which had dictated the story. Here Mr. Bates very closely followed him. To take almost at random two examples. It is impossible not to see the resemblance between these two conclusions, the first of Techev's "The Lady with the Dog," the second of Mr. Bates's "Charlotte Esmond":

"How? How?" he asked, clutching his head. "How?"

"And it seemed as though in a little while the solution would be found, and then a new and splendid life would begin; and it was clear to both of them that they had still a long, long way to go, and that the most complicated and difficult part of it was only just beginning."

"Well, and what was it like at the theatre tonight?"

"And with the same gentle, ladylike smile she listened to the babble of friendly voices. And while she listened she kept telling herself that perhaps after all it was the Will of God that what was to happen would happen, and that when it was time to change or move or die it would be so. One knew no more."

This is dangerously close; it is impossible to accept so completely another author's technique without accepting his spiritual outlook, for the one, was only made to express the other. To learn from an author technically is in part to react from him intelligently, a thing which Miss Mansfield never did, but which Mr. Bates has done in his new volume.

The Woman Who Had Imagination is, to my mind, the first volume of Mr. Bates's complete maturity. In his previous books he has worked out all the superficial aspects of literary influence, and in his new volume he shows himself an artist of magnificent originality with a vitality quite unsuspected hitherto. I cannot enough admire the title story, of which the framework is an excursion to a country house of the Orpheus Male Voice Singers with their wives and sweethearts to take part in a competition. The dresses and slung (which perfectly convey the period of the story), the heat of the afternoon striking up into the crowded brake from the country road, the return at night, the sleepy gossip and the dying away of drowsy flirtations: these frame, in the setting of the country house, an odd romantic episode. But the sureness of Mr. Bates's fact is seen in this: the unusual (of which the treatment is not quite on a level with the rest) is kept in its place and is not allowed to do more than to throw into relief the lovely realism of the choir's outing. This story and at least one other, "The Wedding," containing an excellent character, the bawdy old reprobate

Uncle Silas, who figures in three of these tales, seem to me to deserve a place among the finest English short stories.

Occasionally, as in "The Gleaner," Mr. Bates is too purely pictorial; very rarely, in "A German Idyll" for example, his sentiment becomes a little lush; and, although the strength of his stories partly lies in his firm sense of a country locality (his pictures of slum life seem by contrast rather literary), his treatment of nature is sometimes over-romantic. His first story is cloyed by an elaboration of flowers and scents and birds, and one remembers Techev's advice: "Beauty and expressiveness in nature are attained only by simplicity, by such simple phrases as 'The sun set,' 'It was dark,' 'It began to rain,' and so on." Sometimes, too, he indulges in a sketch which was hardly worth the while. And yet it is in his trivialities that one can see most clearly Mr. Bates's integrity as an artist. For these trivialities have been studied from the first word: such a sketch as "Innocence" has been as carefully designed as a novel; the reader has the satisfying knowledge that he is not being fobbed off with something careless, with something easy, that has occupied only half the author's attention.

The case with Mr. Armstrong's trivialities is different; one feels that he would never dream of treating his novels so cavalierly as he treats his short stories. He seems to have gone about his work in this way. He has thought first of a "plot," and in so far as his stories depend for their interest on "plots" (that is to say, chains of events remarkable for their deviation from the usual), they belong to the commercial tradition. Having thought of his plot, his sole idea is to get under way as quickly as possible, and the poverty of his technical equipment can be seen in the monotonous similarity of his opening sentences:

"For years Mr. Pellett, a flourishing and much respected solicitor, plump, cherry-faced, middle-aged and methodical, had resented King's Square . . ."

"Garland, the writer of novels, sat, on the night of his arrival, in the smoking room of the house in which his friends the Silversons had just established a temporary home."

"Mary Brakefield, wife of Samuel Brakefield, landlord of the 'Golden Lion,' Netherhinton, made her way along the accustomed hedge-bordered road that led to the foot of the downs."

"Gerrard Blunt, a young man of twenty-eight, sat at a bare wooden table under an apple-tree in the pleasant garden of the 'Angel' Inn, Leominster."

"Maurice Clevedon, Rector of Bridgworth, tall, handsome, and not yet old, stood at the open window in his study, with his hands in his pockets, watching his wife, Minnie, in the garden."

Alas, few "plots" are of sufficient interest to survive so rough and unskilful a treatment.

Mr. Ashley Smith's first book is technically far superior to Mr. Armstrong's, again because it is impossible to separate the way a writer does a thing from what he does. His faults (his style is curiously full of *clichés* and sensibility at the same time) are superficial, while he is doing something infinitely more important than the devising of ingenious or fantastic plots. He is interpreting a class which has never yet had this serious, sensitive attention paid it, the class which goes to holiday camps, enters beauty competitions, the class which enjoys the *cameraderie* of seaside cafés. If the English short story is at last in process of forming a tradition, this book is surely a part of the tradition; its sensibility, its very light touch of mysticism, "quiet people doing quiet things, and yet because of them a sense of mystery and longing," are qualities as English as the hard polished witty common sense, half way to cynicism, of Miss Dorothy Parker are qualities of the American literary scene.

After Such Pleasures gave me more pleasure than *Laments for the Living*; these stories have as their supreme quality competence. Miss Parker is as conscious of what she intends to do as Mr. Bates, and if her wit of its very nature is more superficial than Mr. Bates's sensibility, and our pleasure for that reason more transitory, we do not measure our enjoyment at the moment of reading but gaze with admiration through the newest of unreflecting glass at the chromium furnishing and the lovely, absurd, stylized faces of her models.